One of the most radical transformations of the monastic ideal in South Asia is to be found among the householder Naths of Rajasthan. The householder Naths preserve an identity as yogis and lay claim to the traditions and lore of legendary Nath ascetics, but in fact exist as an hereditary caste. The householders continue to interact with the ascetics, and individuals on both sides play across the boundaries between the two. At one time sharing a more solidary identity as a community, the two groups have diverged in the twentieth century, presenting different models of the alternative religious ideals that Nath tradition has long offered Hindu society.

While the settled life characteristic of Western Christian monasticism finds parallels in Hindu tradition, it is not the norm. Hinduism features instead the ideal of the homeless, wandering ascetic, aloof from all other ascetics as well as from the larger society. This ideal derives from the classical Hindu concept of world renunciation, sannyāsa, which prescribes the abandonment of all social relationships to prepare for final release. In reality, of course, the radical ascetic ideal reaches various accommodations with the practical necessity of social intercourse. These can range from the temporary groups of ascetics frequently found congregating at pilgrimage places to the Shaivite monasteries tracing their origins to the great Shankara — a closer parallel to the Western cenobitic model. Many South Asian traditions, further, develop distinct monastic and lay branches, with lay disciples ideally supporting renunciates who are supposed to meditate and teach. This paper will examine one of the most radical transformations of the renunciate’s ideal: the evident, if incomplete, laicization of an ascetic tradition itself and its reintegration into Hindu society as a caste.

Those belonging to the Nath caste in rural Rajasthan do not see themselves as laypeople supporting renunciates, but instead maintain their own identity as
yogis — although this identity differs in theory and practice from that of Nath ascetics. I will focus here on the relationships between the householder Naths and the continuing ascetic lineages, examining the practices each group preserves, the interaction between the two, and the ways in which individuals on both sides play across the boundaries. In mediating their ascetic style with their domestic lives, the householder Naths reveal shifting, liminal identities within Hindu tradition — which, like the intercommunally shifting identities explored by Mayaram (1996) and Khan (1997) in rural Rajasthan, are tested severely by contemporary socio-religious categories: “Hindu,” “Muslim,” “householder,” “ascetic.” Yet even as they adapt to standardized categories, ascetic Naths as well as householders are able to maintain their identities by presenting alternative versions of established religious norms.

Contemporary Naths look to legendary forbears who may have lived as early as the eleventh century. By the fourteenth century, legends and esoteric jargon of the Naths seem to have been widely popular among peasant classes, who continue to sustain Nath lineages. These have thus differed from the more elite Hindu lineages flourishing among the higher castes, which trace a spiritual descent to one of the great teachers of Vedanta and transmit texts in Sanskrit. By contrast, Nath renunciates are drawn largely from peasant (and sometimes martial) groups and have left much of their literature in vernacular languages. Their salvational goal, moreover, has often been articulated as physical immortality, not an identity with the Vedantist’s Brahman. Emerging within a tradition that has never been part of the brahminic elite, the Nath castes that have developed — also known as castes of yogis or jogis — are nowhere considered among the highest in the Hindu hierarchy. Indeed, where many caste members regularly earn a livelihood by public performance of traditional lore — as in much of U.P. — their status is often fairly low, like that of most traditional performers. However, where Naths have traditionally been patronized by kings, as in Rajasthan and Nepal, their place has been higher. The present paper will draw primarily on research conducted in 1993 in east-central Rajasthan, where Nath householders are farmers of their own land and mix freely with middle peasant castes.

Both theoretically and practically, the relationship between ascetic Nath yogis and the Nath caste is complex — ostensibly distant, but often mutually supportive, and moving in parallel ways as they approach the twenty-first century. While traditions of yoga in general do not necessarily enjoin renunciation of family life, in fact they often do. For yogic practices — including concentration on the centers of the body and the repetition of psychically-charged syllables — are thought to give power in this world as well as others; and since the pleasures of the world can be especially tempting when one has powers within it, yogis focused on long-term salvational goals are frequently instructed to abandon worldly life. Some yogic traditions, on the other hand — often referred to as tantric — keep
an eye on salvation but also cultivate powers useful in this world; and living in
the world traditionally entails family life. Nath traditions are part of this larger
tantric milieu and are thus able to embrace both renouncers and family men. As
sadhus, “spiritual practitioners,” Naths may wear special dress identifying them as
renouncers, maintain relationships with their teachers and others in their lineage,
and keep aloof from society, thus presenting a Hindu version of a monastic type
recognizable across cultures. As householders marrying among themselves, they
emerge as a Hindu caste among others in Indian society.

Veronique Bouillier, discussing the Naths of Nepal, argues that their symbolic
value for kings derived in part from their capacity to combine traits characteristic
of both renouncers and householders. On the one hand, like pure renouncers and
brahmins, they may serve a high Hindu god like Shiva, who can appear as an
emblem of state. On the other, as coarser householder-magicians, they were able
to purvey the earthy, powerful magic to which kings wanted access both actual
and visible. In Nepal, where the Naths have been aligned with a dynasty that
is still powerful, Nath householders and sadhus still seem conceived as a single
community. The two have more visibly diverged in Rajasthan — where princes
have not always patronized Naths, and those that did found their power drastically
diminished through British rule and independence. As the groups continue to
diverge in the twentieth century, I will finally argue, they present different models
of the alternative religious images long offered in Nath tradition. First, however,
I will present the continuities between the two groups and their patterns of
interaction.

Continuities: Shrine and Land; Sound and Seed

Members of the Nath caste in Rajasthan regularly tell stories of their descent
from Nath sadhus. These legends reflect not only an historical reality, but also the
householder’s view of their continuing relationship with the sadhus. As an example
of local legend, the tale of the Naths of Dhamnia, in Bhilvara district, presents
a clear continuity between sadhus and householders, describing an imperfect but
revered ascetic whose disciple becomes a powerful married yogi. At the same time,
it also presents the evolution of householders from sadhus as a moral and material
decline, with disobedient sons and rival brothers receiving powerful curses that
doom them to a less than fortunate fate.

