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## *Reproducing Inequality: Spirit Cults and Labor Relations in Colonial Eastern India*

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UNDERSTANDING how unequal relations are reproduced over time is as significant as comprehending inequality itself. For unequal relations exist only in human practices that reproduce them. More than a play on words, the coupling of production with reproduction in recent anthropological studies highlights processes that provide the basis for production.<sup>1</sup> The necessity of reconstructing practices that reproduce social relations is perhaps nowhere more neglected than in the study of South Asian history. When it comes to explaining how unequal relations between social groups were maintained, the caste system is the perennial favorite. This is particularly so where relations between landlords and landless laborers are concerned. Thus, even Jan Breman's sophisticated and rich study of dependent laborers in South Gujarat points to the *jajmani* system, the institutional form of caste relations in the agrarian context, as the basis for relations between laborers and landlords in the past.<sup>2</sup> While his study illuminates how bonded labor relations can be

This essay draws heavily from my unpublished dissertation entitled 'Production and the Reproduction of Bondage: Kamias and Maliks in South Bihar, c. 1300 to 1930s.' University of Pennsylvania, 1984. The research was carried out in 1981–82 and was supported by grants from the American Institute of Indian Studies and the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies. Discussions with David Ludden, Arjun Appadurai, Carol A. Breckenridge, David Rudner, and Lee Cassanelli have helped greatly in clarifying my arguments.

<sup>1</sup> Claude Meillasoux, in particular, has stressed the pivotal role of reproduction in production. See his 'From reproduction to production,' *Economy and Society*, 1, 1 (1972). Jack Goody's *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain* (Cambridge, 1976) draws correlations between the organization of domestic units and mode of agriculture without drawing the tight relationship that Meillasoux develops between the social reproduction of the production unit and the production organization. While these anthropologists tend to deal with those strategies of reproduction that relate to kin relations, this essay is concerned with the reproduction of relations between classes.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Emerging Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974).

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understood in the light of the *jajmani* model, it fails to explain how these relations were reproduced. Are we to assume that the transactional norms of the caste system, once in place, simply drove laborers and landlords into actions that reproduced bondage?

Implicit in the *jajmani* view of labor relations, as also in explanations that point to 'loans' advanced to laborers by landlords<sup>3</sup> and invoke the supply and demand theory to account for bondage,<sup>4</sup> is what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'rule oriented' notion of practice.<sup>5</sup> That is, these three views of labor bondage assume that human practice merely executes rules and follows maps drawn by the logic of the *jajmani* system, 'debt' transaction, or the supply and demand of labor, respectively. Once practice is subordinated to the brute dominance of rules and schemes, how bonded labor relations were reproduced becomes a moot question. And so does history, because historical activities of landlords and laborers, their strategies and actions at different times, appear as mere executions of some grand design.

Focusing on relations between kamias (bonded labor) and maliks (landlords) in south Bihar, I argue in this essay that the reproduction of bondage was rooted in practice. Kamia and malik practices owed conditions of their existence to the social structure, and they therefore articulated notions of hierarchy and bondage, in dealing with everyday life. But the logic of practices was not governed and driven by the logic of the caste ideology. Rather, the caste hierarchy and labor bondage were reproduced through practices aimed at achieving practical ends even as seemingly far removed from labor relations as the propitiation of spirits. In this essay, I reconstruct spirit cult practices in south Bihar during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to show how they reproduced unequal relations between kamias and maliks, and articulated notions of hierarchy and bondage.<sup>6</sup> I argue that, since the social structure was composed of unequal groups whose interests were not

<sup>3</sup> Scholars have too easily accepted the legal fiction that attributed long-term bondage of laborers to 'loans' that they had received from the landholders. For a critique of this view and an alternative interpretation, see Gyan Prakash, 'Production and the Reproduction of Bondage,' pp. 243-62.

<sup>4</sup> For a sophisticated comparative treatment of bondage from a supply and demand standpoint, see H. J. Niboer, *Slavery as an Industrial System*, 2nd edn (1900; The Hague, 1910).

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 22-30.

<sup>6</sup> The oral and written data used in this essay refer to the period roughly between the 1850s and the 1930s. In addition to using references in the oral data itself, I used the vivid memories the people in the region had of the revenue settlement operations in 1914-15 and the earthquake in 1934 to date the occurrences referred to by informants in their testimonies.

identical, spirit cults contained ceaseless struggles between kamias and maliks over practical aims of the ritual practices. Thus, the reproduction of power went hand in hand with the struggle between kamias and maliks. In demonstrating how kamias and maliks struggled in reproducing inequality, I will examine ritual practices that constituted the spirit world, represented the caste hierarchy, and created and used *malik devatas*, i.e., ghosts purchased by maliks from the southern jungles.

### **Kamias and Maliks in South Bihar**

When the Turks, and following them, the Mughals, established their rule in north India, they recognized the superior rights of the local clan chiefs and incorporated them as a subordinate ruling class.<sup>7</sup> Owing to their superior position, these men, called maliks in south Bihar, held lands revenue-free or at preferential rates, and collected a variety of payments from the peasantry in their domains.<sup>8</sup> Befitting their lordly position at the local level, the maliks claimed high ritual status, and employed low castes to work their lands. Called kamias, these laborers in Gaya District were mainly of the Bhuinya caste.<sup>9</sup> Inhabiting the southern part of south Bihar, Bhuinyas were subordinated as low caste kamias and employed in developing irrigated paddy agriculture when Hindu and Muslim clan chiefs immigrated into the region and established themselves as local lords after the thirteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Regional lords, drawn often from the maliks' ranks, arose and established their sway over maliks, revenue-free grants were given to religious men in their domains, but the maliks' position as local magnates remained intact well into the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

British conquest in the mid-eighteenth century, the introduction of

<sup>7</sup> For a recent discussion on this point, see Irfan Habib, 'Agrarian Economy,' in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, I (Cambridge, 1982), p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> Bihar State Archives (BSA), Patna Commissioner's Records; vol. 21 (1839) letter from the Officiating Superintendent of Khas Mahals, dated 10 January 1839, to the Officiating Commissioner of Revenue, Patna Division. Also see, Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811-12*, II (Patna, 1936), p. 564.

