

Ritual Friendship in a Converging Tribal and Caste Society

Uwe Skoda

INTRODUCTION

In north-west Orissa, especially Sambalpur District, one finds a mixed tribal and caste society. In the second half of the 19th and first half of 20th centuries, peasant castes such as the Aghria migrated into a predominantly tribal region, in which they started to clear a large part of the forests, became revenue collectors for various little kings, managed to establish themselves as village kings, and were certainly influential in integrating the tribal population into local little kingdoms, a process I have discussed elsewhere (Skoda forthcoming).

Thus a transitional society has emerged, in which, at the village level, different communities are interwoven into various networks of relations, such as hierarchies established by food transfers or by the services of Brahmans etc. and links created by transferring sick or endangered children (Skoda 2000–1) or through mythological connections. Some of them apparently unite different communities, while others tend to separate them. One quite unifying factor appears to be ritual friendship between persons belonging to different communities in a rather disparate tribal and caste society. The Aghria, among whom I conducted fieldwork for around eighteen months, are part and parcel of these networks of relationships, including ritual friendship, which I shall discuss here.

In this article I argue that ties of ritual friendship occur in this converging society at the inter-community level in particular. There is therefore a contrast with the tribal society of southern Orissa or Chotanagpur, in which relations of ritual friendship might be created at an intra-community level of connection between various clans etc. Among the Aghria the possibility of two men or two women becoming ritual friends is explicitly excluded. To my knowledge the same rule occurs in most communities in the vicinity of the Aghria (in north-west Orissa). Therefore one may find an adaptation or transformation of ritual friendship between a rather segmentary tribal society in the south on the one hand, and a more complex,

transitional society, with hierarchies resembling the caste society to a large extent, on the other. While in the former society ritual friendship may balance a condition of latent war, or 'Warre' in the sense of Hobbes, which Sahlins characterizes (1968: 4ff.) as being typical of tribal society, in the latter type of society it may occur as a counterweight to newly established hierarchies. However, this does not mean that the former type of society should be considered egalitarian, nor does it mean that Aghria migrating into a tribal region may not have needed allies in a predominantly tribal area. Thus various functions might be attached to the same forms of ritual friendship, which in their turn may also be hierarchized or influenced by hierarchies.

Very close friends, particularly school or college friends, often choose a form of ritual friendship to create more formal and more permanent ties. Often parents also arrange the ritual for their young children to become friends. Such a relationship can only be established between different communities, for example between an Aghria and a Kisan or a Kisan and a Mali, not within one's own group. These relationships are mainly arranged between two men, sometimes between two women. In contrast to *dharma* kinship (see below), a tie between a man and a woman is prohibited. Typical of all forms is the complete avoidance of individual names, from which I argue that ritual friendship is aimed at the total identification, even merger, of ritual friends. This particular way of establishing or rather formalizing inter-community relationships on a personal level has been termed ritual friendship. It seems to me, however, to lie somewhere between our categories of friendship and kinship. It resembles friendship in the sense that friends may choose each other to some extent, although ways of formalizing this are socially determined. It also creates a relationship that does not have any exact equivalent in the kinship sphere. Although people sometimes explain it by saying that it is like the relationship between brothers, they also say that these friends are equal in a way that is not so of brothers, with their differences in age and more importantly

status.

The phenomenon bears a resemblance to kinship in the sense that it is extended to other family members: that is, the relationships that are created are not restricted to two individuals only, but rather involve their wider families. In comparison with ordinary friendship, they also certainly have a more permanent character. Ritual friends are said to support each other and to share everything as, ideally, brothers or sisters do, and some people joke that they would even share their wives, although in practice a ritual friend's wife should be avoided like a younger brother's wife. Obligations to invite each other to festivals resemble those of the kinship network. Ritual friendship appears to be more binding than ordinary friendship because it is sanctioned in front of, and blessed by, various gods. However, even though it does not fit neatly into our categories, for present purposes I have decided to call it ritual friendship. There is an impressive variety of ways to create bonds of ritual friendship. Although I am subsuming them under a single label here, there is no vernacular term indicating a 'super-category'. I shall now describe these ties of friendship in more detail.

1. Mahaprasad

The most sacred way of becoming ritual friends is by eating the *prasada* (leftovers of the gods) of Lord Jagannath, or *mahaprasada* (great *prasada*). Although some people decide to create this type of friendship on a pilgrimage to Jagannath's main temple in Puri, the holy centre of Orissa, it is not necessary to go on a pilgrimage to obtain *mahaprasada*: someone else may bring it from Puri. It is not the pilgrimage but the process of eating *prasada* together and the resulting transformation that are most decisive here, and *mahaprasada* is also regarded as a witness to this transformative process of turning friends into ritual friends. For most villagers a journey to Puri is anyway not easily affordable. With *mahaprasada* from Puri any Brahmin can perform the necessary ritual. There is no fixed place for the ritual, which can be performed in the house of one of the friends or anywhere else. Often it is also done at a school, because many friends decide to create this ritual bond during their time at high school. This also indicates that most such friends reside outside of one's own village, thus creating a network beyond the

village.