Unlike most villages in east-central Rajasthan, which are likely to have at
most just a few Nath families, Dhamnia has a large Nath population, about a third
of the total. This substantial Nath population is a result of the village’s origins
as a settlement around a Nath yogi’s shrine. Located under a fruit tree locally
known as dhāman, the site of the shrine has provided a name for the village.
A copper plate inscription still preserved in Dhamnia tells us that in the samvat
NATH YOGIS AS ESTABLISHED ALTERNATIVES

Maharana Raimal Singh gave land for the shrine to one Sarvan Nath. Sarvan Nath, they say, attracted some lay followers from specific herding and agricultural castes,\(^\text{11}\) as well as the martial Rajputs and the Darogas who traditionally served them. These settled near the shrine and, together with the Naths, form the core of the Dhamnia population today.

Remaining a celibate yogi, Sarvan Nath initiated a lineage of sadhus who became active in the area. His most famous disciple, Megh Nath, is remembered as having trouble speaking: he “gave his tongue to Shiva five times,” they say, and became dumb.\(^\text{12}\) But this handicap may have added to his stature as a sadhu, for he founded his own shrine not far away, received some land to support it, and then went off to live in the village of Kheriya.\(^\text{13}\) At Kheriya, Megh Nath's disciple Shital Nath prospered, using his magical powers effectively in the physical world. He had three hundred fifty cows, they say, which went out to graze and came back by themselves; a gold coin emerged from the fire that, according to yogic custom, he regularly kept lit. To complete his earthly prosperity Shital Nath wanted a wife, and found one in the disciple of another ascetic sadhu from a village in the region. The two eventually had three sons together, the origins of Dhamnia's Naths.

Shital Nath’s life of domesticity, however, may have changed the way people looked at him; in any event, the circle of his magically charmed life was broken. Shital Nath’s cows were stolen — taken by nine Minas, members of a tribal group now well settled as agriculturists and prominent among Naths’ devotees, but depicted as wilder then. The Minas began to shoot arrows at Shital Nath; the cows reacted by goring the Minas to death. But before they were done, one arrow hit Shital Nath in the back of the neck. Shital Nath, seeing blood, realized that it was time for his final samādhi and decided to take it right then and there. He told his sons to graze his cows, milk them, and offer milk to sadhus visiting the site of his samādhi; if any of the sons wanted to take over the shrine, he could. Shital Nath’s sons, however, did not respond, and their father became enraged. He told the cows to leave: “go graze, cows! multiply!” Then he cursed the children: “you and your descendants will not have more than twenty or twenty-one cows each!” So of all the hundred Nath houses in Dhamnia, we are told, none has more than 20 cows. But this was not the last curse to befall Dhamnia’s Naths.

Shital Nath’s three sons, shaken, went to Dhamnia, where the Nath shrine was empty. One of them, however, was killed by a Rajput there, and the other two returned to Kheriya. But representatives of the non-Rajput castes of the village went to bring back the older brother, who returned to Dhamnia as mahant, the priest in charge of the shrine. This caused a rift between the brothers, and the younger, angry, didn’t talk to the elder for twelve years. When he eventually did, it was with a curse: “look, a Dhamnia Rajput killed your brother, why did you come back here? Since you came back and left me, your line will continue in only one
This story, told by a widowed Nath elder at Dhamnia, presents the emergence of the Nath caste community as a kind of fall — but not an immediate or even necessary one. Shital Nath, the first in the lineage to marry, had magical powers as well as a wife. Indeed, a family is seen as a natural complement to the wealth that his powers brought him. Yet Shital Nath’s worldly life is also seen as weakening him, or at least making him seem all too human, his wealth open to plunder. The main human failing of his that is highlighted in the story — anger resulting in a curse — is typical of ascetics generally; but it is here exacerbated by family passions. His younger son’s curse, also powerful and motivated by family passions, seems to be instigated in part as well by political intrigue. Although we do not hear the reason for the murder of one of the brothers by a local Rajput, it is reasonable to think that political rivalries were involved: the Rajputs were the traditional overlords of the area. Since Naths were sought out by rulers and would-be rulers wanting to take advantage of their supernatural powers, they frequently became aligned with particular parties and drawn into political life. Thus, the fall of the Naths of Dhamnia from the powerful yogis they once were to the ordinary householder-peasants most are today came about through an unfortunate interaction of magical power with the worldly passions of family and politics.

While magical power and worldly life are both crucial to householder Nath identity, they need not always come together in such a disastrous way. The image of a yogi like Shital Nath in his prime — the prosperous, married, householder-magician — remains an ideal in Nath imagination. It was an ideal, moreover, that could sometimes be realized. Householder Naths, at least in the earlier generations of a lineage, have frequently been seen as powerful yogis. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we have reports of Naths whose perceived supernatural power gave them influence in Rajput kingdoms. One family lineage came to particular prominence during the reign Jodhpur’s Raja Mansingh (1803-43), who relied on Nath gurus and employed their minions as enforcers and tax-collectors.

The worldly influence of the Naths, in turn, encouraged young men of other castes to take initiation as Nath sadhus. With many of these no doubt joining the ranks of Naths with less than the highest ascetic aims, some in turn are likely to have eventually taken wives, whose children were then born as Naths. This immediately pre-modern era, then, shows us a mixed community of ascetics and householders in Rajasthan: young men joining the order as sadhus and then perhaps marrying; children born in the order seen to inherit the yogis’ knowledge and power, but not necessarily an ascetic’s temperament.

