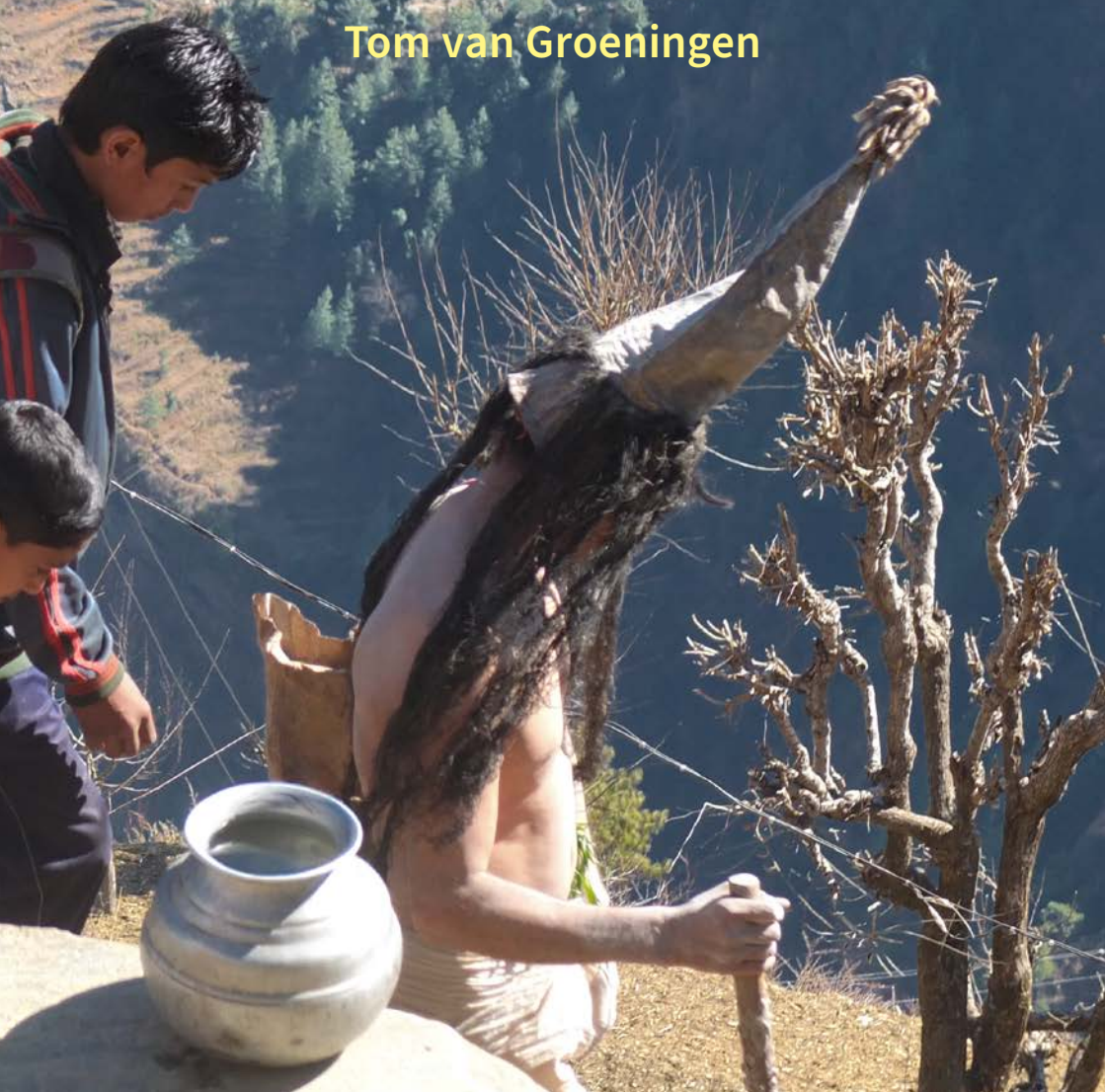
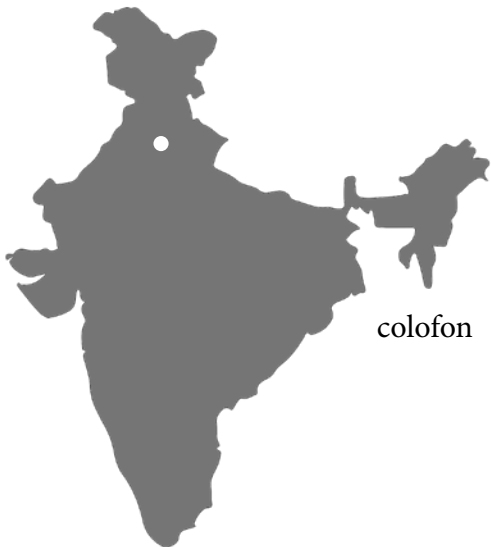
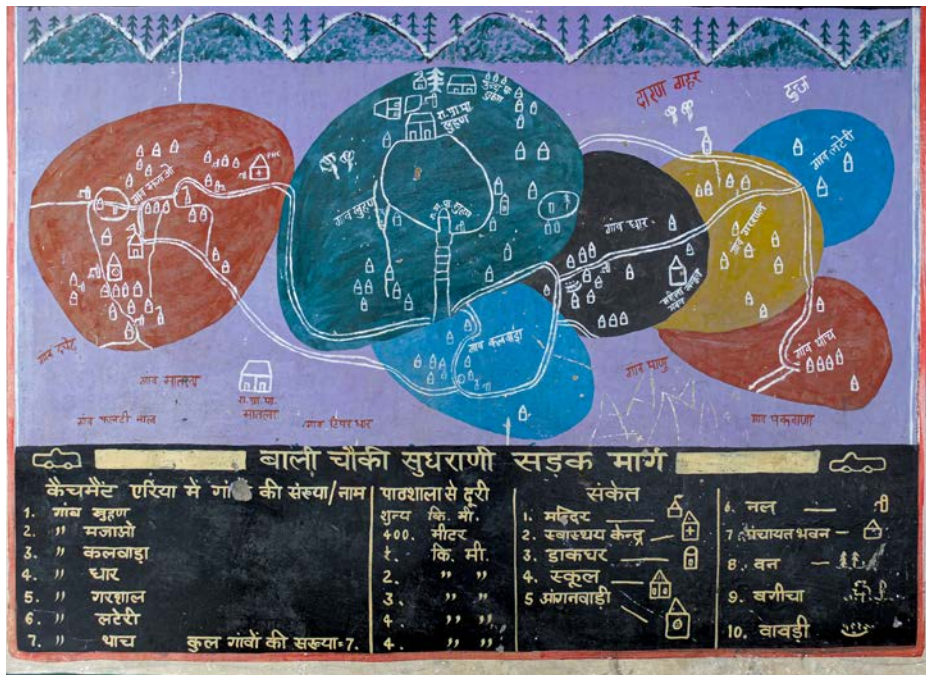