The new friends only address each other as *mahaprasada* and no longer use their individual names. Friends are not allowed to call one another in any other way except *mahaprasada*. *Mahaprasada*, people say, should never quarrel, for this would be considered a kind of sin. In the other forms described below there is not such a strict taboo against disputes, although friends should not quarrel generally. Furthermore, one Brahmin said that *mahaprasada* have one and the same life energy or *jiban*, meaning that the separate *jiban* each of them has at the time of birth is merged with their friend's *jiban* in the act of forging the ritual friendship. A *mahaprasada* bond is unbreakable, and *mahaprasada* must help one another under all circumstances.

If a *mahaprasada* friend dies, his partner must conduct a funeral or *kam ghar* in his own house. This includes destroying and replacing the pot used to boil rice in the *handi poka* ritual; summoning a Brahmin, if the *mahaprasada* belonged to a high-status community; and, perhaps even more importantly, a feast for his caste fellows or *jati*, which is a rather expensive affair. However, compared to an ordinary funeral among a high caste like the Aghria, this funeral is considerably shortened and only celebrated on the 11th day (usually it would continue from the 9th to the 12th day). Nor is it necessary to shave the head. Nowadays, some interlocutors told me, these obligations might not be as strict as they were in former times.

*Empirical cases*¹

| | |
|--------|-------|
| Aghria | Karan |
| Aghria | Kulta |
| Aghria | Keunt |
| Aghria | Chosa |
| Gond | Gaud |

2. Makra

A second method is to perform a ritual on *Makar Sankranti* or January 14 at a place where the festival is observed and altars for Lord Jagannath and Shiva have been erected. This festival is so popular in the region that in some villages it is even celebrated a few days later in order to avoid clashing with other villages. Compared to *mahaprasada* it is therefore easier to become a *makra*.

There is a legend that Lord Jagannath and Shiva met on this particular day and became ritual friends or *makra*. However, other people, in particular a Brahman performing the *Makar Sankranti*, merely stated that although the two gods had met on that day, they did not create any ritual friendship. In any case, during the common festival, after initial rituals to invoke both gods, their meeting is remembered by having villagers push two carriages or *rath*, with the idols and priests sitting on top of them, from opposite directions and meeting in front of the temple or altar. Ideally the cars should be pushed around sunset only by those intending to become *makra*. Then the gods greet each other. After this ritual encounter between the two gods, any couple wishing to become a *makra* can enter the temple, where they offer a coconut and some money. In return they receive *makra chaul*, a special kind of *prasad*,² with they to feed each other. Then the *makra* worship each other by placing a sandal on each other's forehead, applying a *tika* of vermilion and kneeling down in front of each other. As in the case of *mahaprasad*, the aspect of feeding *prasad* plays a crucial role in the transformative process of becoming friends. Commensality, however, is restricted to the ritual context. Though many people are not sure whether a *makra* can accept food in the house of his ritual friend belonging to a lower community, a high-caste Aghria *makra* once told me explicitly that his Kisan *makra* would arrange a Gaud to cook for them if he – the Aghria – were invited there.

The fathers of two *makra* call each other *sahaya* or *sarjya*. Restrictions of avoidance exist between one *sahaya* and the other *sahaya*'s wife, who has to veil her head in the presence of her husband's *sahaya*. A man should not touch the wife of his *sahaya*. The father of one's *makra* is known as *mita bua* (*mita* = friend; *bua* = father). There is no general agreement whether a funeral has to be performed in a friend's house in the case of *makra* friendship.

Compared to the *mahaprasad*, the *makra* friendship can be dissolved, as one Brahman who performs the ritual to become *makra* explained. Although he could reverse the ritual, he said that cancelling a ritual friendship would be bad (*kharab*) and inauspicious (*asubha*). Neither this Brahman nor any other person I asked knew a single case where the ritual of becoming friends

had actually been reversed. This is also true of all the following kinds of ritual friendship.

Empirical cases

| | |
|--------|---|
| Gaud | Kisan |
| Aghria | Tihari (Brahman of Aghria) |
| Aghria | Gond |
| Aghria | Sundhi (wine-seller for <i>mahuli</i> wine – OBC) |
| Aghria | Kisan |
| Aghria | Harijan |
| Gond | Kandh |
| Gond | Keunt |
| Gond | Maharona (brass-smiths) |
| Gond | Kisan |
| Gond | Luhura |
| Mali | Kisan |
| Bhuyan | Kisan |
| Chosa | Luhura |
| Kisan | Oram |
| Kisan | Khajuria |
| Turi | Chamar |