With a heritage as a single mixed community, Nath householders and sadhus have long shared common marks of identity. The most striking of these in the eyes of villagers generally are observances of the body, both dead and alive.
Householder Naths in Rajasthan uniformly follow the sadhus’ custom of burying their dead — not burning them according to usual Hindu custom. Their funeral practices set the Naths apart in an emphatic way from the peasant castes with whom they otherwise mix freely. In addition, some householder Naths, like most sadhus, wear large earrings through holes cut through their cartilages — the characteristic mark of Nath yogis. Since the ear-cutting ritual is painful and leaves permanent results, it is not undergone by everyone, sadhu or householder. Nevertheless, householders are much less likely to undergo the ear-cutting than sadhus; and those that do, thereby make a statement about their status as yogis in community.

The traditional dress of householder Naths brings the sadhus’ style into the peasant world, presenting a standard that blends into the everyday village milieu but which can also be turned into a striking yogi’s uniform. The orange of the sadhus’ robes — universally emblematic of renunciation in South Asia — becomes the color of the householder’s tunic and turban, the normal Rajasthani peasant dress. Worn over a white dhoti (dhotis are always white), the tunic is often workaday and faded with washings; it then becomes a distinguishable caste dress and not much more. However, the tunic may also be cut long and dyed bright, and be worn with a full turban and a necklace of large rudrākṣa beads; it may thus reveal the householder in his yogi’s glory — not exactly a sadhu, but still a religious personage to be reckoned with. Individual householders dress up or down according to particular occasions and the roles they are called to play at them. And the one item of attire most crucial to Nath sectarian identity is the same for both householders and sadhus, and is regularly worn by both. This is a black string worn around the neck on which three items are hung: a rudrākṣa bead, said to symbolize Shiva; a ring, said to symbolize the Goddess; and a small whistle ideally fashioned from animal horn, said to symbolize divine sound. Sometimes itself referred to as a janeu, the term used for the sacred thread of twice-born Hindus, the string and the items hung on it are more often spoken of together as the sīngī nād, “the horned sound” — after the whistle. This name emphasizes the nād, divine sound, which yogis are said to hear in meditation and householders sing about in their esoteric hymns.

The concept of nād that is enshrined symbolically in the whistle worn by sadhus and householders alike reveals contrasts between the two groups as well as continuities — presenting earthly distinctions against some mystically conceived equivalencies. In North Indian religious lineages nād as an adjective becomes one of a pair of terms used to distinguish the normal modes of succession of sadhus from that of householders. Succession from guru to chosen disciple is frequently referred to as nād paramparā, “succession” (paramparā) through “sound” — a mantra or divine name given by the guru to the disciple. By contrast, hereditary succession is called alternatively bindu paramparā or bij paramparā. Both bindu
and bij by extension refer to semen, but both are also technical terms of yoga. Bij is a common word for “seed,” and as such can be used for certain basic, one-syllable mantras (bij mantras). Bindu is a word for “point” that in yoga can refer technically to a point of concentration in the body. Especially when reference is to bindu paramparā we can see a deep equivalence between the two kinds of succession. For in yoga bindu is sometimes paired with nād as a localized point at which yogis in meditation hear the eternal sound power of the universe. In this sense bindu indicates an experience of selfhood concentrated so densely that it implodes into the eternal substrate beyond the finite self. Bindu and nād are thus polar opposites that eventually converge. Used primarily to present a contrast, the terms also point to an ultimate continuity.

This continuity between bindu and nād, worldly density and the renunciate’s otherworldly identity, appears more evident among the Naths than in many other traditions using bindu and nād to mark types of succession. Most of these, more devotionally oriented, spurn the world and its pleasures in favor of life in an infinitely more pleasurable, divine realm. To be fit for this realm, sadhus — ideally immersed in divine bliss — are expected to keep absolutely pure. Given the Naths’ concern for physical immortality and power, the involvement of sadhus with women and royalty was more understandable and more forgivable. Certainly, Naths were ideally supposed to keep aloof from the world, but some lusty engagement with worldly temptations did not spell the end of their yogic careers. The best known of all Nath legends tells us how the great Matsyendra Nath had fallen under the spell of the queen of the realm of women (the epitome of woman and power!) and was then saved by his even greater disciple Gorakh. Even though Matsyendra had forgotten his ascetic identity, living comfortably and fathering sons, he remains a yogi, recognizes his disciple, and can awaken to his true state. Yogis could be powerful without being perfect. From this perspective, the lineage history at Dhamnia presents a series of recognized yogis of increasing degrees of imperfection: Megh Nath was revered despite his strange speech defect; Shital Nath’s cows kept magically returning from pasture even after he had ceased being a celibate sadhu; Shital Nath’s son, even if he hadn’t done much obvious asceticism and was married, still had enough evident power and authority for the Dhamnia peasants to want him at their shrine. While the householder Nath might not perfectly fit the yogi’s ideal, he could still be seen as a real yogi.

Yet at the same time, the sadhu’s and householder’s ways of life may diverge sharply, presenting different images of power and alternative ways of cultivating religious goals. Nath sadhus are depicted as attempting to achieve mastery over their bodies and the material world. Ideally, they do this through yogic askesis, although many today do not seem to engage rigorously in meditative practice. Some sadhus, when asked, will say that their practice is silence, or watching, or sitting. On more than one occasion questions about specific practices led to
mention of the Gorakh *danda*, a mechanical puzzle that was said to occupy the mind.\textsuperscript{25} About any specific mantras, magical practice, or methods of meditation they may have had, sadhus are generally quiet. Although sadhus living at shrines may function as regular shrine attendants, almost all stressed their independence from any other regular responsibilities. Their religious orientation seemed to be oriented less toward any religious practice — specific or otherwise — than toward the sadhu’s life itself: they stressed that they were living happily aloof from family and society; that they were free from worldly entanglements.\textsuperscript{26}

Householder Naths also often have shrines they attend in their own and neighboring villages, but they are not free. With families to support, they derive their income from mundane occupations, for the most part farming land that may have been gifted to a yogi of the past. They supplement this income through occupations peculiar to their caste: not only shrine work, but also sometimes reciting epics, frequently singing hymns, and the most prestigious — presiding over a funerary cult in which many from the peasant castes participate. They are also known for their magical skills, many offering cures for common children’s ailments and collectively able to help save their villages from disaster like locusts and hail.\textsuperscript{27}

With the emergence of the householder tradition, magical power becomes dispersed from weighty individuals to the local Nath community itself. In Dhamnia, villagers tell a story about a great past yogi of theirs who had power over hail,\textsuperscript{28} but for protection against hail today they turn to the village Naths collectively, as is usually the case among villages in the regions where Naths live. The Naths’ power over locusts, moreover, testifies to their intricate cooperation across villages. Naths did not claim to destroy locusts, but merely to send them to the borders of another village — where they might arrange with a Nath from that village (often at least distantly related) to send them even further. This claim was advantageous to the Naths as a group, leading prudent local rulers to attract Naths to their villages by granting them good farming acreage. The result was a landed, if thinly dispersed, community.