<sup>9</sup> This conclusion is drawn from the oral history fieldwork that I conducted in 1981-82, and from the summary information on the caste composition of most though not all the villages in Gaya District contained in 'Village Notes,' Gaya Collectorate Record Room (GCRR), compiled during the revenue settlement operations in 1911-18.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of oral and written evidence on this point, see Prakash, 'Production and the Reproduction of Bondage,' Chs II and III.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-51.

the Permanent Settlement making zamindars landowners and responsible for the payment of land revenue, economic changes associated with the late-nineteenth century—increasing penetration of land and agricultural production by the market—transformed the terms of the maliks' domination at the local level.<sup>12</sup> Rather than force and social hierarchy, the maliks' position came to depend upon land control backed by legal titles and secured by the ability to turn the growing market relations to their benefit. As opportunities for land control through ownership and superior tenures opened up, different groups strove to convert pre-modern claims on produce and revenue into secure claims over landed property. Thus, the Hindu monastery of Bodh Gaya secured and even extended its land control through legal tenures in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

Important as it was, the maliks' control over land was not the only basis for the reproduction of their power over kamias. A kamia was not just a laborer but a Bhuinya with a past and a future, with ancestors and descendants, a living person who defined himself in relation to the dead. Nor was a malik just a landholder, but a person with a caste status, who also had to define himself in relation to his ancestors. Thus, the spirit-world was a field with highly charged meanings, a field that could not escape from the representations of the maliks' power and the kamias' subordination.

### The Spirit World

Written sources provide very little information on the practical contexts in which the spirit world was constituted. Particular circumstances and strategies that went into inhabiting the spirit world with different spirits and ghosts have been lost in the timeless discourses of colonial officials on the 'rude mind' of natives.<sup>14</sup> While particular circumstances and aims are lost to us, colonial descriptions of the spirit world, when combined with oral data, can yield a general sense of the practical strategies that lay behind its construction.

In writing about spirit cults and worship among the people of Gaya district, L. S. S. O'Malley recorded in 1906 that spirits were classed as

<sup>12</sup> This is developed in *ibid.*, ch. IV.

<sup>13</sup> For Bodh Gaya monastery's expanding land control through legal titles, see Government of Bengal, *A Brief History of Bodh Gaya Math, District Gaya*, compiled by Rai Ram Anugrah Narayan Singh Bahadur under the orders of G. A. Grierson (Calcutta, 1893), pp. 16–18.

<sup>14</sup> L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Gaya* (Calcutta, 1906), p. 74 (*GDG*).

*dak-bhut*.<sup>15</sup> Ancestors, *daks*, and *bhuts* were distinct but interconnected elements in the larger spirit world. What was common to all three was that they were different forms of *preta* or spirit of the dead. When a person died, his *preta* or soul survived and continued to make claims on the living.<sup>16</sup> Death was culturally denied by positing that physical death freed the soul from its bodily form. Thus, spirits were not separated from the living; both were distinct but related parts of an organic universe marked by the cycle of death and regeneration.

Spirit cult practices secured the endless passages and transactions between contrary categories within this world. Little mounds of clay called *pindas* were installed in a section of the house called *sira-ghar* to represent the dead in their new form of life. Offerings were made to these ancestors in annual and life-cycle rituals. All castes had these *sira-ghars*, *pindas* and ancestor cults. The offerings and libations were made to ancestors not only out of respect to their claims on the living, but also because of the power ascribed to spirits in general.<sup>17</sup> Shorn of their bodily form, the dead in their new life could see and predict things that the living could not, and could therefore prevent misfortune from occurring. This power was different in quality from the power of legendary ancestors, and different in degree from that of *bhuts* and *daks*.

Legendary apical ancestors such as Ban Singh among the Bhogta

<sup>15</sup> *GDG*, p. 77. The term *bhut* means ghost, and *dak* stands for a sorcerer. But the two terms are used by people as a pair in referring to spirits. When *dak* is used separately, it is almost always to refer to the spirit of a dead sorcerer.

<sup>16</sup> This belief is in the following statement made by Karu Manjhi who as a young boy moved from his parental village Kajri to his wife's home in Sheorajpur sometime before 1914–15. 'My father died a long time ago (sometime before 1934). He died in Kajri. Since I had come to Sheorajpur, I made a *pinda* [shrine] for him here. Although his *kriya-karma* [mortuary rite] was done in Kajri and his body merged with the soil there, his *preta* would have wandered around in Kajri causing problems if I had not made a *pinda* for him.' Karu Manjhi's oral account, Sheorajpur, 6 February 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Referring to the earthquake, Karu Manjhi remembered asking his father's *preta* to protect him. 'He could do so because he was a *preta*. He could see everything that we could not. He warned me once that the *dayan* [witch] would cause my roof to fall if I did not propitiate the *daks*. I did so and nothing happened.' (Karu Manjhi's oral testimony, Sheorajpur, 6 February 1982). Interestingly, in proverbs dealing with agriculture, foresight was attributed to *dak* and *dakin* (a female ghost). This is evident in aphorisms noted by George Grierson in the late nineteenth century. 'If Aradra [the lunar asterism corresponding with the end of June and the beginning of July] does not rain at the commencement, and Hathiya [the lunar asterism corresponding with the first fortnight of October] at its end, saith Dak, hear, O Bhillari, the cultivator is crushed.' See George Grierson's *Bihar Peasant Life* (Calcutta, 1885; rpt Delhi, 1975), p. 276. Another similar proverb recorded by Grierson was the following. "'When the clouds fly like the wings of the partridge, and when a widow smiles," saith Dak, "hear, O Dakini, the one is going to rain and the other to marry"' (p. 280). Attribution of foreknowledge to ghosts accords well with the belief that spirits could see things that the living could not.

caste,<sup>18</sup> and Tulsibir among the Bhuinyas, were also expected to ward off misfortune and aid their caste members. But this power of legendary ancestors stemmed from the heroic character of their lives and not from their status as spirits. Whereas the power of all non-apical ancestors arose from their status as spirits (with the ability to cause both harm and good), legendary ancestors were never classed in the category of spirits and were generally regarded as benign.<sup>19</sup>

Like ancestors, ghosts were also forms of spirit. But their power was much greater and they were therefore more feared. Classed generally as *dak* and *bhut*, ghosts were spirits of those who had died unnaturally. Within this group there were a large number of powerful spirits.<sup>20</sup> There was the particularly powerful and feared *churail* or *kichin*, the spirit of a woman who had died in child-birth. There were *baghauts*, spirits of those killed by tigers in the west of the district; *barunis* and *langhandaks*, which were spirits of those who had died accidentally outside their own villages, who hovered in undefined lands and jungles between villages and at cross-roads.<sup>21</sup>

The different forms that spirits assumed depended upon how ritual practices ordered deaths. From this arose the varying amount of power they had over the living, and therefore, the extent of harm or benefit they could cause. Those who were powerful, such as the ones described by O'Malley as 'evil', were more feared than the weaker ancestral spirits, propitiated to give succour to members of the caste.