3. Bensagar or Benisagar

The name of this type of friendship seems to be derived from *beni* 'both' and *sagar* 'sea', but not everyone agreed with this etymology. Compared to the first two types it appears to be rather rare. Like *makra* this type can be created in a ritual – here known as *usa* – which is performed by Gaud who herd buffalos in the jungle, also known as Gothia Gaud (derived from *gotha*, herd of buffalos or goats). Some said that the ritual takes place every Tuesday between *Nua Khai* and the full moon of the month of Aswina, but the Gothia Gaud I met perform it only four days before the full moon of Aswina. During the ritual the Gaud sit in front of a tree, for example a *sal* tree, and boil rice or *handi* in a pot that they turn upside down on a rope made of straw (*bentia*) lying on the ground. On top of it a winnowing basket or *kula* is placed, also upside down. Above the basket there is a bow or *dhanu* with several cuts. A bamboo stick known as *jhumka* with a metal ring on both sides is moved back and forth to make a sound to call the gods, especially goddesses like Mangla, Samlei or Durga, in order that they may be worshipped. Only the Gaud family is allowed to touch this sacred instrument if they have taken a bath. The Gaud making the music is called *gahani*, while a second Gaud, usually the eldest, performs the

ritual for the gods and enters a trance. At this stage he is called *barua*, a reference to the Goddess into a trance. The friendship is sanctioned in front of the *barua*.

Potential *bensagar* bring a coconut and *phaklo-lia*, while the Gaud who are performing the ritual offer a non-castrated billy goat (*buka*) and two red cocks. There is a provision here that every year at least two men or two women must become friends. If no one is willing to create a new tie, one of the Gaud symbolically creates the friendship with an affine such as his elder sister's husband or wife's sister's husband. This means that Gaud can become friends with other Gaud provided they belong to other subdivisions (sub-castes), but this seems to be rather exceptional in comparison with other communities and other types of ritual friendship. The tie between affines just mentioned can also be renewed every year if required. But usually there are enough people willing to become friends every year. *Bensagar* only address each other with this term and usually offer milk to each other if they meet.

Empirical cases

| | |
|----------------|--------|
| Gaud (Nangaur) | Gond |
| Gaud | Aghria |
| Gaud | Kulta |
| Gaud | Kisan |
| Gaud | Munda |
| Gond | Luhura |

4. Sahi

This particular form does not seem to be very common nowadays, though it was certainly more important formerly. In one case I found that an Aghria girl had become *sahi* to a girl from a Gond family. While the Aghria belonged to a wealthy landlord or Gauntia family, the Gond girl was a daughter of the local *zamindar* family, who in the wider sense also owned the village of the Aghria landlord. This tie had been created around fifty years ago after a rumour that a cholera³ epidemic was imminent and that only families with *sahi* would be saved from it. This story was later confirmed by a case of a Kisan having created a *sahi* friendship with a Bhuyan for the same reason, and by a similar case of an Aghria man who became the *sahi* friend of a Brahman man after hearing a rumour that 'if you do not become *sahi*, you will be infected by cholera'.⁴

Only families of the same size can create such

a bond. For example, in the first case described above an important criterion for selection was the fact that the two families each had ten members at that time. However, the families are tied together by just one child or friend each; not all family members have to become *sahi*. Again a Brahman performs the ritual. *Sahi* feed each other and exchange gifts, usually clothes. The Aghria and the Brahman exchanged a coconut and a *dhoti*. The friendship is expressed every year by invitations on the day of *Nua Khai*, the eating of the first rice. *Sahi* only call each other *sahi*, never by their individual names. No hierarchical distinction is made between them. Veiling in front of the *sahi*'s husband is not required, unlike *mahaprasad* and *makra*.

Empirical cases

| | |
|---------|------------------|
| Brahmin | Aghria |
| Aghria | Gond |
| Gond | Kumbhar (potter) |
| Bhuyan | Kisan |
| Kisan | Chamar |

The *sahi* type is apparently known among the Birhor too, since it is mentioned by Roy (1925: 530). According to him it is only created between married women who have the same number of sons. Roy suggests that the Birhor may have borrowed it from the neighbouring Oraon. The Kharia (Roy and Roy, 1937: 161–2) seem to practise it as well.

5. Karamdal

The name for this form of ritual friendship may be derived from *karam* 'destiny' and *dal* 'twig'. On the other hand it may be a reference to the fact that the friendship can only be created during a festival for the Goddess Karamsani, who many are convinced is a form of Durga. There are actually two festivals for this goddess. One, *bamhan karma*,⁵ is performed in the month of Bhadraba, which is associated with the desire for a good crop.⁶ The other, held around *Dasara* and just known as *karma*, is combined with *puo juintia* and is associated with the desire to have children. It is this one that offers the opportunity to form ritual friendships. Here the ritual is usually patronised by a married but childless couple who celebrate the festival in seven years. While the main part of the ritual takes place in the evening and at night,⁷ ritual friendships can be created

the following morning. The two friends feed each other *prasad* – offerings left by the goddess, here a small bowl with *phaklo-lia* (parboiled rice heated on sand) and *gud* (sugarcane juice) – in front of the altar of Karamsani, which is represented by a *karam* twig that was brought in procession the day before. Friends call each other *karamdal* from that time on. In former times *kharchcha* (the raw ingredients for a meal) were presented to *karamdal* friends on *Nua Khai* and *Rakhi Puni* (full moon in the month of Sraban). However, nowadays this is less strictly observed.