The transmission of powerful knowledge, too, is different among the householder. Not portrayed primarily as a boon from powerful guru to qualified disciple as it is in legends of Nath yogis, it is understood as an assimilation of the community’s traditions. Although householder Naths inherit the right to that knowledge, it nevertheless has to be learned. It can be received from one’s father if he knows it; if not, it can be learned from someone else. To master the epic songs, an apprenticeship with a trained singer is usually necessary. A repertoire of hymns is generally achieved by listening to no one formal guru but through regular participation in song-fests. To acquire mantras, Naths go to many different elders as temporary gurus, to whom they make offerings together with particular requests. Learning specific lore from each, they then practice the mantra — repeating it constantly for
a specified number of days or weeks — to make it effective. Emphasis thus is not placed on strong bonds between guru and disciple, as in the legend of Matsyendra Nath and Gorakh Nath, but on realizing the heritage of the community into which one has been born.

With their divergent religious emphases, the common identity of the sadhus’ succession through nād and the householder’s succession through bindu has become tenuous in east-central Rajasthan. Within internal religious experience, realizing the continuity between nād and bindu is understood to be difficult — the result of years of spiritual practice — but possible and blissful, an experience of polar opposites coming together. When the continuity remains in the external world of socioreligious reality it is much more stressful: nād and bindu remain poles apart, but now have no blissful divine conjunction. Moving between them may entail in one direction, abandonment of loyal family; and in the other (as the story of Dhamnia shows us) political intrigue or even murder. That movement, as we shall see, nevertheless continues to take place.

Interactions

The attitudes of sadhus and householders toward one another are not reciprocal. Householders, in general, like to identify with the sadhus, regarding them as exemplars of Nath tradition. The sadhus, on the other hand, tend to distance themselves from the householders, perceiving them as not real yogis like themselves. Nevertheless, the distant kinship sadhus often do feel with born Naths may lead them to act on their behalf; and householders may sometimes scorn the sadhus and point to the virtue in their own ways.

Contacts: Identity across the Divide

The easiest relationship between sadhus and householders is the least ambiguous one: that between urbanized middle-class householders and respected sadhus. Champa Nath, who through successful government service had penetrated the upper middle classes in Jodhpur, reminded me of many other middle-class Hindus I had met who liked to visit sadhus. The difference was that he was a born Nath, urbanized for two generations, and liked to visit sadhus from Nath tradition. He would visit them like other middle-class devotees, he said, but approaching them would say “ādes, ādes,” the common greeting used among themselves by Nath householders and sadhus in Rajasthan. He expressed a quiet pride when he added that the sadhu would then recognize who he was, and give him special attention. In this way Champa Nath could take pride in his heritage in a respectable middle-class fashion, while the sadhus, their ascetic self-image unthreatened, could afford to be benevolent to their distant spiritual kin.
When householder Naths try to make some spiritual claims themselves, however, sadhus are likely to be less gracious. Nathu Nath came from a village outside Kekri, a small district capital about halfway between Ajmer and Kota. Shankarai Nath, a sadhu with cut ears born outside the Nath caste, lived in a small shrine outside Kekri’s cremation ground. Nathu Nath, attracted to Shankarai Nath and the other sadhus who occasionally lived at his shrine, used to visit and serve him regularly. After twelve years, however, Nathu Nath said he stopped going “because he hadn’t got anything” from the sadhus. He was, nevertheless, ready to take me to meet them. They answered my questions about religious practice, but were politely unimpressed with a tape recording of a talented householder-Nath performer that Nathu had brought. On leaving, Nathu Nath seemed disgusted: “You heard them,” he said, referring to our conversation about practice, “they practice one mantra for twelve years. What do they know? If they had been born into a Nath house they would know lots of mantras!” The feeling was mutual. When I visited the shrine later alone, the Nath sadhus there emphasized that they saw the village Naths as very different from themselves. Certainly, their different ideas about the significance of mantras reveals a clear difference in religious attitudes between the two groups. Nevertheless, the fact that a householder was ready and able to play a disciple’s role to the sadhus for twelve years testifies to both his fascination and their tolerance.

The bond that Nath sadhus feel with householders acting like yogis becomes stronger when it comes to protecting Nath honor. When Shankarai Nath’s guru, Didar Nath, heard about a religious slight to two born Naths, he is said to have taken drastic action. Sukha Nath and Maingi Nath were householder Naths from Junia, a village near Kekri, who in their old age had taken to sadhus’ ways. At a neighboring village a yajña was being held — an occasional sacrifice performed according to Vedic models. When the two went to attend, the Vaishnava sadhu presiding treated them gruffly, so they left — which they presumed was the Vaishnava’s intention. Walking back to their village they met the sadhu Didar Nath on his way to the sacrifice. He was a fearsome sight: carrying the yogi’s trident, two human skulls, a goat’s head, and a drum. When they told him what happened he cursed and told them to come with him. When they got to the site of the sacrifice he put his trident on the ground as a stake and put the two human skulls on it. Starting his own fire, he began toasting the goat’s head over it. Then all the brahmin sadhus started yelling that he’d ruined the sacrifice, while the leaders of the sacrifice asked him to please take whatever offering he wanted and leave. But Didar Nath cursed them, adding “why didn’t you greet these two sadhus of mine respectfully?” When snakes then started coming up all over the sacrifice, we are told, Didar Nath was offered seven thousand rupees to go away. He stopped the snakes, took the money, and used it to get a watering place for travelers built at the spot. The vulgarity, touchiness, and magical aggressiveness displayed here by Didar Nath recalls many stories of...
legendary yogis told by Naths in the area. But here these qualities are evoked not through an affront to him personally, but to his community, which included born Naths with a mixed householder-sadhu identity.

