

ARE *DEV*S GODS OR SPIRITS?

Some Quick Thoughts on Categories in the Study of Religions

GREGORY D. ALLES

Mennesker interagerer med vesener jeg som forsker ikke kan anta faktisk eksisterer. Dette skaper begrepsmessige og terminologiske utfordringer for både tolkning og analyse. I denne korte artikkelen reflekteres det over disse utfordringene ved å fokusere på ett spesielt eksempel: Devs er vesener rathvaer, et adivasifolk i Gujarat, India, interagerer med. Eksempelet viser at ord som “gud” og “ånd” kan være brukbare, men at de også fører med seg åpenbare ulemper. Den beste tolkningsprosedyren kan være å beholde det lokale begrepet, og samtidig ta høyde for at dette ordet også kan komme med en lokal ekvivalent i forskernes eget språk (enten det er norsk eller engelsk). Den beste analytiske prosedyren er nok allikevel å slutte med “klumpete” begreper konstruert i assosiative nettverk – som dev, gud og ånd – og heller søke et teknisk vokabular bestående av typer og klasser.

Are *devs* gods or spirits? They have been called both.¹ Before I venture some answers of my own, let me say something about the question.

Despite appearances, my question does not ask about being or reality, about the ontological category to which *devs* really belong – at least, it is not intended to. It is a question about saying and doing, about what might be the best way not only to tell others about *devs* and the people who interact with them but also to facilitate the analytical work of the study of religions – two somewhat different tasks, then, interpretive and analytical, respectively.

My question is also a very specific one, for I do not have just any *devs* in mind. The ones I have in mind are those that are of most particular interest to me, namely, the *devs* with whom indigenous Indians known as Rathvas interact.² They are the *devs* whose pictures some Rathvas hire people to paint on their walls, whose stories some of them tell, whose names some of them invoke in mantras. They are the *devs* who may be associated with particular wooden posts in the *devsthans*, the “*dev* places,” of villages, who ride the clay horses and inhabit the clay *dhabus* (reminiscent of clay birdhouses sold in the U.S.) which Rathvas present to them. It is these *devs* to whom Rathvas give offerings of rice, *dhebra*, coconut, and liver and before whom they kill goats and chickens, who ensure that crops grow and animals and children remain healthy, and who enter the *badvo* and cause his head to shake, his voice to give advice, his body to dance in ways associated with certain traditional personages and on occasion to climb through a row of tree branches set up in a field, in imitation of a story about a *dev* who goes to the sky. These *devs* may be quite similar to the *devs*, *devas*, and *devis* with whom other people on the Indian subcontinent routinely interact, or they may not be. The only way to tell is through detailed, comparative investigation, and there is no time for that here.

Perhaps the first thing to say in answering the question about whether *devs* are gods or spirits is this: *devs* do not have to be either gods or spirits; they can just be *devs*.³ Maybe this is easier for English-speakers than for speakers of Norwegian, since English has the cognate forms “deity” and “divinity,” derived from Latin. Or maybe English-speakers would have a tendency unreflectively to attribute inappropriate features to *devs*, precisely because they associate *devs* with these cognate forms. In any case, given enough sentences in which the word *dev* appears, and especially enough sentences that attribute properties to them or describe interactions with them, the word *dev* will communicate reasonably well, whether in English, Norwegian, or any other language. Such a transfer from one linguistic code to another is familiar enough to anyone who has ever read a work of serious ethnography. Indeed, we may quickly enough construct quite complex sentences using such bor-

rowed terms. For example: Some Rathvas say that their *vidhis* (ceremonies, rituals) count as *dharma* because *devs* are present at them, making interaction with these beings possible; others say that such *vidhis* are not *dharma*, precisely because although *devs* are present at the ceremonies and one can interact with them there, Bhagwan (the Lord, that is, the Hindu God) is not.⁴