Empirical cases

| | |
|---------------|--------|
| Aghria | Luhura |
| Ganda/Harijan | Chamar |

Roy (1925: 29–30; Roy and Roy 1937: 161–2) reported the same type of friendship among the Birhor and Kharia. In these cases two men intending to become friends present each other with a *karam* (*Adina cardifolia*) leaf as well as a piece of cloth, while two women only give a cloth to each other. *Karam* friends do not use the wood of *karam* trees for firewood.⁸ Among the Santal too, according to Troisi (2000 [1979]: 142; also Mukherjea 1962 [1939]: 149), two boys or two girls might enter into a ‘life-long friendship’ during the *Karam* festival. Troisi notes that: ‘The alliance between boys is called *Karmu Dharmu* and among girls *Karamdar*. It is brought about by the parties concerned exchanging *karam* buds and fixing them in each other’s hair in the presence of the villagers gathered for the festival. Besides linking two friends who promise each other mutual economic assistance...the alliance also puts each one of them into a new relationship with the other’s family. Thus, in the case of boys who address each other as *Karmu* and *Dharmu*, the alliance gives each one of them the status of brothers while girls become sisters. As a result, incest taboo relationships are created between each other’s families’ (ibid.).

6. Sahya and Baula

A *sahya* friendship bond may be created by bringing a mango twig (*am dal*) to the house of the potential friend, or rather by placing the twig above the entrance to the friend’s house. If the friend agrees to the proposal, a day is fixed when the relationship is established formally in the presence of relatives, at which time the friends

feed each other with *chuda* (flattened rice) and henceforth call themselves *sahya*. Again a *sahya* must belong to another community, according to some people a community from whom the friend can accept water. This form is open to women as well as men, that is, men might become the friends of other men etc. Veiling in front of the *sahya*’s husband is not obligatory. If the *sahya* dies, no ritual need be performed at the house of the friend, who should nevertheless attend the funeral in the *sahya*’s own house. The pot to boil rice is not replaced (no *handi poka*). This form may not be as common as the others. I only found one case of a Kharia man and a Kisan who were *sahyas*. Interestingly the Kharia was a Christian.

Yet another form of friendship, called *baula*, is only possible for women in the month of Phagun. The friendship, which is symbolised by mango –flowers, is not very common in the region, and I found only one case, between a Kharia and a Kisan. A teacher performed a little ritual for which a coconut and some incense were required. Again the friends call each other *baula*. The parents of a *baula* are called *mita-bua* and *mita-ma*. This form is said to be more popular around Cuttack, particularly among Adivasis there.

Empirical cases

| | |
|-------|--------|
| Kisan | Kharia |
|-------|--------|

7. Mita

This form of friendship is generally restricted to people having the same name by birth. People believe that there is a special link between those who share a name. However, the common name is also abandoned in favour of *mita* ‘friend’. A Brahman might perform a little ritual to underline the friendship, but in other cases people regard each other as *mita* just because of their common name. They may also address each other as *mita*, with or without a ritual. As in the other forms already described *mita* must belong to different communities. The *mita* friendship constitutes a relationship between equals comparable to brothers. However, unlike genealogical brothers any difference of age does not matter: there is no distinction between elder and younger brother with all its consequences.

It is not quite clear whether women can become *mita* in the setting I experienced, but in the case of the Birhor (Roy 1925: 530) it is quite

explicit that any namesakes may become friends, whether they are women, who are known as *mitin*, or men, who are known as *mitan*.⁹ The same friendship was also noted by Roy and Roy (1937: 161–2) among the Kharia.

Empirical cases

| | |
|--------|-------------------|
| Aghria | Gond |
| Aghria | Bandhari (barber) |
| Aghria | Kisan |
| Gond | Munda |

DHARMA KINSHIP AS INTERGROUP RELATIONS

Before coming to a preliminary conclusion I shall discuss another phenomenon here, namely so-called ‘*dharma* kin’ (relatives in a religious sense), for example, a *dharma* daughter or –*dharma* sister. Unlike ritual friendship this is a way of forging ties between men and women who are excluded from ritual friendship. Such *dharma* bonds are, however, clearly based on kinship patterns: that is, the usual terms of address and reference are used, but the word *dharma* may be added. I came across cases of new relationships of this sort not only among the Aghria, but also between Aghria and Mawari or between a Brahman family and a girl from a Christian family. There seems to be a particular tendency to use this form to adopt daughters or sisters into families in which only sons were born, because the relationship between a brother and sister is particularly significant, for example in rituals such as *Bhai Jiuntia* and *Rakhi Puni*, in which the brother–sister relationship is emphasized, and sisters worship their brothers by praying for their well-being. The *dharma* brother and *dharma* sister relationship can be established on *Rakhi Puni*. Later these brothers and sisters may celebrate *Bhai Jiuntia* too – and in fact a *dharma* –sister should, many people say, be invited to *Bhai Jiuntia* – but the relationship cannot be created on *Bhai Jiuntia*.