Transformations Full and Partial: Householders who would be Sadhus and Marrying Mahants

The two old Naths protected by Didar’s magic were brothers who had lived full lives as householders; after their children were grown, however, they began to live as sadhus — leaving their families to wander about for long periods. Their way of renouncing resembles the classical Hindu model of renunciation as the last of the four āśramas, the final stage of life, but it was not identical to it. Since Sukha Nath and Maingi Nath were born in a community already identified as renunciates, they weren’t called upon formally to renounce their caste and kin. They instead remained householder-yogis as they had always been, if now more yogis than householders. Thus, brothers in family life, they could stay together in retirement, too. Moreover, when they got too old to wander easily, their children brought them back to live at the local shrine. There they were treated partly as sadhus, and partly as family men. Their sons, we hear, mixed with them familiarly, but their daughters and grandchildren kept at a distance.

Younger householder Naths wanting to live out aspects of their renouncer’s identity have a number of options available — the most common of which is open particularly to those with talent as singers or good knowledge of a repertoire of hymns. Throughout Rajasthan and much of North India, people regularly hold all-night song-fests — as part of a family ritual, to fulfill a vow, or sometimes, they say, for religious pleasure ("khushi"). Naths, specializing in a particular popular variety of hymns called nirgun bhajans, are welcome at many of these and will be fed, sometimes for several days, and offered small gifts. Good performers are especially sought after and might be offered more substantial gifts of cash. Most Naths have some knowledge of the local repertoire and participate in song-fests in nearby villages, sometimes staying away from home for several days. Many Naths talk about leaving home for weeks at a time, moving from one song-fest to another, and maybe coming home with some money. Others report traveling further, and sometimes not returning for months. For only a few sought-after singers is participation in far-flung song-fests a substantial source of income. Most others go to foster a cherished aspect of their identity: they like being able to live freely for a while, like sadhus, devoting themselves to devotional singing and religious talk.

A few householder Naths in the area carried this kind of dual identity a step further. They have spent years away from home, during which time they have been known as sadhus; but then they returned to be with their families. Teja Nath, for
example, was married as a child, but his wife died and he didn’t want to marry again. He left home when he was sixteen without visiting again for three years. For a total of nine years he lived “as a sadhu, traveling alone and singing.” During this period, he says, he went to about eight song-fests a month. Eventually his family got him married again, and he has two young sons and two young daughters. He still goes out on long singing trips, and the year I met him was the first he had done farming himself.31

The pattern of leaving home for very long periods and returning may occasionally continue throughout married life. The most dramatic case of dual householder/renouncer identity I came across was Hazari Nath, “the kind of person,” I was told, “who will tell his wife he’s going to Kekri and then won’t come back for three years.” He in fact left home at four times in his married life for periods of a year or more.32 During his last absence he served as priest at a private shrine supported by a well-to-do member of a peasant caste.33 The reasons he gave for both leaving and coming back reflect the general personal conflicts inherent in householder Nath identity. Leaving home, he would say to himself “what do I need with all this worldly giving and taking?”; deciding to return he would think, “What if I die here? Who will take care of my children?” Couched in stock phrases often used to express renunciation and attachment, Hazari Nath’s self-questioning presents the householder Nath’s existential dilemma as a particular variation on a common Hindu theme — a familiar socio-religious refrain played in counterpoint. Although Hazari Nath is an exception among householder Naths, not the norm, his life story reveals both the ambivalence Naths feel about their place in the world and the latitude given to them by community members to express it. Indeed, Hazari Nath was well respected by other Naths in the area. They say he is “satisfied,” living like a sadhu at home and not asking for much from the world.

Some born Naths, finally, become transformed into sadhus in a more specific, lasting way. The practical occasion for this transformation is likely to arise with successorship to Nath shrines. Existing Nath shrines are known in the area as either gharbāri “householders” or nāga “belonging to ‘naked’ sadhus,” depending on whether they are passed down within families (through bindu paramparā) or from guru to disciple (through nād paramparā). While gurus at nāga shrines take disciples broadly from the peasant castes, making them Nath sadhus, they can also make sadhu disciples of born Naths — who, if they go to a renunciate guru at all, are likely to go to a Nath.

When a born Nath inherits a nāga shrine, his change in status from householder to sadhu is marked by a change in lineage. Like most large Hindu religious and caste groups, both sadhu and householder Naths are organized into specific sub-lineages. Frequently carrying the names of spiritual ancestors, they are treated among sadhus as reflecting a spiritual heritage and are proprietary to
certain shrines. Among householders the same lineages are treated as *gotras*, the Hindu subcastes that govern marriage relationships. Although functionally different, the lineages of sadhus and householders — with their overlapping names — are seen by the householders, at least, as equivalent. On inheriting a naga shrine, a born Nath formally changes his lineage from that of his biological family to that attached to the shrine. He thus formally detaches himself from his family group.

As householders can become sadhus, so can sadhus become householders, with Naths at *nāga* shrines sometimes marrying and having families — continuing today the historical process seen earlier at Dhamnia. In fact, this process of transformation is said to be increasingly common. Yet in the world, as we have seen, the movement from *nād* to *bindu* is messy, not sublime, and rivalries between factions aligned with householders and sadhus can keep particular situations ambiguous.

