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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Buffalo Politics: Sovereignty and Sacrificial Publics in the Highlands of East India

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Abstract

Public rituals of buffalo sacrifice have a prominent place in the political history of eastern India. They were productive activities in agrarian livelihoods, stages for intercommunal politics, unifying spectacles for regional kings, and justifications for colonial military interventions. While their historical scale is much reduced today, in parts of southern Odisha, they remain important political events. Drawing on historical research and long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Odisha's Kandhamal Hills, this article examines how public rituals of sacrifice form a site of commensuration: a space where interlocal relations of mutuality and difference are temporarily made visible, and where value is defined in the presence of diverse audiences. By focusing on one specific ritual event, I show how these "sacrificial publics" are structured around the tensions of sovereignty (togetherness and transgression) and have long been spaces where different kinds of sovereign power have become legible. Historicizing an enduring sacrificial politics at India's upland margins, I outline a distinctly anthropological concept of sovereignty—one that reflects the ways human relationships are made commensurable in lasting political formations, sustained through interlocal and intercommunal patterns of recognition.

Keywords: ritual sacrifice; recognition; commensuration; publicity; jungle kingdoms; state formation; elections; ethnohistory; Odisha; India

Talk in Kacheparu one morning was all about a young man who had been gored by a buffalo.[1] The incident took place the night before in Sapari, another village several kilometers away, on the penultimate day of the *Bhia Katina* celebrations. Hosted roughly every three to seven years in villages of the Kutia Kondh, an *adivasi* (indigenous) community in Odisha's Kandhamal and Kalahandi districts, the *Bhia Katina* is a large and public ritual event. The main ceremonial period lasts seven days,

[1]In line with anthropological convention, place names at the village level and personal names, where used, are pseudonyms.

culminating in the sacrifice of a male buffalo to territorial "gods" (*penu*) for future agricultural success, communal wellbeing, and the renewal of life. In Sapari, it had been the beginning of a period of ritual "mocking" (*koḍu gresna*). The main buffalo was tied to a wooden post in the village center and "shown to the *penu*" (*penu tosunere*): men and women sang taunting songs, rang high-pitched bells, and engaged in a dramatized contest with the tethered animal. One young man had been a little too eager. Thrown into the air, he was left with a large gash in his thigh, which required treatment in the plains town of Tumudhibandha, some thirty kilometers away.

Kutia families were talking about the Sapari *Bhia Katina* for quite some time. They compared it to others in recent memory and spoke, in particular, of the strength and resistance of the buffalo. A diverse group of family relations, friends, and neighboring Pano and Gond communities had traveled from all across the highlands to Sapari for the final day. They came as spectators to the public act when the sacrificial buffalo (the *bhia*) is ritually killed, dismembered, and redistributed to the gathered community. Through convergence of an expansive network of mutual relations, the dramatized public contest with the buffalo, and the confrontation with the gods in a brave show of good living, the *Bhia Katina* is a space of commensuration and recognition. For Kutia, Pano, and Gond families who live in the Kandhamal Hills, it has long been a defining part of what makes anything resembling a larger society feel tangible: it brings different participants and audiences into view, forming a sacrificial public where each is a witness to the proceedings but also simultaneously seen.

The *Bhia Katina* was once a core part of the political structure in these highlands. Through it, the Kutia enacted their customary jurisdiction as the principal landowners and ritual custodians. However, the Pano, a *dalit* (low-caste stigmatized as "untouchable") community who live closely alongside them, always sourced the sacrificial buffalo—a costly item of prestige value—through their connections to regional trade networks. Meanwhile, Gonds, a historically more developed and Hinduized *adivasi* community, participated in or sponsored the event according to their presence in local political hierarchies and patterns of land occupation. In Odisha's precolonial kingdoms, the *Bhia Katina* was both an expression of intercommunal relations in customary territories and a time of tribute collection in loose networks of royal authority. Under British colonial rule, it was one of many rituals collectively labeled as the *Meriah*, targeted in military pacification campaigns. Today, the Indian state is the supreme sovereign, and in many regions, traditions of blood sacrifice have all but disappeared. But sacrificial and democratic politics coexist in the Odisha highlands. Every five years, the main sacrifice months (January to April) coincide with the build-up to the Indian General Election. In many upland areas, aspiring politicians seek local legitimacy by participating in and sponsoring sacrificial events themselves.

This article examines the enduring significance of ritual sacrifice as a frame for intra- and inter-communal politics in highland East India. For as long as historical records exist, political life here has been shaped by public events involving the intentional destruction and transformation of value. As these hillside forests were penetrated by the currents of global capitalism and statist governance, sacrifice did not disappear as a political idiom. In Odisha's Kandhamal Hills, in particular, public sacrificial events continue on a large scale, reflecting a system of customary territorial associations that shapes interlocal patterns of kinship and sociability between and within communities. In this article, I will examine how one specific event, the Kutia *Bhia Katina*, involves a situated enactment of the tensions inherent in sovereignty. In doing so, I will argue that the gathering of participants and audiences forms a distinct

sacrificial public: a space where multiple sovereign formations have long been brought into view, made legible, and negotiated in local politics.

As it is usually conceptualized, sovereignty is the supreme authority of "the sovereign" over territories in which it wields violence with relative impunity (see Bodin 1992; Weber 1978[1919]). This model of jurisdictional exclusivity emerged from the quite peculiar history of medieval Europe, which was then globalized through imperial expansion and settler colonization (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Sassen 2006). The exclusivity of the Westphalian state, and its parallel in the exclusive sovereignty of the individual (think autonomous selfhood and personal liberty), are foundational axioms upon which many of our social theories have historically been built. But at the heart of even the most singular conception of authority, there is instability and interdependency: the sovereign must somehow stand apart as a supreme authority and mobilize within the constraints of worldly realities, all while securing the recognition necessary for authority to be efficacious. This conundrum is premised on the antinomian tensions of transcendence, found in many forms in world history, where sovereign power is secured through both violent transgression and benevolent representation (Dumézil 2023[1940]; Gilmartin 2020; Moin and Strathern 2022; Yelle 2018). Rather than any sole prerogative of monarchical god-kings and exclusive nation-states, I take this troubled center of sovereignty to reflect a much more expansive anthropological concern: the power or capacity to set a frame for social relations, the ways that frame is legitimized, and the quality of social relations that then arise—or, in other words, the many ways in which human relationships are made commensurable in lasting political formations.

The paradoxes of sovereign power are perhaps most clearly, or at least most visually, expressed in rituals of sacrifice. At its core, sacrifice involves the setting apart, destruction, and transformation of value, and therefore poses collective questions about what that value is and how it is recognizably transformed. Speaking on a global historical scale, sacrifice has sustained and renewed sovereign authority in a vast diversity of political forms, and, in doing so, encompassed processes of boundary marking, resource redistribution, status consolidation, and the affirmation of alliances and divisions. It is a total social fact in the clearest sense: an expression of the forces that destroy and renew the world, the material processes that underpin social reproduction, and historical sediments of value and their communal expression through time (see Arumugam 2015; Hubert and Mauss 1981[1898]; Valeri 1984; Work 2022).[2] Indeed, as David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins (2017) pointed out in their comparative analysis of kingship, if sovereignty is the force that defines the sacred center (a king, a god, a popular group), sacrifice is the act that periodically reaffirms or dissolves it. As concepts, they converge in the interplay between the normative and the transgressive (see Yelle 2018). You do not have to look far to find sacrificial logics underpinning the sovereignties of the secular

[2]Louis Dumont (1980[1966]) saw the totality of sacrifice as the paradigmatic form of the ordered difference of caste: the sacrificer (the king) gained power through priestly mediation of the Brahmin (see also Hubert and Mauss 1981[1898]). However, Jan Heesterman questioned Dumont's static model, pointing to a more agonistic sacrificial tradition in India, where the position of the sacrificer was not a given but was part of an uncertain sacrificial contest. The development of monistic Vedic ritualism, Heesterman writes, eliminated this sacrificial contest in an almost Weberian world of formal rationality (1993: 218). Robert Yelle makes a similar point when he questions the "Protestant myth" of the social contract that underlies concepts of sovereignty (Yelle 2018: 26).

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state: they were reformulated as capital punishment, the legalized death of war, and the slow sacrifice of populations through a denial of legitimacy or care.