New intragroup and intergroup –ties, and even inter-religious bonds, may be established through *dharma* kinship, but the relationship is different from ordinary or *posya* adoption because *dharma* children do not live in the household of their adoptive relatives, so the spatial separation continues. On the other hand these relationships also seem to be looser in a legal sense, because in contrast to *posya*

adoption there is no formal right to claim a share of the property, and there seems to be no formal recognition by the *jati*, nor is any ritual required. The relationship with *dharma* children seems to be based first and foremost on personal sympathy and is often seen in a very emotional way. However, this tie is not a purely private matter and has a special status in a society that views itself as a whole kinship network. This relationship is acknowledged by both sides or families, who refer to each other as, for example, *dharma* brother and *dharma* sister etc., or sometimes simply as brother and sister. As my interlocutors pointed out, under certain circumstances *dharma* kin can fulfil the traditional functions of biological or *posya* children, for example by lighting the pyre of the deceased at the time of death. Furthermore, once such a relationship is established, there is an obligation on the partners to invite each other to formal occasions like marriages as a demonstration of the special relationship.

Empirical examples

| | |
|-------------|-----------------|
| Aghria | Aghria |
| Aghria boy | Brahman –girl |
| Brahman boy | Christian –girl |

OTHER FORMS OF RITUAL FRIENDSHIP IN THE REGION

Apart from the examples of ritual friendship just described and slightly different forms in the south of Orissa, which will be considered below, there are several other forms of such ties in the wider region, which I shall discuss briefly here. Roy (1999 [1928]: 140) mentions various forms of what he calls ‘ceremonial friendship’ among the Oraon (Oram) without giving details, apart from the fact that marriage between the two families is prohibited if two boys enter into such an ‘artificial relationship’, even if the families belong to different clans (*gotra*). Among the Birhor, Roy (1925: 29–30) came across another type of friendship known as *ganga jal* (*jal* = water), which can be created among women only by splashing each other with water from a river or drinking water from the same pot (*lota*). Such friendship is also common among the Santal (Mukherjea, 1962 [1936]: 149). Roy (1925: 532) also observed that such friendships, in their various forms, are as real and sacred as actual blood relationships and include the observance

of ceremonial pollution after birth, death etc.

Choudury (1977: 63–4, 68–9) found a form of ritual friendship among the Munda known as *sangi* or *sahiya*, which he calls ritual kinship. He argued: ‘*Sangi* relationship exists between two young men of about the same generation and age not necessarily related by blood or marriage. Sometimes, though I have no concrete case, it may be established between a Munda and a Hindu’ (ibid.: 68). This life-long relationship, which is often created between members of different lineages or ‘cousins’, is sanctioned by an exchange of clothes and drinking of rice beer in the presence of lineage members. Henceforth the boys use the term *sangi* for each other. The *sangi*’s father is addressed as *sangi-apu*, and *sangi* should invite each other on ceremonial occasions.

Among the Birhor one also finds the *phul* friendship (*phul* = flower), which is arranged between two men by putting a flower behind each other’s ear, while two women may put the flower into each other’s hair. Henceforth friends call each other ‘my flower’ and swear eternal friendship to each other while mutually feasting and clothing (Roy, 1925: 528). This same type is also practised among the Santal. Troisi (2000 [1979]: 142) mentions that *phul* friendships can be created during another festival (*Sibrat Mela*), as can *Baha Phul* friendships¹⁰ among girls and *Jomnu Gate* among boys, in which there is no obligation to provide economic assistance and no relation of kinship. However, he does not give any further details. Various other forms could be added, for example among the Birhor (Roy, 1925: 529) there are *jitia dair*, a type created among boys only, who put a *jitia* leaf behind each others ears, and *jawa dali*, in which girls put a shoot of barley behind each other’s ears.

According to Mohanty (1973–4: 132), among the Gadaba a friendship that is known as a *babu* relationship, can be established on a personal level between men and women, or rather boys and girls during adolescence. Thus at least among the Gadaba ritual friendship does not appear to be restricted to the same sex. This is again in striking contrast to the converging tribal and caste society I mentioned earlier, in which ritual friendship can only be created between two men or two women, never between a man and a woman. The sexes remain separate, and there is no ritual friendship between them. Only *dharma*

kinship can be established between different sexes.¹¹

RITUAL FRIENDSHIP AND THE QUESTION OF LEVELS

As already indicated, there is an astonishing multitude of forms of ritual friendship within this converging tribal and caste society. Roy (1925: 532) argued that the Birhor had borrowed *mahaprasad* friendship from their Hindu neighbours and *sahi* friendship from their Oraon neighbours. However, I am certainly not in a position to clarify the origin of these types of ritual friendship. Thus tribal communities like the Birhor may have been influenced in this regard by Hindu immigrants or their tribal neighbours, but since Roy is in no position to prove his hypothesis, it may well be the other way round – that is, tribal communities may have had an impact on Hindu peasants. In any case, the sheer variety of forms is certainly significant and no coincidence, but constitutes an important arena of interaction contributing to the mutual influence of castes and tribes. Perhaps even more important than the question as to whether Hindu newcomers have influenced an original tribal population¹² or vice versa is the recognizable difference between north-west and southern Orissa in terms of who may create ties of ritual friendship.