Even ancestors could become *bhuts* and *daks*, usually those who in their lives had been *gunis* or exorcists. Since they dealt with spirits in their lives and had control over some *daks* and *bhuts*, they became powerful ghosts after their deaths. In Sheorajpur village, for instance, Ramjani Bhuinya was a *guni* who communicated with spirits and was believed to have control over several *daks*. After his death, he became Ramjani Dak and was installed by his descendants as their *malik devata*, i.e., the most prominent ancestral ghost who protected them within the house.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *GDG*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> I did not come across any account of spirit affliction by heroic ancestors such as Tulsibir or any of the other birs.

<sup>20</sup> See *GDG*, p. 77. In general, I found that the names of such spirits mostly ended with *dak* or *dano*. Although the meaning of these suffixes in their apparently Sanskrit roots is demon, spirits by these names were not regarded as evil at all times. In describing these spirits, the informants frequently used the term *balwan* (powerful) and *khatarnak* (dangerous). The attribution of potentially beneficial prescience to ghosts in proverbs dealing with agriculture (see note 5) suggests that *daks* were not thought of as evil at all times.

<sup>21</sup> Karu Manjhi's oral account, Sheorajpur, 6 February 1982.

<sup>22</sup> Karu Manjhi's oral account, Sheorajpur, 6 February 1982. Ramjani, according to

Significantly, legendary ancestors never became ghosts. For instance, Dharha, the legendary ancestor of the Dhangar caste did not become a *bhut* even though he died an unnatural death.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, spirits, in so far as they mediated life, the living and the dead, were believed to have different powers from that of heroic legendary ancestors. As spirits, ancestors possessed the power to affect the lives of their descendants. If, in their lives, these ancestors, like Ramjani Bhuinya, bridged contrary categories, partook the power of the living and the dead, their *preta* became all the more powerful: they became *daks* and *bhuts*.

Ghosts came into being by the disruption of harmony in relations between contrary categories in the organic universe. The power hierarchy in the spirit world was based on the confusion of cultural categories and social roles that different spirits represented. The least powerful were spirits of those ancestors who had died natural deaths.<sup>24</sup> These were cases of what are called 'good deaths'.<sup>25</sup> Natural deaths enabled the living to define death as a controlled event leading to regeneration of life in a different form, i.e., *preta*, a regeneration that was socially constructed. In upper caste Hindu mortuary rites, the new life was created by cremation. In the case of the Bhuinyas, it was the burial of the remains after cremation which regenerated the dead. 'When my father was buried and returned to where he came from, his *preta* resumed a new life', explained a Bhuinya.<sup>26</sup> Both were cases of successful reciprocity between nature and culture. The organic unity of the socially constructed universe was maintained in 'good deaths.'

my informants, died soon after the revenue survey and settlement operations and before the earthquake in 1934, making the between period 1914 (when survey operations in the village occurred) and 1934 when he became a spirit. Although called *malik devata*, Ramjani Dak was different from ghosts in the landlords' service who were also known by the name *malik devata*. The ancestral *malik devatas* were simply powerful ancestral ghosts but their writ did not run beyond the house.

<sup>23</sup> *GDG*, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Most accounts of spirit affliction concerned ghosts rather than ancestors who had died natural deaths. In speaking of cases of spirit affliction by powerful spirits, informants mentioned *daks* and *dano* rather than ancestral spirits. The few cases of harm caused by ancestors that I came across involved insufficient propitiation of ancestors. For instance, Keso Bhuinya's father was once afflicted by his ancestors when he slighted them with insufficient offering. Keso concluded this account by remarking that ancestors were 'quiet spirits. They sit and watch over you, they protect you.' (Keso Bhuinya's oral testimony, Bakraur, 12 February 1982).

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, 'Introduction,' in *Death and Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> Keso Bhuinya's oral testimony, Bakraur, 12 February 1982. No doubt this reflects the present belief. But there is no reason to think that it was any different in the past. In fact, Keso Bhuinya said that his father told him the same thing when his grandfather died.



Because 'good deaths' enabled ordered regeneration into a new life, and represented harmony in the organic universe, spirits of these ancestors were not very powerful. When slighted, they could cause harm. But in general, their ordered cultural incorporation into cyclical death and regeneration made them less of a threat. Untimely deaths, on the other hand, were uncontrolled events. They represented disharmony in the reciprocal exchange between contrary forms of the world. These were 'bad deaths' and their power was enormous and unpredictable. O'Malley noted that the most feared ghost in Gaya district was Raghuni Dak.<sup>27</sup> This ghost arose when a Babhan landlord, suspecting his kamia of illicit relations with his daughter, killed them both and then committed suicide. Raghuni Dak represented the three spirits jointly. Born out of the suspected crossing of caste boundaries in real life, and representing a union of contrary categories in the spirit world, Raghuni Dak was particularly feared.

The ordering of deaths as 'good' or 'bad' highlights the role of practice in constituting the spirit world. In attributing varying degrees of power to spirits, people did not simply execute some pre-existing rules. Defining deaths had practical aims: the dead had to be reintegrated into the organic universe. Furthermore, spirit cult practices were also cognitive processes; people created notions of 'good' and 'bad' deaths, attributed a great deal of power to some spirits and not to others, and, while conceding that they existed as spirits, made their legendary ancestors wholly benign.

### **Spirits and Caste Hierarchy**

Upper caste Hindus as well as low caste Bhuinyas propitiated ancestral spirits. Ghosts and witches affected all of them. But the ordering of castes, and the tensions inherent in the separation and interaction between castes were both presented and represented by spirit cults. Ritual practices associated with spirit cults not only bore the imprint of the caste hierarchy but also became instruments for articulating and securing social hierarchy. By subordinating spirit cults—a field inhabited by the Bhuinya ritual specialists and wandering ghosts of low castes—to Hindu beliefs, and by bending ritual practices to conform to the social order, the Hindu landlords reproduced the caste hierarchy.