Phagli of Khun

Tom van Groeningen

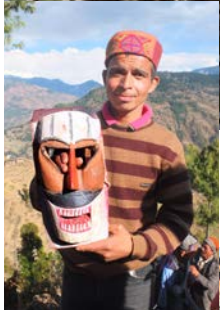




Seven years ago I once again visited the Tirthan-valley in the south of Kullu, the central district in Himachal Pradesh, the state in northwest India. This time to experience the Phagli festival in Khun, a three day procession of dancers, musicians and villagers. The dancers wear masks, often decorated with feathers or flowers and fibre skirts. They celebrate the return of spring, wishing fertility and expelling the winter demons. At the same time it is a social party, a 'mela'. The festival takes place between mid-January to mid-February, at Phalgun, the eleventh month in the Hindu calendar. Nowadays the festival is every three years, tailored to the needs of the residents. The landscape is pleasant and varied with orchards and fields on steep terraces. Small villages and holy centres are scattered over the hills and in the forest.

An old road winds through the Kullu valley, it was used by traders between India and Tibet. Indian markets needed salt and wool and other raw materials from Central Asia, and Tibetans needed wheat and barley from the plains and the hills. From Balichowki, an important

marketplace on the Tirthan river, the road goes up the western slope of the valley. The small villages consist of a few farmhouses, large buildings with three or four floors with wide verandas all around the the building, and with sloping stone roofs, and small temples. The farmhouses and temples are built in Kathkuni style, a method of alternating stone with wood (cedar) meant to absorb the effects of earthquakes. It is bare, wet and cold. The earth black and fertile. The soft green of the budding spring shines on the terraces between the fruit trees. The hills are covered with deodar (conifers) forests and evergreen oaks. On the other side of the valley the low steep slope is hardly inhabited. The small villages are situated on higher slopes. High on the ridge to the south is a transmission tower on the Jalori La at 3300 meters. Towards the north the peaks of the Himalayan are massive. It is said that Shiva lives there. From the road, it is a 45 minute walk to the village Dhar on a steep slippery concrete path. Dhar forms a Bur with five neighbourhoods: Dhar, Manchaon, Kalwada, Garsal, Tach and Lotery. The main village is Khun. The mayor is called Gur, which is a secular and



spiritual function. The Gur of Khun is Mr. Chauhan Budran, a silent, shy man. As a medium he has the exclusive right to interpret the will of the gods.