Royal records, temple inscriptions, and oral histories all clearly indicate that ritual sacrifice has been at the heart of intercommunal politics in eastern India for much of known history (see Kulke 1993; Schnepel 2002; Sinha 1987). The many small kingdoms that shaped this landscape, however, differed from the centralized, exclusive models of sovereign power associated with the modern nation-state. Far from being passive subjects of autocratic kings, communities in these highland forests were core sovereign and sacrificial actors in their own right (Berger 2023; Schnepel 2021). As they were subsumed by the colonial and postcolonial administrative state, structures of dispersed and shared sovereignty were encompassed by structures of singular, standardized authority construed at much larger scales of commensuration. Many customary authorities were undermined through dispossession; others became nested within structures marked by vast asymmetries of power (Gilmartin 2020; Hota 2023; Pati 2019). But by attending to the everyday life of sovereignty (see Steinmüller 2022), I argue that ritual sacrifice in the Kandhamal Hills continues to offer a frame for the tensions between the normative and transgressive; one which influences how political formations are juxtaposed and negotiated at these upland margins today.

The Kutia *Bhia Katina* is one of a variety of political rituals staged by different Kondh communities in the Odisha highlands, centered on the fertilization of the land and the renewal of life in customary territories.[3] My intention here is not to provide an exhaustive account of this complex event. Instead, I will show how it sets some of the terms of interlocal (between localized places) and intercommunal relations (between localized communities) in a contested and shifting political landscape. The several thousand Kutia Kondh families in Kandhamal are just a small part of the larger Kondh community in Odisha—some one-and-a-half million people who share certain cultural principles across radically different socioeconomic circumstances. Many Kondh communities are paddy farmers and mainstream Hindus or Christians today, for whom older practices of animal slaughter have become less commonplace (see Hota 2023; Mallebrein 2007). The Kutia, however, maintain relative productive and political autonomy as hillside cultivators, and in their highland villages, animal sacrifice remains a defining part of everyday life. Based on historical and ethnographic research in the Kandhamal Hills, and centering the distinctly intercommunal politics of sacrifice, I ask: if we take a long-term view, what does sovereignty look like from the highlands down?

I begin by historicizing the place of the Kutia, and their Pano and Gond neighbors, at a perpetual periphery between shifting regional centers. In doing so, I show how, for much of this history, the *Bhia Katina* has been a stage for expressions of sovereignty. Sacrifice is a core act and image of power, authority, and mutuality in Kandhamal; individuals, families, and communities offer sacrifices for marriages, funerals, harvests, ancestral dialogues, and all sorts of other life-cycle occasions. But the *Bhia Katina* is a distinctly political ritual. It frames patterns of landownership in customary territories (the *malanga*) and the mutualities and differences in interlocal kinship, intercommunal relations, and the cycles of hosting and visiting that define highland life. It is, in this sense, a site of commensuration: as it dramatizes sovereign

[3]There is a family resemblance between equivalent Kondh rituals (the *Meriah*), but the actual procedures differ quite significantly (see Bailey 1960; Boal 1982; Hardenberg 2019; Macpherson 1852; Padel 2009; Nayak 1989). Here, I build on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in southwest Kandhamal, conducted between August 2017 and July 2019, and participant observation at eight different *Bhia Katina*.

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autonomy and defines mutual relations, it also transforms value between social, political, and economic orders. These processes converge on the body of the buffalo (*bhia*), which, as an external prestige good and economic-cum-spiritual value sourced through regional trade networks, is domesticated and redefined as a symbolic substitute for the renewal of the sacrificial community (also, *bhia*). A close ethnographic analysis of the *Bhia Katina* shows how it is a key site of commensuration, and that, as a stage for the sacrificial enactment of sovereign power it is constituted by its interdependencies and externalities.

The situated sovereign frames in the Kandhamal Hills are ultimately made visible through relations of interlocal and intercommunal recognition. By "recognition" here, I do not refer to the formal categories of state inclusion. Rather, I mean that, as a public site of commensuration, the *Bhia Katina* brings together a diverse set of participants and audiences in a differentiated space where relations of mutuality and difference are temporarily made visible. But crucially, this public space formed around the act of sacrifice is not simply a by-product of "traditional" sovereignty. It instead dramatizes the tensions inherent in sovereignty (togetherness and transgression, care and violence), providing a space of mutual exposure in which different sovereign formations become legible. In the highlands today, sacrificial publics remain at the heart of intercommunal life; they are spaces where Kutia, Pano, and Gond families continue to negotiate the tensions between different scales of sovereign power. The ideal place to start, then, is by situating these tensions within the region's political history.

Sacrificial Sovereignty, At Three Scales

Nestled between the empires of the Deccan plateau and India's eastern coastline, the borders of the polities in the hilly hinterlands were rarely well-defined. In medieval Odisha (ca. the fourteenth century onward), the rulers (*raja*) of the "jungle kingdoms" were mostly military officers or feuding siblings of the powerful Gajapati dynasty on the coast, appointed to secure trade routes or out to make a name for themselves at the periphery (Schnepel 2002: 191).[4] Riverine royal centers extended out through networks of *zamindars* (tributary authorities) spread over vast upland tracts (Acharya 1955; Patra 2008). The model was more *mandala* than bureaucratic state: radiating centers of influence with little real authority at the periphery (see Scott 2009: 26–32). Highlanders had productive and political autonomy but were still connected to networks of semi-autonomous states and well-worn trade routes, including those linking Central India with overseas trade in Southeast Asia, for likely thousands of years.

In the early seventeenth century, the highland forests of southern Kandhamal were nominally ruled by the *raja* of Paralakhemundi, the cultural center of the Gajapati dynasty. Fighting between two brothers meant the territory was divided in 1776, and a new *raja* in Chinna Kimedi claimed jurisdiction over hill tracts of more than 1,975 square miles (Schnepel 2002: 116; Taylor 1869: 5). In historical sources and local oral

[4]*Raja* is a term encompassing anything from powerful kings to moderately successful brigands. In the jungle kingdoms, *rajas* sought legitimacy mostly through alliance rather than direct conquest—trade, marriage ties, and the patronization of local deities (Kulke 1993; Schnepel 2021). The founding stories are models of "stranger kingship": political systems oriented around an outsider who enters into ties with the indigenous owners of the earth (see Sahlins 1981).

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traditions these upland tracts were divided into territories known as *muthas*: large village collectives with a designated authority (usually known as *patra* or *bissoi*) who managed judicial and fiscal affairs (see Bailey 1960; Behura and Sahu 1971). At the periphery of Chinna Kimedi, the *muthas* comprised several communities living alongside one another. The Kutia were the majority, asserting their sense of rightful ownership through cultivation of the land and a rooted cosmogonic myth. Pano families were artisanal traders who arrived in the highlands due to dispossession elsewhere, mostly attaching themselves to established Kutia villages. The Gond, meanwhile, were relatively prosperous cultivators from Central India; they migrated to Odisha sometime in the seventeenth century, already with political hierarchies and small *rajas* of their own.

At some point, an individual from the in-migrant Gond community became the *patra*, a node of royal sovereignty at the margins of the Odisha jungle kingdoms.[5] The *raja*, and to a lesser extent these *patra* subordinates, surrounded themselves with functionaries (petty militia, arbitrators) and oriented a loose division of labor (artisans, traders, potters, cultivators). The Pano community, for example, took on various roles in the *muthas*, mediating between the Gond *patra* and the Kutia cultivators as *ganda* (arbitrator), *barika* (messenger), *chhatia* (watchman), and *gauntia* (tax collector). This quasi-administrative structure was, as Piers Vitebsky (2022) puts it in his work with the Saora of Odisha, a form of "parasitic feudalism." Royal authority had little bearing on everyday life but introduced new political concepts and provided an overarching structure for extortion. Unity was expressed mostly through ritual events; *Dussehra*, for example, was a royal ritual that publicly performed the axis and various gradations between the *raja* and cultivating communities. It was also the main time for the *patra* to collect tribute.[6]

From the viewpoint of the Kutia, however, the *rajas* and the riverine royal centers were more distant, and *mutha* relations were oriented around their position as cultivators and ritual custodians. When recounting oral histories, the Kutia usually refer to the Gonds as "guests" (*panatara*) who were invited to become "king-people" (*rajendra*), and Kutia authority structures are based on a common reliance on outside arbiters, at various scales of life (family, village, inter-village).[7] Moreover, even though some Pano took on duties for the local *patra*, the majority of Pano families had roles more closely aligned to the Kutia, particularly as *gauda* (herdsperson) and *lohurenja* (ironsmith). In this sense, the Kutia's role as landowners and sacrificers in their own right established their relative status as another pole in a situation of dispersed sovereignty. Sacrifice was a shared idiom of power, authority, and mutuality, at the centers of the jungle kingdoms and at their highland peripheries.

