

Visualising Dossehra

The Display of Royalty and the Performance of Power in the princely state of Bonai in the 1930s

By Uwe Skoda, Institute of Ethnology, Free University of Berlin, Germany, e-mail: uskoda@gmx.net

first draft – please do not quote

Going through old photographs of present royal families in Orissa one usually finds typical family pictures – this or that king with his queen or queens, children and other relatives. Occasionally one also finds a few pictures of coronation ceremonies or wedding albums that illustrate the day's splendour and luxury, in addition to the status of the families involved. Very rarely does one come across pictures of ritual routine depicting annual festivals such as the Dossehra or Chait Parba and photographs that show not only the royal family, but also the local society.

I was fortunate to find such an album including 20 photographs from the former Bonai State in north-western Orissa – a rather smaller princely state bordering Jharkhand. In the following presentation I will try to reconstruct a piece of Bonai history by using an historico-anthropological approach – not only by contrasting the historical photographs with present-day events, but also through interviews with interlocutors in Bonai. Furthermore, I will argue that the pictures of Dossehra not only illustrate the life-style of a smaller princely state in the 1930s, but offer insights into the functioning of a little kingdom and the changes or processes of modernisation caused by various factors such as the British, progressive rulers etc. However, this endeavour is part of on-going research and a work-in-progress rather than a conclusive result.

What is shown: the pictures

Since the album is damaged, the order of the pictures cannot be reconstructed. Now it is a collection of loose photos on black paper. The photographs apparently cover a period of around a week – starting from Mahaastami immediately before Dossehra and end on Kumar Puni, the full moon after Dossehra – thus including the major ritual events surrounding Dossehra. In the following I have – as much as possible - ordered them chronologically.

The pictures themselves are undated, but show the Diwan of Bonai, who served in this position between 1934-1937, so the photographs must have been taken during this period. Otherwise, the photographer is unknown. Photography as a hobby seems to have been extremely rare and pictures were usually taken by professional photographers – for Orissa generally from Calcutta, such as Edda Lorenz. However, since no monogram of a particular photographer is left, it is unlikely that a studio photographer has taken those pictures.

I have tried to reconstruct the local society with the help of the present Raja (shown in the pictures as a child), two of his cousins as well as the descendants of others involved. Let us turn to the pictures:

Pic 1: Raja with Goddess Kant Kumari

List of Persons

No	Name / Title	Designation	Origin / Place of Birth
1	Raja Dharanidhar	King	
2	Gopinath Mishra	Raj-Purohit	Bonai
3	Bisambar Deo	Babu / Relative of the King	Bonai
4	Baya Barik (“Mad Sacrificer”)	Sacrificer	Bonai
5	Brushab Amat	Priest of Kant Kumari	Bonai
6		Eldest Son of Amat	Bonai
7		Kant Dehuri – Bhuyan Priest of Kant Kumari	Bonai
8	Jagmohan Mishra	Son of Raj-Purohit of Talcher	?
9	Dulhab Sahu	Servant	Bonai

Significantly, the Raja, if present, stands at the centre. This picture, like many others, is arranged in a Durbar-like fashion: less important persons are to be found at the periphery or in the second or third row of the photograph. The Raja is the only one wearing a “modern” and western black jacket. None of the recent immigrants and representatives of a modern state (see below) is shown in this traditional setting. Apparently, and given the black background, the picture was taken during evening or rather night time, which corresponds to the traditional schedule.

The photo was taken during an important ritual on Mahaastami, when the tribal deity Goddess Kant Kumari is handed over to the Raja. The deity has to be handed over to the Raja first, who then passes her to his own ritual specialist, the Amat. A delegation of Paudi Bhuyan or Hill Bhuyan, once a year, come to the palace in order to bring their deity, which stays in the palace or, more specifically, the armoury for a day before returning to her cave in the hills. Thus, the picture illustrates the loyalty of a major tribal community of the state and the divine bond and alliance between the “tribe” and their Raja.

Pic2: Group of Paudi Bhuyan (Contrast: photo Paudi Bhuyan today)

This is most likely a group of Paudi Bhuyan who, according to the present king, used to come to the Raja to take darshan – i.e. in order to see the king. The group has probably joined the Kant Dehuri to bring the Devi to the Raja. They have also been photographed in front of the Rajmahal. In terms of clothing, sitting position, and apparently wealth, they form a sharp contrast to the following pictures of the Bonai “modern” and “semi-urban” society.

Pic 3: Group Picture on the day of Dossehra?