Upper castes subordinated spirit cult practices to the larger Hindu tradition. They were also afflicted by spirits, but their ancestral spirits

<sup>27</sup> *GDG*, p. 77.

occupied the world created by the Hindu cosmology. This is evident in the rites of ancestor propitiation for which Hindu pilgrims came to Gaya from all over India, and do so even today. Like Hindus from elsewhere, upper caste men in Gaya also participated in this annual ritual.<sup>28</sup> Offerings or *pindas* were made to ancestral spirits in the Vishnupad temple at Gaya, at the Phalgu river, and at the Pretsila hill. Vishnupad is a sacred Vaishnavite temple where pilgrims as well as local upper caste Hindus went to seek Lord Vishnu's blessing in rescuing their ancestors' souls. The Phalgu represented Vishnu and was believed to be the place where Sita (the wife of Rama in the epic Ramayana) offered *pinda* to Rama's father Dasaratha. At the Pretasila hill, Yama, the lord of hell, was propitiated to protect ancestral spirits.<sup>29</sup>

Linked to the larger Hindu world with its rich cosmology, the upper caste Hindus were able to extricate their ancestral spirits from the world of lower caste *bhuts* and *daks*. The danger of a Bhuinya sorcerer communicating with and controlling an upper caste ancestral ghost was removed. Furthermore, as Hindus saw the universe animated by the presence of different manifestations of God, ghosts who existed out of this universe belonged to untamed nature. Original inhabitants, such as the Bhuinyas in Gaya and tribal groups in Chota Nagpur, were regarded as appropriate persons for communicating with such spirits.<sup>30</sup> Thus the ghost world was both separated from and subordinated to upper caste Hindu ideology.

Although upper caste Hindus were able to bring their ancestral spirits under the protection of Hindu gods, they could not do away with tensions in their interpersonal lives and in their relations with other castes. Ghosts and witches still provided a system of meaning to deal with contradictions in social life. When a misfortune occurred, they also consulted the *ojha* or *guni* to discover its cause.

And so when a little more than sixty years ago, a Kayasth landholder of a village near Bodh Gaya found his cattle dying suddenly, he consulted an *ojha*.<sup>31</sup> The exorcist disclosed that it was a ghost called Jaibir Dak from a nearby village who was responsible. It so happened, as

<sup>28</sup> Oral testimony of Chandra Shekhar Lall, Bakraur, 4 September 1982.

<sup>29</sup> Much of the above is based on O'Malley's description. See *GDG*, pp. 62-72, *passim*.

<sup>30</sup> Throughout southern Gaya, the Bhuinyas were regarded as ritual specialists in spirit cults. S. C. Roy reported in 1932 that throughout Chotanagpur the descendants of the earliest settlers acted invariably as ritual specialists in spirit worship. See his 'Report of Anthropological Work in 1930-31: Chotanagpur, the Chutias and the Bhuinyas', *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, 18 (1932), pp. 51-78.

<sup>31</sup> What follows is based on the oral testimony of Karu Manjhi, Sheorajpur, 6 February 1982.

the Kayasth was reported to admit, that he had kept a cow that had wandered into his yard along with his own cattle when they returned from the nearby village where they had been taken to graze by his kamia. The exorcist said that Jaibir Dak demanded a pig as an offering. But being an upper caste Hindu, the Kayasth landholder would not agree to offering a pig in sacrifice. Nor would he place within his courtyard a ghost who demanded pigs. Fortunately, the *ojha* found that the ghost agreed to accept the offering of a kid. Jaibir Dak also accepted the Kayasth's backyard as its abode.

The Kayasth's propitiation of a ghost, which was obviously of a low caste since it demanded a pig in sacrifice, meant that at the very least caste boundaries were crossed. It is interesting that although upper castes had taken care to extricate their ancestral spirits from the world of lower caste ghosts, they ended up propitiating lower caste ghosts. In one case, upper castes invoked the Hindu world, in the other, they became concerned with the low caste spirit symbols. How do we explain this?

Bourdieu has argued that one has to 'acknowledge that practice has a logic which is not that of logic, if one is to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself to either wring incoherences out of it or thrust upon it a forced coherence'.<sup>32</sup> If we view ritual practices as dynamic events where the selection of symbols and the choice of emphasis in meaning attached to them are generated by the situation, then the cultural inconsistency appears as the function of practice. If practices are not just executions of grand cultural plans, if they are discontinuous events oriented towards practical functions, then the culture they articulate will be variegated. While the cultural notions articulated by the two events were different, the practices in themselves were coherent, i.e., they both employed principles and symbols appropriate to the situation. In one case, upper castes invoked Hindu symbols to reproduce the social order represented by the cycle of death and regeneration. In the other case, a Kayasth propitiated a low caste ghost in order to remove the misfortune threatening his situation.

Because ritual practices are dynamic events, they do not simply reflect but actively construct cultural notions and social relations. So, while in social life the danger involved in the interdependence of separate castes resulted in ritual pollution requiring Hindu rites of purification, in the spirit world this caused spirit affliction requiring propitiation of the ghost. But the danger to the social hierarchy caused by the affliction from, and propitiation of, a low caste ghost was removed by making the

<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline*, p. 109.

ghost subordinate to upper caste Hindu notions, by making it accept a young goat instead of a pig, the backyard instead of the courtyard.

The articulation of the caste hierarchy was not the major purpose of the ritual practice; the practical aim was to restore harmony in the Kayasth landlord's world. But in doing so, ritual practices also expressed and reconstituted the social order. It was the same with the annual agricultural rite with which the cultivating season commenced. The annual *asarhi puja* was the most complex and elaborate ritual embodying the reconstruction of the social hierarchy. Beginning in the middle of June, after the monsoon had broken, it involved the entire village in a series of connected rituals:<sup>33</sup>