From the early nineteenth century, more than twenty kingdoms across the Odisha highlands were gradually incorporated into the British colonial administration. They became semi-autonomous "princely" states of various sizes, which granted some

[5]Early sources note that the Chinna Kimedi *raja* appointed the Gond *patra* (Taylor 1869: 106).

[6]Widely celebrated in the Odisha kingdoms, *Dussehra* expressed royal sovereignty "from above" (see Schnepel 2002; Skoda 2020). In what follows, I will argue that the *Bhia Katina* was part of an expression of sovereignty, to put it a little crudely, "from below."

[7]One interlocutor summarized the story: "One day, we heard people were claiming to be a king. We [the Kutia and Pano] searched for them. They were Gond people, and we found them at Jhirpani. We asked why they had come, and one man said, 'I am a *raja*, so I want to stay.' He was not really a king, but there was fighting elsewhere, so we agreed to create a 'kingdom' (*nange dina, nange rajanitri*)."

internal sovereignty in return for recognition of the encompassing suzerainty of the British Crown. The dispersed, sacrificial sovereignties at the center of these kingdoms, however, were targets of intervention. In 1836, as they pursued a fugitive *raja* and unpaid tribute, British officers seized on stories that Kondhs and their feudatory "chiefs" (the *rajas* and *patras*) were practicing human sacrifice on a large scale (Government of India 1854; Padel 2009). This supposed discovery led to three decades of military suppression campaigns. Each winter between 1836 and 1862, British officers and native sepoy regiments set out to pacify resistant villages and rescue alleged human victims known as *Meriahs*, resettling thousands in colonies and missionary schools.[8]

Many of the British officers assigned to suppress the *Meriah* sacrifice were soldier-anthropologists. Samuel Macpherson, for example, was a cartographer who, in 1835, was sent to lead the *Meriah* campaigns. Educated at Cambridge, Macpherson drafted detailed reports on Kondh life, describing them through tropes of classical literature and new evolutionary ideas (1852; 1865). Through these writings, the Kondh became well-known in early anthropology. James Frazer, for example, for whom the Kondh were "the best-known case of human sacrifices" (1933[1912]: 245), suggested that because the victim's flesh was buried in the fields, the *Meriah* was not a victim. Instead, these individuals had a "direct or intrinsic power of making the crops grow…in the sovereign virtue believed to reside in anything that came from his person" (ibid: 250). The sacrifice of the Meriah, like the ritual killing of the outsider king in the sacred grove of Diana, was part of a universal pattern of slaying a divine representative to secure renewal. Now, of course, Frazer had little to say about the specifics of social relations in which these sacrifices took place. But he was, in many respects, quite correct to point to questions of power and sovereignty.

While instances of human sacrifice certainly did occur (and are still recounted by the Kutia today), they are perhaps better described as a moral extreme in a world where value was defined in very human terms. Many of Odisha's jungle kingdoms contained prominent imagery and symbolism of human killing: rumors of human sacrifice circulated widely (and were politically useful to local rulers), and many of the tutelary deities to emerge in these kingdoms were representations of a ritually sacrificed "tribesperson" (Kulke 1993: 6; Schnepel 2002: 245). Moreover, the royal festival of *Dussehra*, as Uwe Skoda (2020: 122) notes in Odisha's Bonai region, is saturated with imagery of human sacrifice. Even if it was a real possibility, it circulated more as a rumor and an image of transgressive sovereign power over life.

Most early sources indicate that the *Meriah* sacrifice was firmly embedded in the regional political system. For example, one of the earliest colonial reports, from 1837, describes it as performed "at the expense of, and in rotation, by certain Mootahs [sic]" (Government of India 1854: 3). While the various Kondh communities were responsible for hosting the ritual, the Pano traders in the *muthas* supplied the victims, and it was often performed at the behest of the local *rajas* and *patras* (Campbell 1864: 197; Frye 1860: 16; Macpherson 1852: 245; Padel 2009: 130).[9] Within the *mutha* territories, the event also appears to have drawn on a local system of servitude—many so-called *Meriahs* may have actually been captives and bonded

[8]Like their soldier-anthropologist contemporaries, missionaries saw Kondhs as wild and lawless but stressed their childlike amenability to conversion. Many rescued *Meriahs* were housed in missionary colonies in the lowlands and received some formal education (Boal 1982; Padel 2009).

[9]*Meriah* is likely derived from the Odia term *medhya*, which comes from the Sanskrit word for consecrated "victim" or "food" (*medha*). In Vedic prescriptions, *medha* sacrifices are royal (Rousseleau 2008: 108).

laborers kept in the homes of the *rajas* and *patra* as symbols of prestige (Bailey 1960: 60–61; Padel 2009: 110–115). Moreover, as Felix Padel (2009: 161) points out, the British only came with models of human sacrifice of their own: capital punishment and public execution. Today, the residents of one of the largest Kutia villages in Kandhamal still mention British troops hanging Kutia men from a mango tree as a public and sacrificial show of force.

The struggles over different models of sovereignty and sacrifice ultimately laid the ground for new political formations. Initially, the British set the highland Agency Tracts, as they were labeled in the early colonial administration, apart under special jurisdiction. Later they also granted land tax exemption to Kondh communities (including the Kutia) in exchange for the cessation of human sacrifice and its replacement with a buffalo (Bailey 1960: 181). In the following decades, the British took a more distant, quasi-protectionist approach; they aimed to curb exploitation and safeguard Kondh land rights, while maintaining the old *mutha* system in place. Yet, this only meant that structures of parasitism (see Vitebsky 2022) were amplified as the British took control of key markets (salt, liquor, cotton), codified boundaries, and spurred massive movements of people (Padel 2009; Pati 2019). In the late nineteenth century, the Kutia led a series of uprisings against their Pano neighbors, who, the Kutia rebels claimed, were using their trade and administrative connections to the British to consolidate more exploitative positions locally (see Madras Government Judicial Department 1866). The contradictions between colonial paternalism and extraction meant that an enduring political structure—the *muthas*—coexisted with radical shifts in a regional economy.

The *muthas* were only formally abolished during postcolonial land tenure reforms in the 1960s, when they were replaced by the *panchayats* of Odisha's representative democracy.[10] Since then, the Indian state has embodied a much more expansive register of sovereignty through a framework of bureaucratic inclusion and constitutional recognition, and, since the 1980s, an impetus for "tribal" development (see Vitebsky 2017, 2022). The state bureaucracy established the terms of inclusion by formally classifying most Kondh and Gond communities as Scheduled Tribes (ST) and their Pano neighbors as Scheduled Castes (SC), groups formally identified for affirmative action, reservation, and enfranchisement. At the same time, the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution institutionalized mechanisms to protect land rights and ensure some self-determination within Scheduled Areas. These measures were intended to balance developmental inclusion with protective differentiation, granting ST/SC communities a place within the nation-state. Such inclusion came at a new scale and with a new set of political concepts: *panchayats*, reservation quotas, electoral representation, and democratic politics.

So, while the *mutha*s reflected a situation of dispersed sovereignty rooted in distinct intercommunal histories, the sovereignty of the colonial and postcolonial state was based on an encompassing scale of commensuration ("the state" and "the nation") expressed through a vast administrative bureaucracy. In the rescaling of sovereignty, however, sacrifice did not disappear. The British reconfigured it as public executions (Padel 2009: 161), and in the postcolonial state, it was reformatted in more structural terms. The Scheduled Areas in Kandhamal, home to the Kutia and other Kondh communities, have provisions for self-determination

[10]Government of Odisha, "Letter to Deputy Land Reforms Commissioner," November 1962.