Among the Gadaba, according to Mohanty (1973–4), on the one hand there are personal ties of ritual friendship known as *maitar* or *sangat* among men and *baula* (see friendship type 6, above) among women, which might be created by eating from the same plate during *Pusa Paraba*. In such cases the terms *maitar* or *sangat* are used instead of individual names. Such ties resemble those described already. On the other hand – and perhaps more importantly – there are much more enduring relationships between different clan divisions or lineages in various villages, which are also known as *moitr* (Pfeffer 2001: 137) or *mahaprasada* (Mohanty, 1973–4: 132, 137). Such inter-clan or inter-village links go well beyond the rather personal links described above and seem to be absent in the context of northwest Orissa as I have described it. To stress this point once more, among both the Gadaba (also Berger, personal communication) and Dongria Kond (Hardenberg, 2002) ties of ritual friendship can be created within the

community, that is, between clans, while among the Aghria ties of ritual friendship between different Aghria clans (*bansa*) are explicitly prohibited. However, this does not mean that Gadaba may not become the ritual friends of other communities, that is, above clan level.

Common to all cases, including the Gadaba, Aghria etc., is the fact that ritual friends must belong to different segments. Among the Gadaba and Dongria Kond, but apparently also among the Bihor, Munda and Oraon, as Roy and Choudhury report, as well as among the Santal or Gaud, such segments might be clans, lineages, local lines or villages. Thus ritual friendship appears to be a way of cutting across given segments, and on higher levels also caste and tribe boundaries, or even religious barriers between Christians, Hindus and Moslems, who may be ritual friends too. Therefore, ritual friendship seems to demonstrate the segmentary structure of tribal society in southern Orissa and Chotanagpur. In the northwest, however, lower levels of segmentation such as clans are apparently excluded from forging bonds of ritual friendship, thus indicating a transformation of the segmentary structure itself and perhaps a process of substantialization. Only different communities may be related on a personal level through ritual friendship ties. Bonds below this level, like the sorts of collective ties of friendship found among the Gadaba and Dongria Kond, are either completely unknown, as in the case of Aghria, or may have only a rather residual place in tribal groups in this transitional society.

RITUAL FRIENDSHIP: IDENTIFICATION AND HIERARCHY

Ritual friends are said to help each other and to share everything. Some people even joke that they may share their wives too, which, however, would be in sharp contrast to the rules of avoidance applied to a friend's wife. The creation of a network of mutual reciprocity led Mohanty (1973–4: 131, 151) to argue that the function of these friendship ties lies in achieving integration and resolving conflicts by creating security and mutual love. This appears to correspond to Pfeffer's (2001: 137) observation concerning Gadaba ritual friends (*moitr*):

If they [*moitr* or 'co-operative agnates' as Pfeffer has termed them – US] chance to meet

their bond-brothers they bow down deeply in mutual devotion. Love, nothing but pure love, is expected from and given to the *moitr*. They will never demand a buffalo [during the *gotr* funeral – US], but their alter egos will surely provide for them.¹³

Taking into consideration Sahlins' (1968: 4ff.) characterization of a tribal society as one in a condition of permanent latent war, one may regard forms of ritual friendship as a kind of peace treaty in addition to, or combined with, other forms of exchange embodying tribal wisdom. Within tribal society there may have been a need for newcomers like the Aghria to find allies or at least to ensure neutral cohabitants who were not hostile towards them, not only within the village, but also in inter-village relations. Certainly such an approach seems plausible, and the successful integration of the Aghria and other communities into a new mixed tribal and caste society may have been a consequence of their ability to create ties with other communities. However, Nayak (1989: 44)¹⁴ has also pointed out, in relation to the Dongria Kond, that friendship ties between segments such as clans might also result in envy in other segments – thus friendship ties might even be counter-productive to harmony. In other words, ritual friendship ties may actually link certain segments without, however, altering the overall segmentary structure.

Comparing the various types of ritual friendship with one another, it is noticeable that some, like *mahaprasad*, *sahi* or *sahya*, can be created on any day, others, like *makra*, *bensagar* or *karamdal*, only during religious festivals that are usually held just once a year. Almost all forms of friendship are sanctioned in front of gods, whether already present during a festival or invoked in rituals performed by priests. I therefore agree with Hardenberg (2002) that all these personal ties of ritual friendship have a sacred character – my choice of ritual friendship to describe this phenomenon is meant to underline this – though sacredness is somehow ranked. There is a clear difference between *mahaprasad* and the other forms. *Mahaprasad* is considered to be most sacred and irreversible, since the *jiban* or life energy of the two friends has merged. While a *mahaprasad* friendship simply cannot be dissolved, it is unlikely that any other ritual friendship would break up either. Thus, the forms of ritual friendship are hierarchically ranked in

| Type of ritual friendship | Formal / sacred character – hierarchical position |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| mahaprasad makra bensagar | most / highest |
| sahi karamdal sahya / baula | medium |
| Mita | least / lowest |

Diagram A: Forms of ritual friendship and their sacred character

the following manner (diagram A):