After the first rains, when the ground had become wet and swollen, the malik consulted the Brahman, giving him the names of his kamias. The Brahman then selected Shukar Bhuinya whose *rashi* [astrological sign] was favorable to do *harmantar* [plough worship]. He was fed and treated well the night before the *puja* [worship]. Next morning, he was taken to the malik's field. He ploughed one *katha* [little less than 1/20 of an acre] and sowed one corner of the field called the *bhandar kona* [storage corner] with seeds left from the previous harvest. This done, the malik chose a particular Tuesday for *asarhi puja*. All kamias were summoned to the *kachahari*, and told of the date, and were given some money and grain to perform the *puja*. First, the *manjhi* propitiated the *malik devata*. Then he and all other *gunis* went all around the village, inviting all *daks* and *bhuts* to the *puja*. In the Bhuinya quarters where all the ghosts gathered, the *gunis* began to communicate with each spirit one by one. To the beat of the Chamar's drum, the *bhagat* [shaman] danced and all ancestral spirits came to him and told everyone present what they wanted for propitiation. Then the whole procession of the Bhuinyas along with the Chamar beating the drum and the *manjhi* and *bhagats* leading the way went all around the village boundary expelling stranger *daks* who lurked around waiting to enter the village and cause commotion. Then they went to each house, beginning with the malik's. Each household offered a pinchful of rice or some money to the *daks* which was placed in a woven sieve. Then the procession gathered at the Tulsibir *sthan* [Tulsibir's shrine]. The *daks* were offered whatever they had demanded. Then with the Bhuinya men singing songs about Tulsibir whose presence was announced by the *bhagat*, a pig was sacrificed. Following this, the Hindu village goddess Bhagwati was given a young goat.

This annual rite was an integral part of the agricultural operation. Without it the crop was in jeopardy. Because the crop represented the regeneration of seeds from the previous season, death and regeneration in agriculture paralleled the cyclical process of life and death among human beings. Social life in general required the proper transition between different stages, and agricultural activity was no exception. But this transition was a potentially dangerous process.

<sup>33</sup> Oral testimony of Panchu Bhuinya, Sheorajpur, 3 September 1982.

Rains brought the wet and the dry together, the swollen ground representing fecundity. In so far as ploughing was an act which intervened in the passage between fecundity and birth, it was a potentially sacrilegious act. It was precisely the sort of transitional stage when spirits struck. Ghosts hovered outside the village boundaries waiting to attack. *Daks* and *bhuts* thrived on this and therefore they had to be propitiated. Ritual practice intervened in the critical phase of transition between death and regeneration. To ensure a smooth transition, spirits and ancestors of low caste Bhuinyas were brought together with ritual specialists and beliefs of upper caste landlords in ways which reconstructed the social hierarchy of caste.

The distribution of tasks in ritual practice reproduced social relations. The paddy field chosen for ensuring proper transition from death to life in agriculture was that of the malik. But the person selected to perform the potentially dangerous act of ploughing and then impregnating the soil with the remains of the dead was a low caste Bhuinya. The malik's field served as a symbol for the entire community. But the kamia shouldered the burden of dealing with the union of contraries. It was he who dealt with the swollen ground, tamed nature in its fecund and untamed stage, and brought death (seeds from the previous season), to life. The burden of communicating with *daks* and *bhuts* was borne by the low caste *manjhi*, *guni*, and *bhagat*. The Bhuinya population not only provided ritual specialists for the occasion, they collectively also became central figures in the whole drama. It was in their section of the village that the ritual specialists performed. They formed the procession that went around the village. The malik distanced himself from those stages of rites when ritual specialists consorted with ghosts. By appearing only at the beginning and end of rites, by providing resources for the performance of rites, by acting as the patron of the *asarhi puja*, he asserted his social dominance.

Just as distribution of tasks in rituals reconstructed social inequality, so also cultural beliefs articulated by them represented unequal relations. Only low caste ghosts threatened when the passage from death to life was enacted. Upper caste ancestral spirits were removed from the field of dangerous powers who thrived on the ambivalence caused by rites of passage in agriculture. Therefore, only low caste ghosts were invoked by shamans. These ghosts were not expressly defined as low caste spirits. But since upper caste spirits were separated from the rest of the ghost world, the Bhuinya ritual specialists dealt only with low caste spirits. During the concluding part of the ritual where the malik was present as the patron, even Tulsibir, the Bhuinya apical ancestor, was

invoked in assisting the rite of passage. Unlike other ghosts, however, the shaman did not negotiate with Tulsibir about what sacrifice he wanted. A pig was offered, recognizing his role as a benign ancestor.

The village goddess, Bhagwati, was treated differently. The Bhuinya ritual specialist gave way to a Brahman. As a goddess revered by upper castes, her blessings were sought only when the lesser spirits had been appeased. She could not be inserted in the middle because that would have meant that even after appeasing a goddess associated with upper castes, lesser spirits had to be propitiated. The sacrifice of a young goat for her therefore had to be the final act. Social hierarchy was thus inscribed in the temporal order of ritual tasks.

If spirit cult practices reconstructed the social dominance of upper castes, it is also true that low castes were conceded a position denied to them in other spheres of social life by the ideology of caste. No doubt, low caste ghosts were subordinated to upper caste cultural beliefs, placed lower than the upper caste goddess Bhagwati, forced to accept a young goat instead of a pig, the backyard instead of courtyard, and upper caste spirits were separated from the potentially malevolent world of ghosts. But we should also note that this went hand in hand with the fact that upper castes also found it necessary to appease low caste ghosts, that they had to concede the power these ghosts had over their lives, and that they had to respect powers that the Bhuinya ritual specialists possessed. Thus the Bhuinyas enjoyed a cultural autonomy within the overarching hegemony of upper castes. The inter-dependence in social relations, obscured and denied by the ideology of caste hierarchy in other contexts, was played out in spirit cult practices. In this sense, ritual practices associated with spirits did not simply reflect the social hierarchy but represented it in forms not possible in other contexts.

### **Ghosts, Kamias, and Maliks**

Caste was one dimension of social relations represented in spirit cult practices. Another was the relation between kamias and maliks. The two dimensions were linked because the malik was both an upper caste person and a landlord. Spirit cults therefore represented both the caste hierarchy and the unequal relations between maliks and kamias. The above section has already dealt with the caste dimension. In this section, I will examine ritual practices which represented kamia-malik relations.