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and development "nested" within systems of formal state sovereignty (cf. Simpson 2014). But these regions are also identified for resource extraction, and Kondh communities in Odisha have faced dispossession, rising inequalities, and a widespread failure of state welfare (see Hota 2023). In the shifting regional political economy, it is increasingly their Pano neighbors, however, who have become the sacrificial victims. They have lost their old intermediary monopolies, Kondh communities are the majority and dominant political force, and in some areas, Pano Christian converts have been targeted in killings.[11]

The history of sacrifice, sovereignty, and state formation in the hills and forests of eastern India is not a simple story of one political formation replacing another; it has resulted in an uneven and contested political landscape where different scales of sovereign power coexist. I will now illustrate this through a close ethnographic analysis of the *Bhia Katina*, a ritual once at the heart of *mutha* politics, absorbed under the colonial *Meriah* rubric, and still widely performed by the Kutia today as a stage where the tensions of sovereign power are made legible and publicly negotiated. First, let me explain how the *Bhia Katina* sets some of the terms of interlocal and intercommunal relations in the Kandhamal Hills.

Staking the Ground: An Interlocal Frame

The decision to host the *Bhia Katina* is by no means a light one. There are months of preparations, weeks of ritual procedures, and significant costs for sacrificial animals (buffalo, goats, sheep, hens), feasts, and household hosting needs. It is typically celebrated every three to seven years in each Kutia village, usually after a good harvest, and the overall expense can be shared among the host community or concentrated in a sponsor. It is an event with many dimensions: an offering to the gods for agricultural prosperity and wellbeing (*nehi ane*), a "rounding" of territory (*gunjare dina*), a gathering of dispersed relatives (*adenanga ronjine*), and a display of local status (*deranja tos'ne*). As it channels the products of swidden and forest livelihoods into the public transformation of value, a spectacle of abundance, and the hosting of relatives, friends, and other guests, it is a site of commensuration and recognition: Kutia families—and their Pano and Gond neighbors—are brought together within a distinct frame for mutuality and difference.

Ritual activity is focused on small stone clusters, known as *dharnis*, which are found throughout the Kandhamal Hills. These stones, of various sizes and shapes, mark a rough center point in village settlements and a vast number of "named territories" (*padari*). They provide a sense of fixity and heaviness in a constantly shifting landscape of forest cultivation and are where Kutia families address their localized "gods" (*penu*). *Dharni Penu*, the main deific form worshipped by the Kutia, embodies both numerous specific localities (*padari* territories) and a more generalized productive force of life. The term *dharni* itself, as Raphaël Rousseleau (2008: 108) notes, is a contraction of the Sanskritic *dhartani* ("she who supports") and a synonym of *bhumi* ("surface of the earth"). The *dharni* stones are a cadastral and figurative representation of concentrated life-giving and life-taking forces

[11]In some parts of Kandhamal, Hinduized Kondh communities have targeted Christian-converted Pano in ethnonationalist violence (see Hota 2023; Padel 2009). This issue, which mostly did not occur among the upland Kutia, is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail.

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attributed to named places. Through these earthly dimensions, they form the foundation of a system of customary landownership, which shapes patterns of cultivation and intra- and inter-village sociability.

The various *padari* territories and their *dharni* stones are part of a larger ritual collective known as the *malanga*—several neighboring Kutia villages that share "clan" groupings (*gachhi*) and ritual objects (*mala dupa*). These objects, consisting of ceremonial axes, knives, iron shackles, brass pots, and small bells, are used solely for the *Bhia Katina*; each object is associated with a specific *padari* tract and is kept in the homes of the *jani* ritual specialists across the *malanga* territory.[12] While Kutia villages are generally less stratified than their Kondh counterparts in the plains, and everyday life in the highlands is marked by considerable heterogeneity, the *malanga* is characterized by tensions and asymmetries. Both the *dharni* stones and *mala dupa* objects are generally the responsibility of more senior Kutia *gachhis*: the owners (of the land and the *mala dupa* objects) who are pitched against various other non-owners who "arrived later" (*gachhi bakoti vhatere*).[13] Several *malanga* collectives were historically grouped under the larger *mutha*, which, centered on the *patra*, was a frame of royal sovereignty from above. The *malanga*, centered instead on the Kutia, was a frame for more situated enactments of sovereignty expressed through their localized political relations.

The *Bhia Katina* is, on the one hand, an idealized expression of relations of ownership and obligation in the Kutia *malanga* territories. Yet, at the same time, it also emerges from and aims to energize productive relations in this same *malanga* territory—it is, as in the paradox of sovereignty, both set apart and within the constraints of worldly realities. Therefore, although it presents an idealized image of political unity, the *Bhia Katina* frames a great diversity of actual circumstances in the many *malanga* territories. Histories of migration, for example, mean that Kutia families often reside some distance from their traditional *gachhi* areas. In some places, long co-residing *gachhis* have established close, amicable ties as *tanji-tali* ("elder siblings" or "man and woman"), while in others, significant asymmetries shape access to local resources. Moreover, in areas around the upland market centers, *malangas* are also home to Pano and Gonds. These communities may occupy areas of land and have influential positions, but the Kutia are the owners and ritual custodians.[14]

But if we are speaking of sovereignty, who here is the sovereign? In the more remote *malangas*, senior Kutia *gachhis* are responsible for hosting and mobilizing resources for the *Bhia Katina*, and families from the senior *tanji-tali gachhis* generally take turns to purchase the main buffalo (in roughly three- to seven-year cycles). Rather than any static, centralized image of sovereign power, it reflects the loose political hierarchies and negotiated forms of customary authority found in Kutia villages. At other times, however, the event may be sponsored by prominent Kutia figures, as well as Gonds and Odias who reside in some *malangas*. In these cases, the *Bhia Katina* frames a more concentrated display of wealth, status, and authority.

[12]According to my Kutia interlocutors, these are remnants of past human sacrifices.

[13]The *jani* men and women do not own the *mala dupa*. The objects have an inalienable connection to the *padari* territories; when Kutia families move, they remain rooted in place.

[14]Even in highland *malangas* where the *Bhia Katina* was celebrated by descendants of soldiers (*paika*) of the former *rajas*, who once took land from the Kutia, the Kutia still conducted the ritual procedures (Niggemeyer 1964: 186).

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This distinction is key to understanding how older *malanga* relations, and their expression at the *Bhia Katina*, have fed into newer socioeconomic hierarchies. Typically, it is the various owner *gachhis* in the respective *malangas* who have managed to consolidate most local influence in the Kandhamal Hills, maintaining their customary swidden territories, securing small areas of official land under the tenure reforms of the 1960s–1970s, and taking advantage of development interventions since the 1980s. Therefore, some *malangas*, particularly around the upland market centers, have become marked by significant socioeconomic divisions. But, even so, older *malanga* relations (based on Kutia ritual custodianship and their inter-*gachhi* relations) remain at the heart of interlocal politics, particularly for the way hillside land (used for swiddening) is divided communally each year. This persistence of customary landholding systems is also supported by the protective mechanisms established by the Odisha state under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which has, to some extent, safeguarded *adivasi* land rights in this region. Therefore, rather than reflecting any traditional sovereignty, the *Bhia Katina* is perhaps better described as a frame for the enactment of different sovereign relations in the *malanga* territories, as they are embedded in the shifting currents of the regional political economy.

What I want to suggest here is that the ritual frame set out at the *Bhia Katina* is characterized by two distinct poles of territorial association, which orient the constant ebb and flow of interlocal relations. Alongside the political relations in the host *malanga* territory, it frames a second, more distant connection to land—the place of affinal relatives.

The distinction between agnates (patrilineal kin) and affines (in-laws or potential in-laws) is a core tension of life in the *adivasi* communities of the Odisha highlands; it sets the terms of who is "own" and "other" as part of local concepts of social difference (see Bailey 1960; Berger 2023; Hardenberg 2019). Moreover, the problem of who is a host and guest in different places (the *padari*, the *malanga*) is a recurrent question of highland life: Kutia, Gonds, Pano, and others are constantly judging their actions based on their connections to different named territories, and their movement in and out of defined roles associated with them. Unlike other Kutia rituals, including those involving buffalo sacrifice, what sets the *Bhia Katina* apart is the explicit involvement of this much wider set of affinal relations—relations that are, in many respects, the horizon of the Kutia social world. It is one of the few occasions that such expansive relations, spread out across the highlands, are brought into view. But each year, the position shifts. It moves between Kutia families mobilizing resources to host the event in their own villages and attending a *Bhia Katina* hosted by affinal relatives elsewhere.