List of Persons:

No.	Name / Titel	Designation	Education	Origin / Place of Birth
1	Diwan Rai Bahadur Chunilal Roy	Diwan (retired Excise Commissioner Bihar and Orissa)		Bengal
2	Niramani Acharya	Chief Medical Officer	MBBS	
3	Abdul Halim	Head of Police (retired Bihar and Orissa Police Officer)		Cuttack
4	Kadamba Keshari Deo	Tikayat		
5	Radesh Mukherjee	Private Secretary of the Raja	MA/BL	Calcutta / Bengal
6	Ram Chandra	Servant		Bonai
7	Gulam Farid	Driver / Mechanic		Punjab

8	Dukhishyam Das	Compounder		Cuttack
9	Charan Das	Assist. Medical Officer		Cuttack
10	Harilal Bose	Jailor		Calcutta
11	Rama Ballhoba Mohanti Kirani	Dwari / Gatekeeper		Bonai
12	Narayan Nanda	School Inspector		Cuttack
13	Gatu	Son of a Servant		Bonai
14	Gopinath Das	Headmaster		Cuttack
15	Nadia Mohanty			
16	Brundaban Tripathy	Assist. Headmaster / Second Teacher		Dhenkanal
17		Son of the Diwan		
18		Son of the Chief Medical Officer		
19		Chakria / Service-Holders		
20		Chakria / Service-Holders		
21		Chakria / Service-Holders		
22	Badhu Miar			Cuttack

This time the picture is centred on the Diwan. The Raja is absent – interestingly there is no picture showing the Diwan and the Raja together -, but the Raja’s heir apparent is present at the centre as well. Apart from one Christian (no.13) one finds a number of Muslims in prominent positions (no.3, 7, 22). Going by the names and information of my interlocutors the majority of service holders (notably no. 8, 9, 12, 14, 15 etc.) are Brahmins.

Pic 4: Gathering in front of the main gate (Singh Dwar) of the palace on the day of Dossehra

- 1 Havildar
- 2 Constables
- 3 Musicians – probably of Dom caste with drums and muhuri
- 4 Paiks / Foot soldiers – Gond and Bhuyan

- 5 Low caste people belonging to the Dom, Ghasi or Kol communities, who used to anoint their bodies with ash in order to celebrate (for “khusi”) and received from the Raja small amounts of money
- 6 Royal elephants (Indra Prasad, Laxmi Prasad and Radha Priya) – Indra Prasad, a tusker, was usually reserved for the Raja’s eldest son or Tikayat, while the other elephants carried the relatives of the Raja and the Zamindar as well as the two Jagirdars.

This picture must have been taken before the procession to the Dossehra field. The Paiks of the Bhuyan Zamindar as well as the two Gond Jagirdars had to be present during this occasion, which was also traditionally a show of strength. The Zamindar and the two Jagirdars, who had to also be present and usually arrived on horses, do not figure in any picture at all. From the palace, the Patkhanda, the main sword, would be carried to the Dossehra Pada and returned to the Palace, before the King came out. He himself did not use any of the elephants on which the relatives of the king and the Zamindar and Jagirdars were carried, but a silver palaquin and was carried by eight tribals belonging to the Munda community.

2 Pics added – not belonging to the album – the Raja in a procession – undated with his sword, family priests as well as bards (Bhat)

Pic 5: The Raja opens the shooting competition

- 1 Raja
- 2 Head of Police
- 3 Bansi Senapati – “Pet Servant” of the Raja – Mali
- 4 Servants
- 5 Singhababu – dist. relative of the Raja

This photograph shows the Raja in a typical royal sujet: the Raja as “warrior” – probably shooting birds. The present Raja and others informed me, that in Bonai archery was particularly popular and famous during Dossehra, but there is no picture of anyone with bow and arrow.

Pic 6: The Raja and the local “high society” in front of a shooting stall

No	Name / Title	Designation	Origin / Place of Birth
1	Raja Dharanidhar		
2	Brajar Sundar Deo	Babu / Relative of the King	Bonai
3	Jankinath Gosh	Forest Officer	Bengal
4	Abdul Halim	Head of Police	Cuttack
5	Bhola Nath Saha Deo	Babu / Relative of the King Magistrate	Bonai
6	Badu Saman (Badu Babu)	Sub-Inspector of Police (later Head of Police)	Cuttack
7		Havildar	
8	Jagmohan Mishra	Son of the Rajpurohit of the Talcher Raja	
9	Gukam Farid	Driver	
10	Bansi Senapati	Servant	Bonai
11	Lal Pratap Rudra Deo	Babu / Relative of the King	
12	Ghasi Keunt	Servant	
13		Police Constables	
14	Braja Kishor Singh Deo	Babu / Relative of the King	

Here the Raja again stands at the centre surrounded by relatives, guests (no.8), higher service-holders and palace servants. It is not clear, where the pictures were taken – perhaps at the Dossehra field.