The Gur is elected in a miraculous way. At the election Lakshmi-Narayan (a goddess in Hindu religion and one who has a temple in Khun) sits like a doll on a pole, carried by two men. The doll is supported on either side by two catchers. Behind these catchers are three or four candidates. The carriers move the bar driven by the super power of Lakshmi-Narayan. The bar pushes forwards and back, left and right until the doll falls. One of the catchers catches the doll. The candidate directly behind this catcher is chosen as the new Gur for the rest of his life but can be replaced prematurely. From now on the Gur will no longer cut his hair. Only ten days ago at the temple of Lakshmi-Narayan the Gur and ten priests installed a palanquin with bronze and copper masks, the mohras. The mohras are local gods. Questions asked at the mohras replies the Gur.

On the first day of Phagli, a crowd forms outside a farmhouse. A group

of boys follow two characters, the male Saddhu and the female Mal Sing. Saddhu is naked except for a loincloth, a bag over his back with ash in it. He has long hair covering his face, a huge long pointed hat and a stick in his hand. Mal Sing, played by a man, has a basket with a doll on her back and wears a mask. Her mask is made of a black plastic jerry can and she has a short stick in her hand. They walk slowly dancing through the fields from home to home, asking money and giving their blessings to those who believe in Phagli. Later in a larger field, the Sadhu pulls on Mal Sing's legs, throws her to the ground, bends forward and makes shocking gestures. Both get up again and Saddhu scatters ashes on them. A lot of hilarity spreads among the youth. This act is repeated several times in other fields. Mal Sing is also joking with me. In addition to the serious aspect, apparently frivolity is possible too. All of a sudden musicians and boys with masks in their hands appear out of thin air. They wave masks over their heads and cry. Cries to drive away the demons. In the brass band, among others, play two horn players, two clarinets, and five brass leather-strung drums

in front of ten men with male masks, two men with female masks, four with monkey masks and one man with a white face mask, which features also a red tongue and a white beard. A circle forms around a person who wears his mask over his left shoulder. On the left they hold their neighbour, and on the right, a stick with which they point rhythmically to the person in the middle. This symbolizes the gopies for Krishna. Gopies are girls, portrayed by male masks and monkey masks. They stand in a circle around Krishna. Krishna speaks bad words. The gopies repeat the bad words pointing with their baton at Krishna. Bad words are demons, thrown away in this way. The sun sinks behind the ridge, it gets cold. The procession stops in front of a house where the Gur tells a story. After this everyone goes home.

The second day it is quiet until late in the morning. A small shrine is being demolished and replaced. A small palanquin with a mohra on it, colourfull dressed, is carefully removed, as well as a large three-pronged spear and other smaller objects. In the next village Khun

Phagli of Khun

the cafe is full. Boys play on a small billiards table. The teacher does not want to answer my questions. “I have a holiday today”. And so there is nothing to explain. Not everyone celebrates Phagli.

Around noon the procession goes to Machaon, a small village of ten houses. In one of the houses people are busy. Women, girls and children are sitting outside on the balconies and on the higher terraces. In a circle are among musicians, about forty men. They move from left to right, slowly rotating. The boys with masks are standing outside the circle, with the masks in their right hand. All of a sudden the masked men dance with loud screams. After about half an hour the entire procession leaves the village to an open field. Everyone walks and runs along. Boys with various masks hunch together. Saddhu and Mal Sing stand next to each other. The group splits in two, four men with male masks on one side and four with monkey masks on the other side. Again they talk and hassle, the whole community is close around this scene. Then they go all back to the stone terrace. The man with the abnormal white mask with tongue and beard mask sitting on a bar is