A professional genealogist of the Nath caste told us of the goings on at one shrine established in the recent past, now in its fourth generation. While the first two gurus were described as good sadhus, the third was something of a renegade. He abandoned the shrine, and the genealogist’s father together with another Nath had to bring him back. “But he kept a lot of whores” — women with disreputable histories with whom he took up in succession. One, we are told, he abandoned after the genealogist’s father insisted that “he’s a *nāga* and should leave this woman.”

The castes of all the women were specified as either Nath or Gosain, a group with a socio-religious role similar to the Naths, and with whom Naths marry in Western Rajasthan. Thus, at least according to caste criteria, the renegade sadhu’s children could be accepted into the householder Nath community without major difficulty. There were a son and a daughter, by different wives. The son married and was treated as a householder, but the daughter didn’t and adopted sadhus’ ways. When her father died, she became *mahant* as a sadhu, and, as is customary, gave a feast attended by both sadhus and householders. However, one group of householders from a neighboring village attempted to recognize the son as hereditary successor: they wanted to tie a turban around his head as one does with a householder instead of offering cloth to the daughter as one does to a sadhu. But the daughter, it seems, prevailed.

Although women *mahants* are unusual, they are not without precedent; more anomalous was the fact that the *mahant* was a family successor inheriting as a sadhu. The local political and economic considerations that led the sadhus to support her in spite of her gender and family heritage and the householders to intervene were not made clear in the narrative. We did hear, however, that the shrine had once been a palace given to the first sadhu there by an old Rajput woman, so it may well have been a prize worth fighting over.
Established Alternatives: Sadhus, Householders, and Contemporary Ways

While still recognizing enough commonality to interact with one another and sometimes come into conflict, over the last century householder and sadhu Naths have increasingly diverged. The divergence has been occasioned in good part by transformations among both that come under the general rubric of Sanskritization — a term first used in the 1950’s to describe the adoption by local vernacular traditions of high cultural norms found in Sanskrit texts. Considerable work over the intervening decades has shown the different complexities of this process, with the Naths adding a paradoxical turn characteristic of their tradition. Although from the larger civilizational standpoint Sanskritization appears incorporating and homogenizing, linking local traditions to a more standardized Hindu cultural sphere, for the Nath community itself the process has proved divisive, as different Sanskritic ideals for householders and renouncers increase the distance between the two sides of the community. The distinctions between Nath sadhus and householders, visible but still blurred in local peasant cultures, are given sharper definition as Sanskritic norms are taken seriously. In contemporary Hindu society, increased status for both householder and sadhu Naths comes with adherence to the Sanskritic models established separately for each.

This contemporary divisive Sanskritic model diverges from the norms of princely Rajasthan, which had provided elite models more conducive to the life of a married sadhu. When Naths achieved positions of wealth and power in pre-modern times, it was generally through active association with princes; and in adopting elite ways Naths turned to princely ideals. These did not emphasize the virtues of restraint and self-containment prescribed for the sage in Sanskrit texts, long the norm for sadhus and normally so today. They were instead eminently outgoing and expressive: wealth was to be acquired and distributed; life-forces should flow. Men were given license not only to sexual activity, but also to impulsive action, particularly in the pursuit of honor. Thus, in 1841 Laxmi Nath of Jodhpur could take drastic action against a widow from his extended family, who contrary to princely norms, took another husband. A similar ethos no doubt also underlay Didar Nath’s decision, described above, to ruin the Vaishnava’s sacrifice because of a perceived slight to the Nath community: he too acted impulsively and severely when honor was threatened. The image cultivated by Naths was neither the pacific brahminic sage nor the respectable householder, but the fearsome, expressive warrior-sadhu.

With British rule and independence, the role of the Nath as warrior sadhu and princely protector has had little practical value. While the image of the fearsome yogi is still cultivated by some — and may even find new life with resurgent Hindu nationalism — it is today perceived sooner as a variant of the more familiar and pacific Hindu renunciate. Contemporary Nath sadhus, save for their earrings, may...
appear much like other Shaiva ascetics. They are likely, moreover, to identify with all-India institutions that situate them among other respectable monastic groups. At Shankarai Nath’s ashram in Kekri, for example, he and his sadhu disciple talked about the Nath ashram and wayfarers’ lodge established at Haridwar — a pilgrimage place important for Hindus generally, but not particularly highlighted in Nath tradition. They had books published by the ashram establishment — written in highly Sanskritized Hindi — that they claimed would tell me the whole story about Nath tradition. The disciple further was proud to show me a card issued by a government agency that identified him as a “registered sadhu.” Unlike his guru Didar Nath and the latter’s ambiguous householder/sadhu followers described above, Shankarai Nath and his disciple would have little reason to consider disrupting a local sacrifice, for they would no doubt be easily admitted.

Further afield, the large Nath monastery at Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh is a substantial establishment, its head recognized as a leader by almost all Nath sadhus in North India. Gorakhpur is also well known for the Gita Press, probably the most prolific publisher of popular Hindu religious books and magazines in the subcontinent. The institutions are separate, but their broad clientele overlap; and with lay people on a religious tour sometimes visiting both, their public ambiance thus tends to converge. The monastery, moreover, also has its own publishing operation putting out books in Hindi and English. These include, for example, “The Philosophy of Gorakh Nath,” written by a professor of Sanskrit in Gorakhpur and presenting the rough yogi of legend revealing doctrines similar to many classical Hindu sages.