Thus, without denying the integrative potential of ritual friendship and the idea of bridging gaps within a segmentary structure, there might be another explanation for the multitude of forms of friendship. Many people like Troisi (2000 [1979]: 142) argue that a tie is created between friends as brothers or sisters respectively. But, as it has been already stressed, in contrast to brothers in the kinship network, in which a difference of biological age is usually translated into a difference of status, such distinctions simply do not matter among ritual friends. Friends, who are usually of the same biological age, although not necessarily, are equal in status with respect to each other. Their social status or the rank of the community they belong to does not matter in their own affairs. The relationship between brothers might be very similar in many respects, but nevertheless it is not the same. Avoiding a friend’s wife may hint at a kinship relationship with a younger brother’s wife, who has to be avoided similarly. Such avoidance implies agnatic ties between ritual friends. However, avoidance between ego’s father and a friend’s mother, or vice versa, rather resembles an affinal kinship relationship between ego’s father and wife’s mother (between *samdhi* or children’s spouse’ father and *samdhen* or children’s spouse’ mother). Ritual friendship therefore combines elements of affinity and agnation and should be viewed rather as a separate category. Perhaps even more importantly, ignorance or the prohibition of individual names – in all the forms described, friends address each other only according to the type of friendship, for example as *makra* etc. – seems to indicate a tendency to equalize and avoid hierarchical connotations. Thus, ritual friendship implies ‘total identification’ (Pfeffer, 2001: 138), a certain ‘de-personalization’, or the ideal of the

merger of friends, as in the case of *mahaprasad*, whose life-spirits (*jiban*) have become one. I therefore argue that ritual friendship – not being expressed as a relationship among brothers – should also be understood as countering the hierarchy that may have been established in other fields. Just as hierarchical distinctions are balanced in the kinship sphere, as Dumont (1983: 168) suggested, ritual friendship might play a similar role in village relations.

This, however, should not imply the absence of hierarchy, even within ritual friendship. First, as already shown, forms of ritual friendship are ranked. Secondly, in some high castes like the Aghria the number of friends from lower status communities is rather limited, apparently for status reasons. Though my sample is rather limited (diagram B), it shows that most friendship ties are created between communities who are highest in status or *bal lok*¹⁵ in the narrow sense (16 cases) as well as between high- and low-status communities (16 cases), but only rarely between low-status communities and ‘Untouchables’ (two cases). The Aghria figures (in brackets) may show a even more pronounced preference for ritual friends belonging to other high-status communities rather than low-status communities, though it is perfectly possible to become the ritual friend of an ‘Untouchable’.

This finding clearly contradicts Choudhury’s argument (1977: 68–9) that friendship should be understood as a concession to the individual in a close-knit, kin-based society. Though there is a degree of personal choice, this is also limited by the culturally determined forms. Although two friends form a new relationship in many cases, this does not mean that an individual decision is necessarily involved. Often the parents might be more interested in arranging a new relationship via their children. Thus ritual friendship is not limited to two individuals, but rather includes wider families as expressed in forms of address

| Hierarchy / Status category | High-status communities | Low-status communities | ‘Untouchables’ |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| High-status communities | 16 (9) | 16 (4) | 1 (1) |
| Low-status communities | 16 (4) | 2 | 2 |
| ‘Untouchables’ | 1 (1) | 2 | 1 |

Diagram B: Friendship ties among various status categories

like *mita ma* (friend's mother) or *mita bua* (friend's father) for the close relatives of the friends. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in *sahi* friendship: two families identical in size are connected via one of their respective members.

Moreover, although friends are equal in many respects, this does not mean that restrictions regarding food are no longer valid in inter-community relations. Although ritual friends can feed each other *prasad* – and in fact the bond is created through the sharing of food – they cannot disregard the regulations of the communities they belong to in everyday life. On important occasions like *Nua Khai* or *Rakhi Puni* friends might send each other raw food as a sign of their special bond, but usually they are not allowed to share boiled food. Thus hierarchy invades the sphere of friendship.

Besides, the idea, already mentioned, of sharing everything among ritual friends – you give to your ritual friend something of whatever you have – is noteworthy, since it hints at the idea of a pure gift and of generalized reciprocity in Sahlins' terms (1965: 147). Ritual friends are specially cared for, and the greatest hospitality is shown to them. They usually do not demand anything, but they also know that a wish could never be refused. Therefore, apart from the balancing effect of ritual friendship in regard to an evolving hierarchy of ritual purity, ritual friendship may also have a certain counter-effect on, and stand in contrast to, the redistributive systems that have been established in a mixed tribal and caste society.

CONCLUSION

In the transitional tribal and caste society of northwest Orissa, a multitude of types of ritual friendship can be found by which castes as well as tribes are linked on a personal level. Various forms like *mahaprasad* or *makra* can be created during religious festivals or by eating *prasad*. Compared to kinship and ordinary friendship, these relationships combine elements of both in a unique way and should therefore be considered a separate category. Ritual friends are depersonalized by losing their individual names or merging their life-energies (*jiban*). They are identified with one another and are equal in their own affairs. However, not only are the forms of ritual friendship themselves hierarchized, with *mahaprasad* being the most sacred, but hierarchy

invades the sphere of ritual friendship, first because commensality among ritual friends is restricted to the religious sphere and to food left by the gods, and secondly because hierarchical considerations may determine the selection of ritual friends.