Throughout the ceremonial week, the hosts of the *Bhia Katina* greet groups of affinal relations at the village boundary for an act of ritual welcoming (usually drinking), ritual exchange (usually a half-carcass of a pig), and a ritual plea that no quarrels arise during their stay. Relatives from the *mama ijo* (both the maternal uncle's home and the paternal uncle's home through marriage), in particular, are treated with high regard, and must bring small parcels of grain from their villages for the host's ritual procedures.[15] Alongside these ritual obligations, other

[15]In particular, the *mama pranga* ("mother's brother's grains") and *bhanaja pranga* ("siblings' sons' grains"). These obligations reflect how Kutia marriages cannot be repeated between the same families for at least three generations, dividing the Kutia social world into broad sets of unmarriageable "sibling" relations with ritual obligations—or, in other words, an expansive conceptualization of siblings includes cross-cousins (maternal and paternal siblings' children by marriage) living elsewhere. The principles

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affinal relatives have special privileges: the *bhanaja*, the "sibling's son" (the son of a sibling who has married elsewhere, from either the male or female perspective) are given free rein to kill domestic animals, climb palm trees to break open pots of fermenting palm juice, and destroy property in the host village. The Kutia describe this as a mock "fight" (*pagisana*) that reflects a reversal of the dynamics of marriage in the *pokta naju* (maternal or in-laws village)—the long Kutia marriage negotiations, too, also involve various mock and ritualized conflicts. In this sense, the *Bhia Katina* is a key stage for different generations of affinal tensions to play out; old feuds and disputes are frequently reignited, but young people also meet potential marriage partners and forge new affinal connections into the future.[16]

Importantly, it is not only human guests that must be welcomed. The main ceremonial period lasts eight days, the "time of the *penu*" (*penaka dina*), during which the hosts invite the *penu* as witnesses from "all four directions" (*chari digo*). Each family has a portfolio of *penu* influenced by their specific histories of marriage and movement—such that the involvement of these *penu* also reflects the dual orientation to land and territory. These diverse family *penu* portfolios are encompassed by the spirits of the host locality in *Dharni Penu* and *Soru Penu*, representing the more generalized life-giving and life-taking forces in the host *malanga*. At the *Bhia Katina*, each *penu* is welcomed by name—some publicly in the village center, others in intimate household rituals—with pleas such as: "Do not bring us trouble! Look what we are giving!" There are three stages to this spiritual hosting: the "gods have come" (*penu vhate*), the "gods have eaten" (*penu tinjhi guananga*), and the "gods have stood" (*penu ningite*). Much as with the human guests, the aim is for the *penu* to gather to witness the enactment of sovereignty, and then to be sent away again, happy and satiated.

Close kin and distant relatives, eager participants and outside spectators, capricious gods, and all sorts of other guests gather at the *Bhia Katina*. The setting of a ritual frame enables these relations to be made commensurable to one another as part of an image of mutuality and difference that encompasses a diverse range of actual *malanga* circumstances and family biographies. The ritual frame orients these relations to the terms of the host *malanga* and their enactment of situated sovereignty. This attentive orientation is perhaps most clearly evident on the penultimate day, when the hosts open the *Bhia Katina* to guests and "plant" (*ohina*) a large, intricately carved wooden post (*koḍumunda*) into the village center. Each *Bhia Katina* must have a new *koḍumunda*—ritually chosen in the forest, carved, and planted into the ground—where the buffalo is bound and shown to the assembled guests.

guiding inter-*gachhi* relations are generally explained by the number of generations that ritual grains must be brought to the *Bhia Katina* before marriage between the same families can be repeated. Importantly, *mama* and *bhanaja* relations are essentially reversals of one another, and the principles at the *Bhia Katina* involve various affinal relations across different generations and from different standpoints. It is perhaps more helpful to view these kin relations in expansive socio-centric terms rather than centered genealogically on "ego."

[16]Warfare was historically part of life in the Kondh regions (see Bailey 1960: 60; Boal 1982; Nayak 1989). Land and marriage, in particular, were key sources of tension, and family histories in Kandhamal are full of stories of feuds, trickery, and loss caused by inter-village disputes. The Kondh social world was split into relatives and "others" who were also a source of status and potential marriage ties. Contest and capture are dominant idioms in the region, particularly in marriage and ritual. At the Dongria Kondh *kodru parba*, for example, visiting affines often attempt to kill the sacrificial buffalo before the final day, such that it requires bodyguards (Hardenberg 2019: 581).

The *Bhia Katina*, then, is an expression of relations of ownership and obligation in customary territories. Participation involves oscillation between the role of hosts and guests, in a context where land is more than a resource: it is a referential mooring from which to confront life-giving and life-taking forces (the *penu*) in particular places, and to act outwardly toward other people whilst remaining separate from them. Mobilizing resources in the *malanga*, the *Bhia Katina* sets a ritual frame oriented around two poles of territorial association: the host *malanga* and the place of affines. This frame for interlocal relations—that is, a localized center and periphery from an "us-centric" perspective—encompasses a diversity of actual circumstances and relations within the *malanga* territories. In other words, it is a frame through which different sovereign relations can be expressed.

Now, before addressing the public act of killing at the heart of the *Bhia Katina*, a key part of the event is that the main sacrificial animal, the *bhia*, is always sourced from lowland marketplaces.

The Wealth of Strangers

It was Gokana's job to source the buffalo for the Khumudhi *Bhia Katina.* An elderly Pano man, his wiry figure concealing real strength, Gokana traveled from his home, in a Pano village near Khumudhi, to meet a livestock trader in the plains town of Kurtamgada. It was an eight-hour walk each way, and he made the trip over several days. Negotiating a price, he then walked the buffalo back along narrow jungle paths, keeping it with domestic animals behind his home for several weeks. Gokana was the *barika* (messenger) and *gauda* (herdsperson) of Khumudhi, roles held by Pano families who historically performed various tasks in Kutia villages, usually in exchange for a small area of cultivable land. Gokana was a messenger, a seasonal herder, a trader, and an occasional cooker of *mahua* liquor. He was also the primary supplier of sacrificial animals; even though Khumudhi had a healthy herd of twelve buffalo today, the main one for the *Bhia Katina* had to be sourced by Gokana from "outside" (*ra'e'ta tana*).

According to local traditions, the Pano were traders, ironworkers, weavers, and musicians who, dispossessed from their lands in the regional kingdoms, headed to the peripheries. Most Pano families recall how their ancestors became attached to Kutia villages upon settling in the highlands, usually several centuries back, but in some cases much more recently. Their family histories are diverse. Some became relatively prosperous, taking on duties for the local *patra* and consolidating economic monopolies (as liquor sellers and traders). The majority, however, established closer connections to the Kutia cultivators. During colonial rule, the British criminalized the Pano as human traffickers who kidnapped or purchased human *Meriah* victims from lowland Hindu communities—or provided their own children in times of hardship—and then sold them to the Kutia and other Kondh (Frye 1860: 38; Macpherson 1865: 115; Padel 2009). Regardless of the scale on which these claims were true, we find the same relationship in the *Bhia Katina* today: the Pano *barika* sources and cares for the buffalo until it is shown to the guests on the penultimate day.

Far from any stereotypical image of isolated homogeneity, *adivasi* communities throughout East and Central India were historically marked by extensive intercommunal interdependencies. In Odisha, a range of lower-caste groups held social, economic, and religious roles in the villages of the Kondh, Gond, Baiga, Bondo, Gadaba, and Saora, among others (see Berger 2023; Boal 1982; Sinha 1987; Vitebsky

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2017). In the Dongria Kondh villages of the Rayagada district, for example, the Domb (as the Pano are known there) are a core part of the Dongria world: they mediate between the Dongria and the regional markets as traders, but also, through their procurement of sacrificial victims, between the Dongria and their gods, circulating key forms of wealth on which the wider socio-cosmic order rests (Hardenberg 2019: 132–139). The Kutia foreground a similar sense of ritual interdependency with their Pano neighbors, who not only procure the main buffalo but have core ritual duties and, as traditional ironworkers, are said to have made the ritual *mala dupa* objects associated with the *malanga* territories. The Kutia describe themselves as "big people" (*deranja*), the Pano as "little people" (*likanja*). Yet, these differences are not organized according to the logic of caste purity, but from the perspective of the Kutia's situated status as cultivators and "people of the earth" (*tana tanja*).