At the same time that contemporary political structures have little place for the Nath as warrior sadhu, contemporary technologies have diminished the importance of Nath householder magicians. Understood to be a resource in times of peril to the community, Naths are still called upon to alleviate drought or prevent hail. Their main claim to fame, however, was banishing locusts, which can now be done through chemical means with more obvious effect. While many Naths still derive regular income from their maintenance of local shrines, few can derive a living from their religious work, and most farm their inherited land themselves. Living for the most part like other landed peasants, few these days feel a need to take earrings — which could also be a hindrance to the employment in towns and cities sometimes sought by Naths as by other villagers. Mixing and working with other middle-caste Hindus, Rajasthani householder Naths increasingly conform to familiar Hindu householder norms. This seems to be even more the case in parts of North India other than Rajasthan. Knowledgeable Naths from U.P. report that they are cremated there, not buried — still distinctive to Naths in Rajasthan. They suggest that this may be in part because of the large number of Muslims in U.P., who are regularly buried and include groups known as Jogis. In an era of increased religious tension, burial could confuse their communal identities.
Like other caste groups seeking their collective good, Naths and Jogis have organized into caste associations at state and national levels. Mahendra Nath of Delhi, the leader of the national caste association, pursues caste interests through the apparently contradictory strategies that are sometimes found among organizers of lower-ranked castes. On the one hand, seeking to make his community seem more respectable, he advocates closer conformity to standard Hindu householder norms: Naths who cut their ears should become sadhus, he says, and leave the householder life. Proper householders need to demarcate themselves from their sadhu counterparts. On the other hand, he seeks official recognition of the group as a "backward class" of "religious mendicants," entitling them to preferential treatment in university admission and government employment. Urban Rajasthani Naths I spoke with were not so enthusiastic about this latter idea. Still proud of their former princely association and inheriting some benefits from it, most did not feel that the economic advantages of being a "backward caste" would be worth its social stigma.

While not seeking a special status as "religious mendicants" many householder Naths in Rajasthan have a renewed sense of identity as a caste with a particular religious heritage. In east-central Rajasthan, several popular Nath religious leaders have arisen with wide followings among their own community. When talking to predominantly Nath audiences, they exhort them to take pride in their heritage. They are likely to do this, however, in a moral tone and Sanskrit language that recall the Gita Press tracts, not the rough traditions still found among some rural Nath sadhus. Thus, householder Naths, while still sometimes reverently interacting with the sadhus, have produced their own religious leadership that promotes a distinctive Nath style of middle-class Hindu piety.

While householder Naths continue to preserve their lore orally, printed texts of different sorts play increasingly important roles in the cultivation of Nath identity in the contemporary world. The popular religious tracts presenting legendary Naths as Hindu cultural heroes that are distributed widely in India can help city-dwelling Naths locate themselves within a broader Hindu world. In Delhi, the caste leader Mahendra Nath, told me stories of the great Maharashtrian Nath yogis that he had not heard in his U.P. village but had read about in books. In Rajasthan, ritual manuals distributed as pamphlets within regional Nath communities offer versions of important liturgical formulas including Hindi mantras for both everyday ritual and special liturgical events. Contributing to the standardization of those formulas as well as helping to preserve them, they are part of a publishing program by the Rajasthan caste association that includes a quarterly journal with articles on religious topics written by members of the community. Printed materials can thus help upwardly aspiring, literate Naths assimilate both the wider Indian and regional rural aspects of their tradition.
Despite their growing adoption of standardized Sanskritic norms, both sadhus and householders also cultivate something of the rough image of Naths of yore. Indeed, maintaining a distinctive Nath identity within a world of diverse Hindu communities entails preserving images of fierce magical power. Sadhus keep their earrings, and often a somewhat tougher visage than other Shaiva counterparts. Householders, established at Shaivite temples, landed and respectable, continue to do popular magic, sing songs of salvation, and preside over unusual death ceremonies. Moreover, the same individuals most revered as popular preachers among the householders are also said to be deeply involved in esoteric practices rumored to border the scandalous. Increasingly distinct in democratic India, householders and sadhus are in this sense similar: they both present alternative models of being religiously powerful in the world. Even while becoming established within conventional society, householders tell raucous stories; and sadhus present fierce visages that continue to startle their compatriots. Their very presence in their separate socio-religious spheres points to the limits of social conventions, suggesting spiritual possibilities beyond brahminic respectability and commonly received truths.

NOTES

1 On classical Indian traditions of renunciation see Olivelle (1992).
2 On Shaivite monasteries see Gross (1992, pp. 147-151) and Ghurye (1964, pp. 82-13).
3 The classic examples of this dynamic are non-Hindu: Theravada Buddhism — see Wijayaratna; and Jainism — see Carrithers (1991) on aspects of Jaina community. Parallels in the unorthodox Hinduized milieu in which the Naths moved can be found in some sant pathis; see Gold (1987, ch. 4) and Thiel-Horstmann (1986).
4 Vaudeville (1974, pp. 86-87) presents the scholarly opinions on the dates of the early Nath yogis in a larger discussion of early popular Nath tradition (pp. 81-89). Over the millenium, Naths have been found in diverse socio-religious milieux throughout North India. For documentation on a well-endowed monastery in the Punjab see Goswamy (1967). For a version of the continuing popular tradition in the Eastern Gangetic plains see Champion (1994). On the esotericism participated in by early Naths see White (1996), who deals with the textual traditions.
5 The fullest anthropological study of Hindu monastic lineages is Gross (1992).
6 But see Champion, p. 35, who talks about the Muslim Bhartrihari Jogis of Gorakhpur as ranking high among the Muslim peasant castes.
7 To locate more precisely the area of research, see the map in A. G. Gold (Gold 1988a), p. 23. The research methods included participant observation among the householder Naths in the area (numbering in the hundreds) as well as the analysis of taped narratives given by knowledgeable caste elders. For an extended reflection on my research methods among the Naths see D. Gold (1988b).
8 Bouillier (1986, pp. 162-63) clarifies the Naths' value to kings in technical ethnological terms: they could serve both the more "pure" vegetarian and "impure" non-vegetarian deities — usually served by separate classes of priests.
9 On the continuing dual nature of the Nath community in Nepal through the twentieth century see Bouillier (1994).
NATH YOGIS AS ESTABLISHED ALTERNATIVES

10 Probably the Grewa asiatica, called dhāmin (or phālsā) in Hindi and important for its fruit (Brandis, 1906, p. 98). I heard the fruit referred to loosely as jambu (more specifically “rose-apple”), with which it is also associated in Rajasthani verse (Lalas 1962-75, v. dhāman).