The limitations of communication may, however, sometimes demand translating *dev* into, let us say, English, for example, when one is pressed for time or space (cf. my glosses for *vidhis* and Bhagwan in the preceding sentence), when one does not want to overburden one's text with foreign terms, when one is making comparisons, or when in fact one wants to acknowledge that some people who worship *devs* also speak English and that their linguistic usage merits some respect, too. (Today people in the area generally render the term *dev* as god.) Such communication situations may not be ideal, but even the most precise scholar cannot always speak "scientese," even when talking about her fieldwork area. In these circumstances, there is no inevitably right term to choose. Much depends upon the attributes one wishes to suggest. If I call the *devs* "gods," I elevate them and recognize their power and centrality in Rathva religious life. If I call them "spirits," I sound like a colonial anthropologist, and I also demote them, for a spirit is akin to a spook, a ghost, a *pret*, or a *bhut* (the last two words are often translated "spirit"); at the same time, I might also be acknowledging that Rathvas who have converted to caste Hindu communities now often consign the traditional *devs* to a lesser rank than Bhagwan "God" or "the Lord." It might be possible to employ a creative translation to suggest the feature most salient to one's analysis, as Piers Vitebsky does when he discusses dead relatives who come and speak to the living via a person who serves as an intermediary; he systematically translates the word *sonum* as Memory, capital M, to distinguish it from memory in our sense, small m. At the moment, I do not have such a creative translation to suggest for *dev*. Maybe that is why in most cases I prefer to leave the word untranslated, as I have been doing here all along.

When one turns to analytical work in the study of religions, leaving *dev* untranslated leaves much to be desired. It is not that *dev* is an emic

category – or that “god” and “spirit” are, for that matter – and so unsuited to analytical purposes. The sciences are filled with emic categories, terms that start out in particular locations and achieve universal recognition – at least for a time; no scientific claim lasts forever, and categories which seem obvious today can seem just as obviously bogus tomorrow. The problem, rather, is with the kind of concept that *dev*, “god,” and “spirit” are. I call them “clumps”. Clumps are collections or, perhaps better, associative networks of instances that for some reason our brain finds it attractive to group together, but they are not yet the kinds of terms that are truly useful for analysis: classes, defined in terms of specific properties, or kinds, defined by specific generative mechanisms. A clump suggests which instances it might – or might not – be useful to examine together. It does not, however, provide much guidance for what exactly one should examine, and further clarification usually results in the need to adjust the instances to which a term refers, the tokens of the type. Standard examples include the exclusion of bats from the category birds and the inclusion of whales in the category mammals.

In the case of rigorous analysis, then, it is not just that *devs* do not have to be gods or spirits. They probably should not be. Instead, they should be instances of a particular, more precisely defined class or kind. Considering *devs* as an instance of a class would provide a concise set of features that call for analytical clarification and explanation. Considering them as instances of a kind would call for the identification of a generative mechanism that, wherever it operates, produces instances of that kind – instances about which we can learn a great deal .

One current practice takes beings such as *devs* as belonging to the class “culturally postulated superhuman agents.” Doing so provides fuel for analysis in a way that considering them as gods or spirits does not. One can interrogate each term in turn – “culturally postulated,” “superhuman,” and “agent” – as well as what it is that distinguishes *devs* from other such agents.

Being something of a contrarian, I am not convinced that “culturally postulated superhuman agent” is the best analytical terminology for

scholars of religions to use. “Culturally postulated” seems to capture only one side of a complex process that results in people interacting with *devs* (or gods, spirits, saints, what have you). It ignores the role of what Robert McCauley has recently called, in a fortunate turn of phrase, “maturationally natural” cognitive systems along with the interaction between the cognitive and the ecological, an organism and its environment. “Agent” seems to presuppose that *devs* must be actors, but as Einar Thomassen pointed out at the 2012 meeting of the European Association for the Study of Religions in Stockholm, some “gods” are just patients; they primarily serve as recipients of prayers and offerings. Others may simply resemble the disinterested observers of the shipwreck of human existence that one finds in Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*. The appropriate category seems to be not agency but personhood, whether we are dealing with *adrsya* (invisible, non-perceptible) persons, such as *devs* are said to be, or with visible physical objects treated as persons, as Håkon Tandberg is in the process of exploring when he asks whether Zoroastrians treat the fire as a god. The middle term, the adjective “superhuman,” strikes me as even less satisfactory. Superhuman in what respects? The concept seems to require an impressionistic judgment of superiority that opens up onto an endless, unclassified variety of characteristics. In this regard “counterintuitive”, in the sense of a violation of the schema implicit in folk physics, biology, and psychology, provides a more clear-cut, parsimonious set of categories with which to approach analysis than “superhuman” does.