The position of the Pano as intermediaries and gatekeepers shows how the sacrificial politics of the Kutia and other Kondh groups were embedded in much wider economic and political networks. In fact, most of the long ritual narratives (*rakhi'kata*) at the *Bhia Katina*, which the Kutia *jani* ritual specialists recite over several days, trace a sacred geography in the Kandhamal Hills set within a broader set of regional trade networks oriented around old royal centers such as Sonepur, Bissamcuttack, and Bhawanipatna.[17] It was the Pano who enabled the Kutia to access these wider networks, but in ways that generally aligned with loose local hierarchies. The *barika*, for example, was usually associated with the senior *gachhis*—that is, the "owners" (*gochhi bina tana*)—and their designated *majhi* (roughly, "leader") in Kutia villages, reflecting their relative political predominance in the *malanga.* The Pano *barika* and *gauda* did not serve an undifferentiated tribal community, even if the forms of authority familiar to the Kutia differed significantly from classic understandings of centralized sovereign power.

Consider the buffalo. As domesticated animals, they are primarily found in India's northern agrarian plains today. Wild buffalo, meanwhile, are mostly found in the far Northeast and parts of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha—regions where their daily agrarian use has historically been more limited (see Hoffpauir 1974). Kutia stories about the origin of the *Bhia Katina* usually describe the initial use of hillside crops as sacrificial offerings, which were later replaced by humans and buffalo.[18] It was only after paddy cultivation expanded into the upland valleys, sometime in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that semi-domesticated buffalo became more widely available across the region (Boal 1982: 151). In the hilly tracts, in particular, they are not particularly useful as draft animals or for milk, which the Kutia do not drink. Until within living memory, buffalo were almost entirely "outside" prestige goods, used in marriage exchanges, dispute settlements, and various ritual events. They were "wealth on the hoof" as Janet Hoskins (1993: 168) aptly puts it in her work on similar buffalo sacrifices in Indonesia.

Buffalo, then, were not a means of production. But they were a means of reproduction, essential for the renewal of the Kutia world. Their foreign origin amplified their sense of economic-cum-spiritual value in the highlands. However,

[17]Similarly, *Lohuwadi Penu*, the god of iron-smithing, is one of the primary deities at the *Bhia Katina*, and iron was historically a driver of early integration into the regional economy. Some Pano in the Kandhamal Hills were traditionally ironworkers.

[18]Barbara Boal suggests that wild buffalo were too dangerous, and that trapped sambar deer were once used as offerings in the Kondh sacrifices (1982: 151).

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as multi-sphere objects of value, their circulation within networks of trade, prestige, and renewal meant that they were a tool for exploitation. Among the Saora of Odisha's Gajapati district, for example, Piers Vitebsky notes that the prestige value attached to buffalo often led to indebtedness and situations where gangs of Pano would seize portions of the Saora harvest for payment (2017: 31). The Kutia, too, have many stories of difficulties caused by the Pano and the costs of buffalo for ritual events. Indebtedness was a widespread issue, even if the extent of exploitation in the highlands was historically lesser than elsewhere (see Niggemeyer 1964: 17). Yet, given this situation, as Felix Padel (2009: 135) suggests: "does it not make symbolic sense that Konds [sic] sacrifice an 'outsider' [human or buffalo] in an attempt to ward off the subtle forms of control which outsiders were enmeshing them in?"

We seem to be looking at sovereignty from two angles. From the perspective of the *rajas*, the Pano were intermediaries within an expansive network of royal sovereignty. In this view, some Pano *barikas* took on quasi-administrative roles and held positions of extraction and extortion that were later consolidated within the colonial state. From the Kutia perspective, however, most Pano *barikas* were messengers, herdspersons, and mediators; they provided links to powerful and useful strangers, as well as trade networks, while also being a buffer to keep their more negative aspects separate. They held an ambivalent position; aiding the state while also helping the Kutia keep a distance from it.

Today, the Pano intermediary role has lessened in importance; most Kutia can visit the market themselves, moneylending is officially forbidden, the Odisha state protects Kutia land rights (to some degree), and the Kutia's numerical majority makes them the dominant force in local politics. There are buffalo in the hills today, too. Most Kutia villages have healthy herds, in some cases utilized for limited upland paddy cultivation, but still predominantly for ritual events and various prestige exchanges (in particular marriage). Yet even with this shift, the Pano *barika* still always sources the main buffalo for the *Bhia Katina* from "outside" (*ra'e'ta tana*). The event is built upon an enduring image of intercommunal interdependence in which the Pano are subordinate in terms of the Kutia's land- and ritual-custodianship, but are also a key part of the reproduction of a wider social order (cf. Hardenberg 2019; Sprenger 2005). The Kutia say that this outside-ness enhances the buffalo's power as an object of wealth (*dulu*) and life-giving power (*jela*), and that sourcing an impressive specimen is a demonstration of social power by senior *gachhis* or other hosts of the *Bhia Katina* in the *malanga* territories.

In setting out a frame for interlocal relations, then, the *Bhia Katina* relies on the capture and incorporation of external value; it presents an image of sovereign self-containment but depends on the control and transformation of imported wealth between spheres. It is a frame where this extraneous prestige good is then defined in a way that negates its previous market value: the buffalo enters as a commodity, but it becomes something else entirely as the wealth of strangers is destroyed before a watching audience.

Spectacles of Domestication

So far, we have been dealing with what are essentially two kinds of commensuration—processes of translating different relations, meanings, and values into a shared frame. In the first, the *Bhia Katina* sets a frame for mutual engagement and recognition oriented

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around two poles of territorial association. Through cycles of hosting, it creates a public space in which interlocal social alignments become legible. In the second form of commensuration, the *Bhia Katina* constructs a frame for the internalization and transformation of external value: the buffalo, a form of prestige wealth and a commodity procured through regional trade networks, is ritually incorporated and transformed. These two processes converge in a public act of domestication, where the paradoxes of sovereignty are acted out on the body of the buffalo.

On the penultimate day of the *Bhia Katina*, the hosts tether the buffalo to the carved *koḍumunda* post in the village center and beckon the guests and gods to come as witnesses. The animal has been fed, watered, and well-looked after, but now, as it is brought into this public space, it is harassed in a dramatized scene of mockery. Young Kutia men display their athleticism by holding the buffalo's horns, swinging from its tail, and grabbing its testicles, before leaping quickly out of the way. Women ring small, high-pitched bells and sing their own taunting songs: "You were once 'taken' by your master (*mastu opondi*). Your master sold you (*ninde mastu pranate*). You must fight (*inu pagisamu*)!" The attentive focus shifts from the welcoming of guests to a public spectacle of subjugation: initially sourced by the Pano *barika*, the buffalo transforms from a cosmopolitan object of prestige wealth (*dulu*) into the sacrificial *bhia*, a form of value that is then destroyed, transformed, and reallocated to the sacrificial community.[19]

The Kutia describe the ritual domestication of the buffalo as a "mocking" (*gresna*), "seizing" (*ana*) and "tearing" (*kḍuhpa*) intended to make the buffalo "cry out" (*reha*). Typically, they are relatively silent animals when under threat. To avoid predators, their herds move quietly through the forest, and they are generally less vocal than other domestic animals. In Kutia villages, they are symbols of power and prestige, but also uncertainty and superstition.[20] Moreover, the provocation of the buffalo's silent strength is far from certain. In some *Bhia Katina*, the sacrificial animal resists, displaying strength and a strong "life force" (*nehi jela ane*). But in many *Bhia* events, the buffalo gives only a muted response, and spectators complain it is "weak" (*pusu*) and "fearing" (*ajananga*). Transformed from a commodity and prestige object, the buffalo becomes a sign of something else entirely: its resistance, the manner of its death, and the image of the destruction of this external value circulate in an interlocal sacrificial public.

But what kind of value does the buffalo become in this public space? The Kutia say that the prestige buffalo, the *dulu koḍu*, becomes the *bhia* through its association with the *malanga* territory and the gathered sacrificial community—both of which are also referred to by the same term, *bhia.* Aside from a linguistic homology, the connection lies at the heart of the ritual procedures, which position the buffalo as an attentive focal point in the tracing of territorial boundaries. Throughout the ceremonial week, it is "shown" (*tosunere*) at the various *malanga* villages. Then, on the penultimate day, the animal is tied to the central *koḍumunda* post in the host village for the public mocking. On the final day, it is released from this central tether and led in procession (usually seven times) around the host village. After this

[19]For comparative cases, see Hoskins 1993; Sprenger 2005; Work 2022.

[20]Domesticated buffalo are associated with power in India, represented as a demonic force against which many regional kingdoms were ritually solidified (Biardeau 1984; Hiltebeitel 1985). In Kutia villages, they are ghostly creatures of silent strength, and Kutia superstitions include a buffalo crossing over a pathway, calling out in the night, and, in particular, entering or sleeping in front of the threshold of the home.