11 These included Gujars of Hadva and Baler gotra, as well as Jats.

12 Megh Nath was presented as an immediate disciple of Sarvan Nath, but the early date of the copper plate inscription suggests the possibility of some intervening generations.

13 The shrine is known as Jalandhari, to which, they say, was originally attached 51 bighas (about 25 acres) of land.

14 Interview with Chitor Nath, April 12, 1993.

15 For some well-known cases, see O’Flaherty (1975, pp. 94-96, 142, 293).


18 The funerary practices of Naths in Rajasthan are similar to those described by Bouillier in Nepal (1985, pp. 153-7).

19 See Gold (1996).

20 The thread and whistle are described by Briggs, pp. 11-12, who lists some common ceremonial occasions at which the whistle may be blown.

21 See the usage in Woodroffe’s text (1964, passim).

22 For the semantic ranges of bija, bindu, and nāḍā, see Feuerstein (1990, pp. 59, 60, 226-28). The Nada Bindu Upanishad (Shastri 1968, pp. 214-226), a short yogic treatise, presents concentration on sound (particularly the sound represented by the syllable “om”) as a path to liberation.

23 For some problems in the continuity between bindu and nāḍā in sant lineages, see Gold (1987, pp. 98-104); for an extended example see Gold (1988c, ch. 2).

24 For the story as told by a Rajasthani bard see A. G. Gold (1992a, pp. 279-287).

25 The Gorakha dāṇḍā consists of a rod strung through a series of intricately connected rings; one tries to get the rings on and off the rod. I would not be surprised if many yogis are aware of the obvious lingam-yoni symbolism here, although I have never heard it articulated.

26 This paragraph is based on interviews conducted in Pushkar and Bikaner districts in Winter 1987-1988 as well as on the 1993 research.


28 “We used to do the hail work, but not any more. There is a story: Manpuri, a Dhamnia Nath, had been disturbed in his samadhi by the villagers and so had himself buried sitting in yogic posture. People thought he was dead but he was actually still in samadhi. One day Pandit Champalal went from Dhamnia to Banaras and met Manpuri there. The two agreed that a miracle would be needed to prove to the villagers that Champalal had actually seen Manpuri there. ‘This will be the proof,’ said Manpuri to Champalal, ‘when hail falls, all the villagers’ crops will be destroyed, but yours won’t.’ He also told him a cure for snakebite. A few days after Champalal returned and told the villagers what had transpired, hail fell as predicted. So now, when the cold season comes, the people here take a collection for incense to ward off the hail; people from other villages do it too. The snakebite cure still works as well” — abridged from an interview with Maingi Nath of Dhamnia, April 12, 1993.

29 Shankarai Nath had been born a Daroga, traditionally royal servants roughly equivalent to the Naths in caste hierarchy.

30 For these aggressive qualities in legendary yogis see A.G. Gold (1992). The story of Didar Nath was told by Ugma Nath, a nephew of Sukha and Maingi.

31 Interview with Teja Nath, March 17, 1993.
Hazari Nath left home for three years when he was twenty-five; for two years when he was “about thirty or thirty-five”; for one year at age forty; and for three years at age sixty. Interview with Hazari Nath, summer 1993.

A seth mālī, “a merchant gardener.”

For the meaning of gotra within Hindu kinship terminology see, Inden and Nicholas (1977, pp. 4-5). In Rajasthan, householder Nath gotras include those of the well-known royal houses of Rajputs: Chauhan, Rathor, etc. For a comparison with gotras among Dasnami Sannyasis see Ghurye (1964, pp. 83-85).

A detailed example of this phenomenon is presented in Gold (1996), with the example of Mishri Nath.


The term was first used by Srinivas (1952) and developed at length by Singer (1972). Problems of Sanskritization are treated by a number of authors in the classic collection by Singer and Cohn (1968).


When I met him in 1980, Avaidya Nath, the Gorakhpur mahant, was distinguished by his small gold earrings, which indicated both wealth and a conservative, respectable style.

Banerjea (1961); for some notes on the monastery’s emphasis on Sanskrit norms, its publishing operation, and the involvement of its leaders in politics see Champion (1994: 36-37).

Interview with Mahendra Nath, Nath caste leader, Delhi, August 7, 1993; Mahendra Nath’s urban perception presents a contrast to the rural ambiguity that Champion (1994) still sees among rural Bhartrihari jogis.

The classic description of caste associations is Rudolph and Rudolph (1967, pp. 29-36).

These are described in Khan (1997), p. 131.

REFERENCES

Banerjea, Akshaya Kumar


Brandis, Dietrich K.C.I.E. (assisted by Indian Foresters)


Carrithers, Michael and Caroline Humphrey, eds.

CHAMPION, Catherine

FEUERSTEIN, Georg

GHURYE, G.S.

GOLD, Ann Grodzins

GOLD, Daniel

GOLD, Daniel and Ann Grodzins GOLD

GOSWAMY, B.N. and J.S. GREWAL

GROSS, Robert Lewis

INDEN, Ronald B. and Ralph W. NICHOLAS

KHAN, Dominique-Sila

KOLFF, Dirk H.A.

LALAS, Sitaram
MAYARAM, Shail

O’FLAHERTY, Wendy Doniger

OLIVELLE, Patrick

RUDOLPH, Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoeber RUỘLPH

RUDOLPH, Suzanne

SHASTRI, Pandit A. Mahadeva, B.A., ed.

SINGER, Milton

SINGER, Milton and Bernard S. COHN, eds.

SINGH, Zabar

SRINIVAS, Mysore N.
1952 Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India. London: Oxford University.

THIEL-HORSTMANN, M.

THIEL-HORSTMANN, Monika

TOD, Lieut.-Col. James

VAUDEVILLE, Charlotte

WHITE, David Gordon

WOODROFFE, Sir John