I have not yet thought enough about *devs* to put forward an alternative to “culturally postulated superhuman agents” or “counterintuitive agents.” Since it is awkward to have a class without a name, these phrases provide a good enough place from which to start, at least for now. They invite us to analyze several dynamics systematically: the origin and persistence within human communities of these “intentional” persons (using “intentional” in the sense it has in philosophical phenomenology); the properties which they possess; and the ways in which they are thought to interact – or not interact – with human beings and the world at large. These three topics, in varying degrees cognitive, eco-

nomic, and ecological, may not be exhaustive, but they do deserve systematic, analytical attention. They also provide a set of more precise ideas to use in trying to make sense of *devs* and other non-empirical beings among Rathvas. Simply calling *devs* “gods” or “spirits” would not exactly be useless, either analytically or interpretively, but it would certainly be a step backward.

NOTES

1. This sentence requires some clarification. As will become apparent in paragraph three, I am not talking here about Hindu *devas* and *devis*, whom I would instinctively call gods, but about beings worshiped by a group of India’s indigenous peoples.
2. India is home to hundreds of groups who are recognized in the Indian constitution as “scheduled tribes” and who in many but not all parts of the country call themselves *adivasis*, the “first inhabitants”. Regardless of whether this claim is historically accurate – it requires these people to have remained distinct from the descendants of the Aryas and other peoples for at least 3,500 years – they do meet criteria adopted by the United Nations for being indigenous; see http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf. Rathvas live primarily along the border of the state of Gujarat with Madhya Pradesh to the east, inhabiting the regions that stretch forty miles or so to the north of the Narmada River. They number over 500,000, have a literacy rate of under 50%, and mostly earn their livings through small-scale agriculture. For further details see Alles 2012b.
3. In this, of course, they are not alone. In personal conversation recently, Jennifer Butler of University College Cork made a similar point about the *Si/Sidhe* (modern/ancient Irish), better known as fairies, a word which now apparently has Walt Disney-esque connotations, even for some young Irish people.
4. To be clear, Bhagwan refers here not to the Christian God but to the God or Lord of the caste Hindus who, although they are a distinct minority in the areas where most Rathvas live, nonetheless consider themselves and are considered by others to constitute the “mainstream.” Many Rathvas have converted to various communities associated with caste Hindus, but even those who have not converted sometimes make the judgment that I have reproduced here. The language is, however, also commensurate with Christian usage. For example, my copy of the Gujarati Bible, published in Anand in 1993 by Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, renders the second half of Ps. 96.4 this way (I give the Gujarati only for the operative terms): “Bhagwan alone among all the *devo* [Gujarati plural of *dev*] is worthy of the highest praise.” In Rathvi-*bhasha*, the language of the Rathvas, as well as in Gujarati, one may preface proper names with Bhagwan, thus: Bhagwan Krsna, Bhagwan Isu, and Bhagwan Buddha, normally rendered in the area as Lord Krsna, Lord Jesus, and Lord Buddha.

REFERENCES

- Alles, Gregory D. 2012a. "Kinds, Classes, and Clumps: A Preliminary Typology of Concepts and Some Implications for the Study of Religions." *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 41(1):12–23.
- Alles, Gregory D. 2012b. "Tribal Chic: Crossing Borders in Eastern Gujarat." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80(3):623–658.
- Boyer, Pascal. 1994. *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Boyer, Pascal. 2001. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- McCauley, Robert N. 2011. *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McCauley, Robert N. and E. Thomas Lawson. 2002. *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Millikan, Ruth G. 2005. "Why (Most) Kinds are not Classes." P. 106–120 in *Language: A Biological Model*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sperber, Dan. 1996. *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Vitebsky, Piers. 1993. *Dialogues with the Dead: The Discussion of Mortality among the Sora of Eastern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SUMMARY

Beings with whom other people interact, but whose actual existence I as a scholar do not recognize, present challenges of terminology in the case of both interpretation and analysis. This short article reflects on these difficulties by focusing on a very specific case: the beings known as *devs* with whom *adivasi* (indigenous) people in eastern Gujarat, India, interact. It recognizes the obvious: that words such as god and spirit can be useful but also have their drawbacks. Given sufficient time,

the best interpretive procedure may well be to retain the local term, while recognizing that the local term may itself come with a local equivalent in the language the scholar employs (such as English or Norwegian). The best analytical procedure is probably to abandon terms that are “clumps” constructed via associative networks – terms such as *dev*, god, and spirit – and seek a technical vocabulary consisting of kinds and classes instead.

KEYWORDS: adivasi; class; clump; dev; god; kind; Rathva; spirit