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circumnavigation, it is transferred to one of the hillside *padari* territories, usually those associated with senior *gachhis* or the sponsors of the event, and finally killed. As in the public contest with the animal, the killing involves a period of struggle to make it "cry out" (*reha*).[21]

The association of the buffalo with the *malanga* territory and sacrificial community is made particularly clear in the division of its body. First, women and men from each *malanga* village, along with various affinal delegates, rush to strip off pieces of flesh and fill small pots (*muta*) with blood. The head of the buffalo is separated, and a Kutia man hoists it onto his shoulders, leading a procession back to the host village. This head is taken to the central village *dharni* for *Dharni Penu*, one leg is placed on the roof of the most senior *jani* home for *Soru Penu*, and the blood is distributed to the various villages that comprise the *malanga* territory. The day after the killing, the *malanga* villages and remaining affinal relations gather to eat the meat and bury the other parts in the cultivation fields. Explaining this ritual disassembly and part burial, the Kutia say that the body of the buffalo encourages the growth of crops and ensures future agricultural prosperity. Within the ritual frame, the buffalo condenses the identity of the sacrificial community and the integrity of the territory into a tangible sign. Through its public incorporation, display, and subjugation, the buffalo becomes a metonym for both. The prestige value of the "outside" buffalo is destroyed, transformed, and redistributed across the *malanga* territory and networks of affinal association. Frazer, in some sense, had a point.

As in classic anthropological cases of ritual sacrifice—the Nuer, the Polynesian kings, the Shilluk kingdom—the model of society present at the *Bhia Katina* is made real through its enactment. It is through the gathering of people, the public subjugation of the animal, and the division of its body, that a larger totality is temporarily brought into being (see Graeber 2017a; 2017b). The spectacle of domestication operates on multiple levels: not only is the animal brought in and publicly subdued, but external value is incorporated, transformed, rendered internally meaningful, and reallocated. This is an active and uncertain process: the buffalo resists as the sacrificers attempt to exert their power over life in the conquest of the animal, while striving to control the power of life upon which communal wellbeing and agricultural prosperity depend (cf. High 2022: 17). I have described this public act of domestication as a frame for sovereign power emerging from distinct intercommunal histories. The buffalo is a sign —standing in for the community, its territory, and its sovereign unity—and a value, a movable and convertible form of wealth. Its destruction in the ritual space transforms external wealth into locally meaningful power, fertilizing the fields, revitalizing (inter) communal relations, and displaying sovereign status.

Through a dual process of commensuration—aligning people within a shared frame and transferring value between frames—the public domestication of the buffalo at the *Bhia Katina* orients a sacrificial public: a differentiated and intercommunal set of participants and audiences who periodically gather during the constant cycles of visiting and hosting that define highland life. The buffalo is repeatedly shown in different *malanga* villages, and to the beckoned gods and guests who are constantly reminded of their role as witnesses. But even though it is one of the few moments when a broader image of society is made visible, we should not mistake it for a harmonizing

[21]Unlike other ritual sacrifices, where animals are killed by a swift blow to the spine, the *Bhia Katina* involves a slow ritualized decapitation using small ceremonial axes.

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logic. The *Bhia Katina* elicits relations of mutuality and difference; it creates a temporary alignment through which the Kutia and their neighbors grapple with the conundrums of sovereign power. In this way, it shapes the conditions under which potential sovereigns become perceptible, setting out a provisional model of how commensuration might work across different sovereign relations.

Politics in Sacrificial Publics

Every five years, the *Bhia Katina* months, from late January to early April, coincide with the build-up to the Indian General Election, typically held sometime between April and May. State and national politics usually feel distant from the everyday concerns in Kutia villages. Yet, in these months, party symbols appear: the conch shell of the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), the lotus of the Bharata Janata Party (BJP), the open palm of the Indian National Congress (INC). Weekly market gatherings become sites of electoral strategizing and often heated debate, and the public space of the *Bhia Katina* takes on added political significance. In fact, on most weekends during these months, a *Bhia Katina* takes place in a different Kutia village. Some attract many hundreds of attendees. Even at smaller ones, talk inevitably turns to politics at home and politics in more distant affinal locations. It is the more intercommunal events, however, that become key political stages.

Roughly a month before the 2019 election, in late March, a *Bhia Katina* was held in Madalaguda, a Kutia village near the market of Belghar, the current *panchayat* headquarters and the old seat of the *mutha patra.* It drew hundreds of guests—Kutia, Pano, Gond, Odia—and even local dignitaries from plains towns some distance away. It was a far more lavish occasion than *Bhia Katina* in remote Kutia villages: homes were elaborately decorated, an intricately woven awning was erected in the village center, and the ritual procedures were more extensive. In this *malanga*, encompassing Madalaguda and several neighboring villages, Gond families occupy land, supposedly "gifted" (*siate*) to them after they first arrived in the highlands several centuries ago. Both Kutia and Gond recount versions of this story, and one Kutia man described the Kutia-Gond relation here as like having "one mother and two fathers" (*eka ama, dui aba*). In this *malanga*, Gond families participate in ritual procedures, and a Gond priest shares the sacrificial duties to kill the *bhia* buffalo alongside his Kutia counterparts.

The act of killing itself took place in the area of scrub and swidden land occupied by the Gond families. In fact, although the elaborate ritual procedures traced the *malanga* jurisdiction centered around the Kutia's ritual ownership, a single Gond man in Madalaguda sponsored almost the entire event. He was the local Zilla Parishad Chairman—a district-level body in the *Panchayat Raj* system primarily focused on rural development—and a key political figure for the BJD, the incumbent in state politics at the time. According to local rumors, this Gond man spent more than one lakh (100,000 rupees) to sponsor the *Bhia Katina.* It was not only a reflection of his presence in local patterns of landownership; it was also an opportunity for public display. Knowing that it was likely to be one of the most well-attended events that year, he visibly demonstrated his connections to the Kutia and cultivated his influence. Many of my Kutia friends were in awe. They said it showed he was like a "king-person" (*rajendra*) and noted the impressive buffalo. It was reportedly purchased from the lowlands for 20,000 rupees, roughly double the usual amount Kutia would spend.

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Other local politicians and aspiring political figures employed similar strategies that year. For instance, another *Bhia Katina* took place in a more remote Kutia village in the Guma region. This event was sponsored by a Kutia man from this village who had gone on to become a prominent figure in Kandhamal politics for the BJP and an elected Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) for Balliguda, a constituency at the state legislative level, between 2004 and 2014. His rise was especially notable: he had come from the Kutia periphery, and, as a result, had become something of a celebrity. While the Kutia uplanders have remained relatively disconnected from the emergence of a collective Kondh or "Kui" politics in Kandhamal (see Boal 1982; Hota 2023), the MLA's emergence from among the *soru-tanja* ("hill-folk") Kutia reinforced his regional stature. It granted him a sense of legitimacy grounded in his enduring social ties at the margins. Much like the political figures of earlier times—the *rajas* and the *patras*—this Kutia MLA carefully cultivated his political influence through sponsorship of the *Bhia Katina* and ensuring he was a visible presence.[22]

As Uwe Skoda (2020) puts it, there is a "tenacity" to older frames for sovereignty in highland Odisha. In Kandhamal's precolonial center-periphery dynamics, the *Bhia Katina* was a stage of sovereignty from below: it was an expression of political relations within the *malanga* territories and a key site of intercommunal politics. The Gond families were part of these relational associations, even though they also occupied positions in a more encompassing system of royal sovereignty centered on the *muthas*. In the colonial period, the prominent political role of sacrifice made these events (collectively labeled as the *Meriah*) a target in suppression campaigns as part of a struggle over new scales of sovereignty. However, even in the decades following independence, the Gond *patras* continued to use the *Bhia Katina* to help shore up their waning influence in the *mutha* system (Niggemeyer 1964: 187). Today, although the old kingdoms have long been formally abolished, political actors in Odisha's formal electoral politics still utilize sacrificial publics as a platform for negotiating authority and legitimacy.