supported inside the circle by two men with male masks. The bar itself is worn by two men with monkey masks. Slowly all goes quiet. The musicians put their instruments on the floor. After the last rays of the sun, everyone goes home. I have been able to distinguish four scenes. Only of the first scene I gather it is a fertility ritual, scattering the seed, and shouting to drive away demons. Of the other scenes I’m not certain. In the evening the goat I bought earlier is slaughtered and prepared for the people present. Men play cards, children warm themselves by a fire and women cook. Local beer is no longer available. There is a disco party. At night it starts snowing. The third Phagli day is no longer celebrated due to the snow. Six years later I am sitting in a cafe in the neighbouring village Balichowki with my laptop. With four people from the village and with my contact from Delhi we have a look at pictures and videos of the past. Their laughing and the brief explanations of the processions start almost every time with the words “purana purana”. Earlier, then, longago. There are apologetic smiles. “We don’t know exactly what is written in the old books.” In the Vedics (the

holy books of Hinduism, which were composed and orally transmitted between c.1500 – c.500 BCE) The main deity of the Bur is Vishnu Narayan. In Hinduism the evolution of mankind is symbolized by the incarnations of Vishnu Narayan into different avatars. Vishnu has ten avatars. Masti, an animal that lives in the sea, Kurma, an amphibian, Bashara, a boar, Nashima, half man half animal, Bhawan a dwarf, Pasurahma the primitive human, Rama the human, Krishna, the human who thinks and wages war, Buddha, the enlightened man, and Kalki the mighty all-destroying man. We are nowadays waiting for this last incarnation. This incarnation sequence is basically what Darwin later called the theory of evolution.

One explanation of the Phagli is the ceremonial re-enacting of the evolution of the avatars of Vishnu. Saddhu and Mal Sing are two people who know nothing, they are naked and copulate in public. It is not a fertility ritual. It depicts the primitive man Pasurahma. The scene with Krishna and gopies could be as if the gopies accuse Krishna of his immoral behaviour (#metoo). Man and monkey separate from





each other during the third scene. Man evolves, the monkey remains an animal. The monkey mask does not depict the god Hanuman but animals in general. “The monkey is a monkey, the wild one, not civilized, not Hanuman.” In the last scene, men are carried into the village by monkeys. The individual man is no longer alone, he is civilized. “The monkeys still live alone.” Upon my question “What happens to the man who is carried into the village?”, my company from the village answer after some silence: “He marries”

The imagination is great. Saddhu and a woman, not his wife, bless houses, collect money and at the same time represent the most primitive man. The gopies carry both Risha- (female) and Rishi- (male) and monkey-masks. Masks are interchangeable and without names. The ashes the Sudhu spreads around him are “to keep him warm”. “You should go to Thachi”. A village in the mountains high above the confluence of the Beas and the Tirthan river at 2800 meters. The biggest Phagli is in Thachi. There is a statue of Vishnu Narayana with his ten avatars. My local guide and

Phagli of Khun

I go there by taxi. Dashing through rain, clouds, and cold winds. When after 22 kilometres the mud is too much, we walk. Under the roof of a farm hangs a mask. Perhaps the last mask so preserved. Masks have become a commodity. Nowadays masks are hidden at home. After 4 kilometres we see an open space in the forest with a small temple on a raised terrace. The temple is closed with bars. The entrance is richly decorated with carvings, colourful painted and in one corner a very rare wooden sculpture. In the book Rural art of the Western Himalayas, (1985), K.C Aryan writes that he knows only two wooden sculptures in Himachal Pradesh. Found nearby Simla, the capital. Here, then we have found a third. The head is blackened, legs and arms broken, hands folded in front of his chest. He sits in a squatting position. Nearby a small shrine, also closed with bars. Inside there is a big statue, broad and pitch black, 170x150 metres. Soot and grease from many years candles and incense burning cover the statue. Here stands Vishnu Narayana with his ten avatars. The Phagli of Khun summarized in an image.

Back home, I put the picture of the statue on the Facebook page of 'Heritage & Culture of India' and ask for the names of the avatars. Answers come in. 'Not Dashavatara, this is Sri Krishna in his viral Roopa.' 'Krishna appears in this form in the Mahabharata', and someone send a picture of Krishna and Arjuna.' But for residents of Bur, Khun, Dhar, and other hamlets, this is their statue of Vishnu Narayana with the ten avatars.

Fredric Rond writes in his book Masks of Himachal, (2018): "The last known (to the author) interpretation (of Phagli, TvG), is the Hindu adaption ..., in which Vishnu, the Saviour wakes up at the end of the winter and frees the village from evil spirits."

In the celebration of Phagli in Khun we see this happening in the broadest sense. The development of humanity, freed from its limitations, has become civilized.

Reason to party.

Amsterdam, January 2020



Bronze images and brass masks (mohra) on plaques were made purely for worship at home and in the village shrines.