There was a category of ghosts in Gaya district known as *malik devatas*

which were spirits purchased by maliks to protect their property.<sup>34</sup> Although O'Malley did not mention that ghosts were bought by maliks, he noted that the purchase of ghosts was widely practiced to protect the village fields and crops.<sup>35</sup> The following account of a *malik devata* that I collected describes the process of the purchase of ghosts.<sup>36</sup>

During the time of Hem Narayan Gir [the chief monk or mahant of the Bodhi Gaya monastery from 1867 to 1892], the *gosain* of Sheorajpur *kachahari* [the religious disciple of the Mahant who managed the math's property at Sheorajpur], went with Pancham Bhuinya, the *manjhi* of the village, to Tambe, a village to the south of Palamau in an area called Kothikunda, to buy a ghost. The people who sold ghosts there were Korba and Korain, and Turi and Turain [Korba and Turi men and women]. These people told Pancham Bhuinya that Bhainsasur and Kol Baba were best capable of protecting the Mahant's property. The *gunis* of Tambe placed a four-directional lamp on a sieve which was placed at the *pinda* of the two ghosts. Then a handful of rice was put in the sieve. The *gunis* were given some money and then Pancham Bhuinya and the *gosain* headed back. The sieve followed them back to the village. Once it reached the village, the sieve circled the village boundary and then descended on a tree. Pancham Bhuinya stayed awake the whole night looking for the light from the four-directional lamp. But once he spotted it on top of a tree, the sieve and the lamp vanished. *Pindas* were set up for Bhainsasur and Kol Baba at the place where the lamp had been spotted. The whole village was informed that *malik devatas* had arrived.

The above account is remarkably similar to the description O'Malley gave about the purchase of ghosts.<sup>37</sup> So it is very likely that he was also referring to *malik devatas*, even though he did not note that the purchase of ghosts occurred under the malik's direction. According to him, the ghost kept watch over the village fields.<sup>38</sup> Another report from a district official in 1852 also echoed the existence of this belief. He said of the Rajwars (a low caste group residing in the hilly and forested Nawada region of Gaya district): ' . . . like all simple and uneducated people they are very superstitious and the fear they have of incurring the displeasure of their Deities (even to stealing Grain from the field) is so great that this

<sup>34</sup> Memories of these ghosts and of incidents associated with them were widespread in Gaya. But these were different from *malik devatas* which reigned within the house.

<sup>35</sup> *GDG*, p. 76.

<sup>36</sup> Oral testimony of Karu Manjhi, Sheorajpur, 16 February 1982.

<sup>37</sup> 'A peculiar feature of the power of *ojhas* over *bhuts* is found in the actual purchase and sale of them, which is said to be practiced by some low castes in the jungle-covered tracts to the south of the district. The *bhut*, when under proper control, is a valuable possession and becomes a marketable commodity. When the sale has been arranged, the *ojha* hands over a corked bamboo cylinder which is supposed to contain the *bhut*: this is then taken to the place, usually under a tree, at which it is intended that the *bhut* should in future reside.' *GDG*, p. 76.

<sup>38</sup> *GDG*, p. 76.

alone is a great check to the commission of such crime amongst them.'<sup>39</sup> Since kamias did not own fields, and as peasant castes did not purchase ghosts or act on behalf of the village as a whole, it appears that the ghosts that, according to the report, discouraged Rajwars from stealing grain from the field were *malik devatas*.

*Malik devatas* were particularly powerful ghosts. They were always bought from the south, from the forested region close to and in Chota Nagpur. The four-directional lamp that represented ghosts can be interpreted as a symbol of their origin in the wild. But most *malik devatas* had names connected to original settlers of southern Gaya and the Chota Nagpur region. Kol Baba, Bhainsasur, and Bhuini Rani were the most common names that figured in the list of *malik devatas* of the past. Kol was the generic term used for all non-Hindu tribes, Bhainsasur was derived from Asur, a tribe regarded as the earliest settlers of Chota Nagpur, and Bhuini Rani was associated with the Bhuinyas. In other words, *malik devatas* were ghosts who were believed to have tamed nature. Since the region to the south of Gaya was thickly forested and inhabited by non-Hindu tribes, ghosts who represented appropriation of nature to culture were believed to reside in such tracts. Other powerful ghosts, who were not connected to original settlers but figured in the repertory of *malik devatas*, were also bought from the south.

The southern tract was where the appropriation of nature to culture was regarded as problematic. Therefore, ghosts from there were most powerful. They were in the best position to effect a smooth exchange between nature and culture. They were propitiated annually during the *asarhi puja* by the *manjhi* with money given by the malik. In some places, expenses for propitiation were met by lands set aside for this purpose by landlords.<sup>40</sup> It was believed that without propitiation at crucial times of the agricultural cycle, wild animals would destroy the crop.<sup>41</sup>

Ghosts bought from the south were closest to nature. The reciprocal exchange with ghosts stood for relations of mutuality between nature and culture. By purchasing such ghosts and securing their assistance in agricultural rites, landlords gained control over transactions between the social and spiritual worlds. Although upper caste landlords possessed a rich cosmology within which death and regeneration were accomplished by mortuary and ancestor propitiation rites, they still found it necessary to propitiate ghosts purchased from the south. Why?

<sup>39</sup> BSA; Gaya Collectorate Records, vol. 4a (Issue side), letter from the Deputy Magistrate of Nawada, dated 10 May 1852.

<sup>40</sup> GCRR; 'Village Notes', Barachatti thana no: 266, village Charaili.

<sup>41</sup> GCRR; 'Village Notes', Barachatti thana no: 266, village Charaili.



Once the ability to communicate with ghosts was conceded to the Bhuinyas, the power that ritual specialization gave them had to be countered. Even if they were subordinated to Hindu beliefs in ritual practices, ghosts still represented power. This could not be left completely to the lower class. The power of ghosts was thus harnessed to the landlord's cause. The guardian of nature became the castellan of land and landlords because while ghosts were custodians of nature, lands were held by landlords. Ghosts became *malik devatas*.

Controlling ghosts meant that the landlords could appropriate the power that ghosts exercised over nature, over transactions between nature and culture, over exchanges between the living and the dead. If through calculated acts of generosity, maliks could represent themselves as munificent providers, the purchase of ghosts enabled them to represent themselves as the bedrock of an orderly universe.

The transformation of a ghost into a *malik devata* through its purchase by the landlord meant that the ghost's function was not merely to mediate reciprocal exchange between nature and culture. The ghost was identified with the malik's interests, with unequal appropriation of nature as landed property. So, while in ritual practices associated with the agricultural cycle the ghost mediated the transaction between the dead and the living, between nature and culture, as a guardian of the malik's property it also kept watch over his field and crop. It punished theft from the malik's field and crop.<sup>42</sup> But this was not all, as the following account of theft and punishment illustrates.<sup>43</sup>

There was a Bhuinya whose daughter was married to a man from Sakhwara. One day she fell ill. She could not even see properly: she mistook her father-in-law for her husband, and her husband for her father-in-law. When the *ojha* was called, he disclosed that Kol Baba, the *malik devata* from her parental home, was the cause of her sickness. On being asked to remember anything she had done to offend Kol Baba, she revealed that while taking out rice from the clay pot to cook food in her parent's home, she had found some coins which she kept and brought over to her husband's village. The woman's father-in-law had to propitiate Kol Baba in order to cure her of spirit affliction.