Ritual and democratic politics intersect in complex ways in the Odisha highlands. In a fascinating comparison of two royal dynasties in Odisha, Uwe Skoda and Minkaten Bag (2018) highlight the contrasting fortunes of the Bamra and Bonai kingdoms in the northwestern region. After independence, these kingdoms became adjacent political constituencies of comparable size. But they were marked by radically different processes of political inclusion. Bamra became a general constituency in Odisha's electoral system, open to contestation by any social group, and here the former royals continued to dominate local politics. By contrast, Bonai was designated as a constituency reserved exclusively for Scheduled Tribes—that is, elected positions were reserved for candidates from the ST community under India's affirmative action policy. In this context, Bonai's old royal families mostly lost their influence, and political power shifted instead to emerging political dynasties from within the ST population.

Like Bonai, much of Kandhamal is officially designated as a Scheduled Area, with most of the district's political constituencies reserved for STs. However, the dynamics of local electoral politics differ from Bonai because both Kondh (including the Kutia) and Gond communities hold ST status. The Balliguda Constituency, encompassing the Kutia region, has been characterized by competition between older political

[22]Also in 2019, a *Bhia Katina* was sponsored by an Odia individual in another highland market center, Jhirpani. This individual was, likewise, a key figure in local politics.

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dynasties (such as the extended family of the old Gond *patra*), who still exert significant political influence, and emerging dynasties from Kutia, Kondh, and other ST communities. In the 2014 election, the Kutia BJP candidate from the Guma region, who had been MLA for ten years, was defeated by a Gond BJD candidate from a family that had managed to re-establish its political influence. Then, in 2019 and 2024, the constituency was won by another ST candidate from the plains region, who ran as a new BJD candidate.

In the hills of southwest Kandhamal, different ST communities vie for leadership positions in local politics. The Kutia remain the majority landowners and cultivators in the region, and their *de facto* sovereignty is reinforced by the provisions of the Scheduled Areas, which, to some degree, protect land rights and ensure political representation. In recent years, Kutia families have entered electoral politics, and limited dynamics of social mobility have led to new hierarchies and differences of wealth and status in their villages. The Gond families remain relatively prosperous, however, and draw on long histories of political leadership. By contrast, the Pano—classified by the Indian government as a Scheduled Caste—have seen their position decline. Once essential intermediaries in the region's sacrificial and economic networks, they have become less central as the political field has shifted toward the Kondh (and Kutia) majority, who retain control over land and dominate local politics.

As I noted earlier, the transformation of sovereignty in highland eastern India has involved a radical shift in scale: from forms of commensuration rooted in specific intercommunal histories to a logic of "many-as-one" embedded in the administrative abstractions of the bureaucratic state (see Gilmartin 2020; Steinmüller 2022). Throughout the *adivasi* regions, new liberal-democratic ideals, shifting political vocabularies of command and governance, and changing value systems have reframed the terrain of political recognition (Shah 2021; Vitebsky 2022). The classificatory logic of state sovereignty, and particularly the ST/SC distinction, creates sharper boundaries between groups, reconfiguring the forms of commensuration through which authority and mutuality are recognized. In parts of Kandhamal, these larger scales of commensuration and recognition have become a significant political issue—the plains regions, for example, have been impacted by ethnic tensions and ethnonationalist violence (see Hota 2023). In the highlands, home to the Kutia, by contrast, formal authority, while expressed on one level through a state structure and democratic mandate, is also, at the local level, still rooted in older patterns of recognition and commensuration in enduring sacrificial publics.

We find ourselves back at the conundrum of sovereign power. Figures such as the Gond Chairman and the Kutia politician draw on older sacrificial frames as they mobilize their claims to political authority within the constraints of local realities. We might see this as a form of "nested sovereignty" (Simpson 2014: 11–12): layered, overlapping, and asymmetrical relationships between indigenous politics and state structures. These are political frames and enactments of sovereignty that are formally marginalized, even if, through them, Kutia communities may act *as if* they were sovereign. At another level, however, state institutions themselves also sustain Kutia landownership and customary authority through the protective provisions in the Scheduled Areas. Ritual and statist frames are not simply nested in a neat, linear fashion; they feed from and into one another in ways that are grounded in specific interlocal and intercommunal histories.

The *Bhia Katina*, therefore, is a frame where heterogeneous relations (kin, affines, neighbors, allies, and outsiders) and values (livelihood surplus, prestige goods, status,

honor, and "life" (*jela*) itself) are made publicly commensurable through ritual transformation. This sacrificial public is not a reflection of any residual or traditional sovereignty; it is a stage where paradoxes of sovereign power continue to play themselves out before diverse audiences. Just as the buffalo is brought from outside and ritually transformed, forms of state authority are absorbed, displayed, and rendered meaningful at the *Bhia Katina* through established patterns of commensuration and recognition.

Conclusion

All sovereignty may depend on some form of sacrifice. In establishing what is of value, sovereignty necessarily defines what can be separated through sacralization and what can be destroyed. In this sense, sacrifice is part of the logic of sovereign power; a way of making authority visible, embodied, and comparable within a commensurable frame. Likewise, while forms of sovereignty often present themselves as self-contained—whether cloaked in a "divine mandate" or the "will of the people"—they are, in practice, always constituted by transgression, interdependency, and the recognition necessary for claims to authority to be efficacious. These tensions are perhaps most vividly worked out in sacrificial rituals like the *Bhia Katina*, which portray an image of political unity through the public domestication of an external value. However, this sacrificial logic exists in other sovereign performances. Electoral figures, too, are exalted and consumed in endless cycles of renewal; brought into the public sphere, they are made symbols of the collective, and either affirmed or destroyed.

In this article, I have outlined how the dramatized conquest of the buffalo at the *Bhia Katina* orients a public space where intra- and inter-communal relations play out in polyphonic dramas of sovereignty. Doing so, I have suggested, enables us to understand the prominent place of these events in the complex, patchwork history of highland East India. Across this region, public sacrificial events have long been a core part of the renewal of life in customary agrarian territories, were once political spectacles in precolonial kingdoms and targets during colonial suppression campaigns, and they remain key political stages in India's formal electoral democracy. I have argued that the enduring role of sacrificial events in regional political life reflects how sacrificial publics, centered here on the Kutia customary landowners, continue to set some of the terms of interlocal and intercommunal relations between the Kutia and their Pano and Gond neighbors.

At an ethnographic level, I analyzed three sovereign dimensions of the *Bhia Katina*—that is, ways the event frames some of the inherent tensions of sovereign power. The first relates to land; by mobilizing livelihood resources within the *malanga*, the *Bhia Katina* establishes a ritual frame oriented around two poles of territorial association: the host *malanga* and the place of affines. This interlocal frame encompasses a diverse range of actual economic circumstances and political relations as it shifts through the cycles of visiting and hosting that define highland life. The second dimension is that the ritual offering, the *bhia*, is a form of foreign wealth; the buffalo is a prestige object sourced from lowland markets by the Pano *barika*. In this sense, the *Bhia Katina* also serves as a space of commensuration between spheres, where the wealth of strangers is redefined and reallocated in a way that negates its extraneous value. These two forms of commensuration come together in the third dimension, a spectacle of domestication; in the provocation and subjugation of the buffalo—and the contest with the watching gods and guests—welfare, honor, and status are all at stake in a public performance.

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The *Bhia Katina*, then, is an expression of an enduring system of relational associations. It establishes a ritual frame for commensuration where relations, meanings, and values are made comparable and mutually recognizable—not according to the large-scale bureaucratic logics and abstract standards of states and nations, but through values grounded in specific intercommunal histories. This is a frame in which communities, families, and individuals come together in mutual engagement, and a frame in which an external value is incorporated, destroyed, and transformed. While things are certainly changing in the Kandhamal Hills—there are new inequalities, new values, and transformations in everyday livelihoods—the *Bhia Katina* remains part of a social grammar through which individuals and families negotiate some of the paradoxes of sovereign power. It is a stage where different sovereign formations become legible—be it the localized *malanga* relations, the old kingly associations, or the recurrent cycles of democratic elections.

Reflecting on the sovereign need for an audience, Danilyn Rutherford (2012: 248) asks: "[I]s sovereignty just another word for the force that brings multiple audiences into view, for better or worse, compelling would-be sovereigns to act?" In other words, the power of sovereignty lies in the dynamics of framing, just as the creation and maintenance of frames are central to the power of ritual in shaping the world. Therefore, if we can say that sovereignty is the force that brings participants and audiences together, sacrifice establishes the legitimacy of the sovereign position through the public definition of value. As I have sought to show in this article, such a close association between the logics of sacrifice and sovereignty is particularly evident in the highlands of East India, where ritual sacrifice has long been a stage to work through the conundrums of worldly power, at different scales.

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