In contrast to the northwest, forms of ritual friendship among the tribal communities of southern Orissa and Chotanagpur are not limited to personal ties created between communities in the sense of castes or tribes, or even religious communities, but may also exist as collective or personal ties between clans, lineages, villages etc. Segments of these lower levels might be combined by ritual friendship corresponding to a segmentary structure of tribal society. However, such structures appear to be quite absent in the converging tribal and caste society of the northwest, suggesting that ritual friendship may have been changed, transformed in a limited way or adapted to personal inter-community links in this context. However, one reason for its immense popularity might be also its balancing effect with respect to evolving hierarchies on the tribal border.

KEYWORDS Ritual friendship; tribal society; caste, hierarchy; segmentary structure; Orissa

ABSTRACT In north-west Orissa one finds an enormous variety of bonds of ritual friendship, a form of relationship in between kinship and ordinary friendship. In this article, existing types of ritual friendship and empirical cases will be introduced and analysed. Since a converging tribal and caste society has emerged in the region, the multitude of forms might be related to two different phenomena: on the one hand a segmentary structure of tribal society bridging gaps between segments; on the other hand a balance to evolving hierarchical distinctions, since ideally friends are equal and identified with each other by avoidance of individual names etc. However, the various types of friendship are ranked, and in practice the choice of ritual friends may be influenced by hierarchical considerations.

NOTES

- 1 There is an interesting custom for new-born babies, who should only see certain mushrooms (*bihiden chhati*) and the palm tree and its fruits after some mushrooms and fruits have been put behind their ear. The explanation given for this is that the child and the mushrooms or palm tree and its fruits are *mahaprasad*.
- 2 In a village where I witnessed the ritual, this *prasad* consisted of a mixture of rice (*arua*), til (*maghirasi*), sugarcane (*akhu*), sugarcane juice

- (*gud*), honey (*mahu*), ginger (*ada*), coconut (*nadia*), cardamom (*ilachi*), cinnamon (*dalchini*), clove (*labanga*), clarified butter (*ghi*) and fruits.
- 3 Cholera is known locally as *haija* or as *haga*, the second word also meaning 'nature's call'.
 - 4 The rumour was *sahi nai bosile, khaiba rai*, also translated by my host as 'the evil gods will eat you if you do not make *sahi* friends'.
 - 5 It is named after a small insect or *bamhan*, which sucks the liquid out of the growing rice. The ritual is meant as a prayer to the Goddess Karamsani to get rid of this insect and protect the harvest.
 - 6 The festival takes place between transplanting and cutting the rice.
 - 7 After constructing a little pond at the entrance, the couple usually go in a procession known as *ankur* (germination) to the jungle to bring a twig of the *karam* tree to an altar set up on the street in front of the entrance of the house (next to the symbolic pond). Before cutting the twig the patron and his wife circle around it seven times. The twig should not fall on to the ground. The couple must fast during the day. The dancing continues the whole night. Some say that a particular type of drum known as *mandal* (Sambalpuri) or *madal* (Oriya) is required for the dancing. The patron must offer alcohol to all the participants, including the so-called 'Untouchables'. The next morning the dancers walk in a procession through the village to collect money and rice. In former times it was also common to sacrifice animals – non-castrated billy goats (*buka*) or cocks (*ganja*) – in the final year of the ritual cycle. The high cost of the ritual often means that it is interrupted after six years or sometimes never completed at all. At the end of the festival every year the patron and his wife bring the twig to a pond. If another couple want to continue the festival they must bind a thread around the twig seven times to signal their intention to do so. Afterwards the twig is immersed into a river or pond.
 - 8 However, Roy (1925: 528) also mentions that men may put the *karam* leaf behind each other's ear, and women into each other's hair. The friendship is generally created in the morning of the day after the festival.
 - 9 They might also be known as *sapaki*.
 - 10 In Mukherjea (1962 [1939]: 149), the same type of friendship is apparently known as *phul patao*.
 - 11 The *babu*-relationship mentioned, but not described in detail by Mohanty, might be viewed in the context of dormitories, in which there are fixed relationships between young men and women e.g. *gor* relations as analysed by Gell (1992: 176ff.).
 - 12 This does not mean that there has been no tribal migration, and in some areas tribal groups may be newcomers too.
 - 13 During the secondary funeral or *gotr* the *moitr*

stand in opposition to the aggressive agnates (*tsorubhai, panjabhai*) as well as to the affines (*bondhu*).

- 14 Nayak's observation refers to 'drinking friendship groups', which are not identical with ritual friendship, but might be applied to it as well.
- 15 Communities are considered *bal lok* or 'good people', that is, of high status (see also diagram), if Brahmans, barbers, washermen etc. offer services to them that they deny to lower communities and so-called 'Untouchables', to whom, unlike low-status communities, entrance to temples is denied and who are excluded in many other regards.

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Author's Address: Uwe Skoda, Institute of Ethnology, Free University of Berlin, Drosselweg 1-3,
14195 Berlin, GERMANY
E-mail: uskoda@gmx.net