The revelation that the Bhuinya woman had kept quiet about the

<sup>42</sup> *GDG*, p. 76.

<sup>43</sup> Karu Manjhi's oral testimony, Sheorajpur, 16 February 1982. According to Karu Manjhi, he learnt of this incident from Sodhar Bhuinya who, in turn, had been told about it by his grandfather, Pancham Bhuinya. Apparently it had happened during the life of Pancham Bhuinya. As Karu was a small boy at the time of the survey operations in 1914-15, and since, according to him, Sodhar Bhuinya was older than he (he was already working in agriculture as a *kamia* when Karu was a young boy), the date of this incident which occurred during Pancham Bhuinya's life can be placed well into the nineteenth century.

money she had found in the earthen pot came only after the *ojha* had diagnosed that Kol Baba afflicted her. But the implication of the connection made between her actions and spirit affliction was that the *malik devata* could be offended even when the theft was from a kamia's house. Relations between kamias and maliks were emphasized over all other ties. Furthermore, the event articulated a belief that was absent in other contexts. It treated the kamia's belongings as if they were part of the malik's property so that the spirit offended by theft in the Bhuinya's house was the *malik devata*. This belief was an extravagant representation of the malik's power: ritual practices did more than reflect social relations.

In spite of its association with the landlord, the *malik devata* was not identical with his person. This meant that the ghost symbol was flexible. It could be used to express the resentment that kamias felt towards landlords but could not state openly. For example, when Bithal Bhuinya moved from Kharhari to Bakraur sometime before 1914–15 because of a misfortune in his family, it coincided with problems he was having with the landlord.<sup>44</sup> One of Bithal's two sons died when a well he was digging for the landlord suddenly collapsed and fell on him. It was the *malik devata* who had set a *dayan* on him. It was at this time that the landlord had taken away the land he had given Bithal Bhuinya. But the reason he gave for leaving Kharhari for Bakraur was not that he had lost his land but that the ghost had turned malevolent against his family.<sup>45</sup>

A breakdown in reciprocal relations with the landlord was paralleled by disharmony in relations of mutuality with nature. A sudden death was just as disturbing as the loss of land. But one did not cause the other. Bithal Bhuinya did not attribute the landlord's action to the *malik devata* nor did he hold the landlord responsible for the death of his son. The two events were analogically rather than causally related. The record of Bhuinya spirit cult practices expresses the belief that nature, person, and social life exist as an organic unity. Agricultural rites, ancestral cults, death, birth, and social intercourse are analogical discourses between man and nature in which symbols become animated with meanings appropriate to the situation.

The choice of spirit affliction as the likely cause of death expressed the belief that there was disharmony in relations between different elements constituting the organic world. The diagnosis of affliction was an

<sup>44</sup> Keso Bhuinya's oral testimony, Bakraur, 13 February 1982. Since Bithal Bhuinya died before Pyare Lal whose death, according to his family records, occurred in 1926, this incident can be placed in the early part of this century.

<sup>45</sup> This is what Keso was told by his grandfather.

enquiry into the state of the social disorder, and spirit healing was the treatment of social disharmony. The exorcist looked for representation of this disorder in social life. That the death occurred while Bithal's son was digging a well for the landlord was presumably the 'factual' basis for holding the *malik devata*, rather than any other ghost, responsible for the misfortune. But involved here was an active choice of meaning. By evoking the symbol of the *malik devata* in interpreting the fact of his son's untimely death, Bithal animated the event with meanings pertinent to kamia-malik relations. Because the landlord was not identical with the ghost, he was not accountable for the death. But since the *malik devata* represented unequal social relations, the complicity of the malik in the death was not too distant. It was this ambivalent and multivocal quality of the *malik devata* which made it a powerful symbol. It allowed transmutation of tensions in kamia-malik relations into dissonance in transactions between man and nature.

Spirit cult practices allowed a fantastic representation of the malik's power over his laborers. In *malik devatas*, the power of the malik to cause harm became greatly exaggerated. The following account of affliction by a *malik devata* further reinforces this point:<sup>46</sup>

In Silaunja, the malik had purchased Banaut and Banautin from the south. They killed my grandfather's brother, his four sons, and his grandsons. The problem was that since the malik trusted my grandfather's brother completely, he regularly pilfered the landlord's crop at nights and became somewhat prosperous. So he and his family became victims of Banaut and Banautin.

When anyone was caught stealing from the landlord's field or his threshing yard, he was severely beaten and punished by the malik's employee.<sup>47</sup> But those who got away undetected had to contend with the *malik devata*. Unlike punishment by landlords, the wrath of enormously powerful *malik devatas* could bring untimely death. Disorderly and unpredictable death, however, threatened the cyclical reproduction of death and regeneration. But so did theft. Since nature, in the form of paddy fields, bore the imprint of unequal social relations, a violation of the transactional norms in the social sphere also disrupted the natural order of things. *Malik devatas* struck with terrible fury to ensure the reproduction of this order. Their power paralleled that of the landlord. But the two were not identical: in *malik devatas*, the power of landlords was reconstructed in menacing terms.

<sup>46</sup> Oral testimony of Bangali Manjhi, Bakraur, 16 February 1982. According to him, this happened after the survey operations in 1914-15, but I was unable to determine a more precise date.

<sup>47</sup> Karu Manjhi's oral testimony, Sheorajpur, 3 March 1982.

Sometimes, to pre-empt spirit affliction, kamias propitiated *malik devatas* before going to the landlord's field to steal grain. But prior propitiation meant that it was no longer theft in the eyes of ghosts: it was a gift. It may be argued that the ghost's generosity simply reflected the benefaction that the landlord showed at certain times of the year. But while the generosity of the landlord was founded on the collective apprehension of unequal reciprocity as liberality, the gift from the *malik devata* was activated by disengaging the ghost from its relation with the malik. Whereas in one case, benefaction was based on social relations, in the other, social relations were denied. Prior propitiation of the ghost established reciprocal exchange between kamias and nature unencumbered by property.

Theft was a socially illicit mode of redistributing resources. In the absence of legitimate methods, kamias resorted to stealing. But in doing so they sometimes took care to represent it as a licit act, as a gift. This was not, however, always the case. According to one account, it appears that prior propitiation was regarded successful only when the relations between the *malik devata* and the landlord were tenuous.<sup>48</sup>

Sodhar Manjhi told me that his grandfather, Pancham Bhuinya, used to say that kamias propitiated *malik devata* when it was angry with the landlord. Then someone could even steal the grain from the field and he would go undetected and unpunished.

Ghosts were by nature fickle. So, as the above account suggests, kamias looked for signs which expressed the ghosts' temporary alienation from landlords. At such times, they were more likely to take risks and steal grain, hoping that the ghost would not punish them. The proof that the *malik devata* was temporarily disenchanted with the landlord, and that the ghost had rewarded its propitiation by kamias, came in the results of theft: if kamias got away without any harm, it proved that the ghost was alienated from the landlord. But there were also times when ghosts were strongly identified with landlords. At such times, ghosts represented the power of their landlords in fantastic forms; then ghosts were potentially malevolent, capable of causing much harm.

When a Bhuinya woman gave birth in her husband's village, the *malik devata* from her natal village announced its arrival by causing sickness in the family.<sup>49</sup> Since the woman had grown up on grain that belonged to the landlord, the *malik devata* claimed to have a role in the birth of her

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Deoki Bhuinya's oral testimony, Bakraur, 16 March 1982.

child. For that, it demanded propitiation.<sup>50</sup> It was appeased with suitable offerings and installed in the house as *chalani devata* (literally, a travelling ghost). It did not displace the local *malik devata*, but, disengaged from its pivotal role in assisting agricultural operations in its new abode, it became unquestionably malevolent; sorcerers used it to cause misfortune.<sup>51</sup> As *chalani devata*, the ghost's identification with the landlord was complete, and now that it was outside the village where it had been a *malik devata*, kamias defined it as a malevolent ghost. In doing so, kamias put the maliks' power in an unfavorable light. But in so far as kamias refrained from attributing complete malevolence to *malik devatas*, they accepted the overall hegemony of maliks.

In those situations where the *malik devata's* ties with the landlord were most prominent, the ghost was evil. When distribution of resources was involved, the ghost identified strongly with the malik. It guarded his property and represented his power as all-encompassing. It stressed kamia-malik relations over all other ties. But in the sphere of production, its role was different. It intervened, along with other ghosts, to facilitate agricultural production. In agrarian rites, the ghost's ties were stretched to include the entire community. While the social distribution and temporal succession of ritual tasks in *asarhi puja* inscribed the practice with unequal social relations, all ghosts including the *malik devata* intervened for the community as a whole. At these times, the *malik devata's* connection with the landlord served to represent his power in benign terms, and the ghost did not bear a malevolent character. It was precisely because of its ambivalence that the *malik devata* was effective as a symbol of the landlord's authority.

Although neither oral nor written records exist about the practice of

<sup>50</sup> This was the explanation given by informants. The arrival of *malik devata* was of course known only if some misfortune occurred. Otherwise, presumably the ghost was not known to have travelled to the woman's married home. This practice raises an interesting speculation. Does this indicate that maliks exercised a tight control over the kamias' progeny in the past, that by virtue of their authority and power even over villages and lands that they did not hold directly, they controlled the marriage circles of their kamias? Control over males through a variety of transactions and domination over the progeny of women through the tight control of marriage and through ghosts would have given them a mastery over reproduction and production. Once, however, the malik's power became defined strictly by land control, as it did in the colonial period, such a strategy of domination over the progeny of women who lived on lands not held by him directly could not work.

<sup>51</sup> Memories of incidents of setting spirits upon one's enemies were many. One that I recorded concerned a peasant, Prasad Mahto, setting Bhainsasur (who had come to Bakraur as a *chalani devata*) on his own brother-in-law because he had taken a corn cob from Prasad Mahto's field without his permission. Soon afterwards, the brother-in-law died. Bangali Manjhi's oral testimony, Bakraur, 16 February 1982.

ghost purchase in the pre-colonial period, there is no reason to deny the possibility of its existence in those times. However, one feature in the practice of buying ghosts was particular to the colonial period. This was related to the reconstitution of rural power on the basis of land control in the colonial period. Unlike pre-colonial Bihar when maliks exercised direct control over people, the power of landlords in the colonial period was based directly on the amount of land they controlled through various tenurial rights. Appropriation of ghosts as *malik devatas* at a time when social relations were being reconstituted through appropriation of land lent a new dimension to the dialectic between spirit cult practices and kamia–malik relations.

### Conclusion

Like Tio, the devil worshipped by the miners in Bolivia,<sup>52</sup> the *malik devata* represented subordination of the Bhuinyas by landlords. But whereas Tio expressed the alienation of miners from capitalist production, as Michael Taussig so eloquently argues, the *malik devata* of colonial Gaya echoed the power of landlords over kamias, based on land control. It is tempting to conclude that *malik devatas* simply reflected unequal relations between landlords and kamias. But this would be contrary to the logic of ritual practice. Following Bourdieu, I have argued that rituals were not mere executions of pre-existing rules. In fact, ritual practices were dynamic events in which social relations were actively reconstructed. Through propitiation of ancestors and spirits, people sought to deal with 'good' and 'bad' deaths. In doing so, they made spirit cults an arena for the reproduction of social order. Upper caste ritual practices separated their ancestral spirits from lower caste ghosts, but, when practical life required, they also propitiated low caste spirits and conceded ritual specialization and cultural autonomy to the Bhuinyas. The cultural notions expressed through these may appear contradictory as long as we seek their logic outside practice. But seen from the point of view of aims, these seemingly contradictory practices were coherent: both restored harmony in relations between the living and the dead. The purchase of powerful ghosts, too, was connected to the practical task of assisting the regeneration of the dead, to give life to seeds from the previous harvest. But in this process, the social power of landlords was also reproduced. Just as some practices reproduced the

<sup>52</sup> See Michael T. Taussig's *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill, 1980), pt III.

caste hierarchy, the purchase, the installation, and the use of *malik devatas* reproduced the dominance of maliks. Kamia practices responded by attributing malevolence to the ghost in situations where it was closely identified with the landlord. It was through articulation of such contrary beliefs and strategies that spirit cult practices reproduced kamia–malik relations.