Having returned from the Dossehra field the Raja held a Durbar in front of his Durbar Hall, where certain Brahmins such as the Rajpurohit, the Diwan, and higher officers such as the Medical Officer and “Commoners” (Kansari etc.) used to bring gifts (nazrana) in the form of money or goods which were later distributed among the servants of the Raja. However, there is no picture of this event.

Pic 7: Tennis

- 1 Gato (Son of the Head Nursing Sister)
- 2 Nadia (Son of the Nazir / Service-holder in the Revenue Department of the Raja, responsible for rations, tents etc.)
- 3 Mr. Pattnaik (Overseer in the Public Work Department)
- 4 Bhim Sengupta / Bhim Babu (Assist. Forest Officer)
- 5 Charan Das (Assist. Medical Officer)

Pic 8: Running match

- 1 Bhim Babu (Assist. Forest Officer)
- 2 Basudev Munda (Driver of the Raja)

There are a number of photographs depicting sports activities such sack race, cabery, and the hurdle-race which probably took place at the Dossehra Padia or Dossehra field. Compared to the traditional Paik demonstrations, these seem to be a modern innovation perhaps under British influence. The photos invoke European ideas of physical education or “Körperertüchtigung”.



Pic 9: Theatre Performance at Dharanidhar Club

- 1 Badu Babu (Sub-Inspector of Police from Cuttack)
- 2 Ragunath Das / Sarangi (Yatra-Guru from Cuttack)
- 3 Harilal Bose (Jailor from Cuttack)
- 4 Charan Das (Assist. Medical Officer from Cuttack)
- 5 Sada Samal (Police Constable from Bonai)

Given the masquerade it is difficult to identify the actors of this play performed at the Dharanidhar Club. Significantly, in neither photo is a member of the royal family involved, even though they took part in sports activities. The photograph once again illustrates the dominance of the people from Cuttack, or the coastal belt of Brahmanic origin, as far as “modern” activities or “art” are concerned.

Pic 10: Ritual in front of the Ma Kumari Temple (Contrast: the Raja today during the same ritual)


- 1 Raja Dharanidhar
- 2 Bisambar Deo (Babu / Relative of the King)
- 3 Bansi Senapati (“Pet Servant” of the King)
- 4 Servants

On the full moon after Dassehra the tutelary deity or ishta debi of the royal family, Ma Kumari – supposedly a sister of Kant Kumari -, is worshiped in her temple. Next to the temple a special seat (asan) has been erected for the Raja, which is, however, not his throne (gaddi). Sitting on a carpet on this seat he keeps a box in the form of a book in which the Raja used to store Pan, cigarettes, a note book, pencil, glasses, cash, paper and the royal seal. Just behind the Raja his favourite servant, his “Pet Servant” – the influential Bansi Senapati, is standing and, interestingly, holding a camera – perhaps as a status symbol for the king. Again newcomers from the coastal belt or Bengal do not figure in this picture.


Dassehra and the local society of Bonai as represented in the photographs

What one finds in these pictures is a combination of actually two societies or elements of societies: an apparently traditional society and a modern one. On one hand there are photographs of rituals around Dassehra, in which the Raja is shown with or next to two major deities of Bonai –surrounded by traditional functionaries – relatives, priests, servants as well as subjects. Long-term relations loyalties are affirmed to the ruler blessed by the deities.

On the other hand, however, there are several photographs including a new elite of Bonai: the Chief Medical Officer, the Head of Police, and the Forest Officer etc. – all hired on a short-term basis. For the new, modern bureaucracy a prominent place is reserved in these photos. It also seems that Raja Dharanidhar, to whom more or less all modern innovations in Bonai such as the hospital, the jail, the club-house etc. are ascribed, intentionally wanted to convey the picture of a modern state and of an effective ruler.

Having been involved in a murder case Raja Dharanidhar had to undergo training under the British in Ranchi for several years and became familiar with a British run administration. Returning from Ranchi in 1913 he started to modernise Bonai by opening an ME  hool in

1913, constructing the new Jail and the Court in 1918 as well as a Girls High School in 1926. In the same year he not only establish the Dharanidhar Club named after him, but had completed the construction of 26 Primary Schools – each having at least one teacher from Cuttack or Puri. These pictures do not just document, but are a deliberate attempt to represent a modern state with an enlightened ruler. They also show a quest for modernity. Apparently Raja Dharanidhar did not only invite qualified personal from the coastal belt or Bengal to run the state, but also wanted to illustrate it with these photos.

The pictures exemplify the sharp contrasts of the local traditional and modern society as they must have been expressed und Dossehra. Paudi Bhuyan from the hills visited the palace and their Raja and must have come across the rather new administration and rather alien administrators, who had apparently little interest in local cults and culture. As Bailey¹ observed:

“... absolute rulers often prefer to recruit aliens for their administration. Outsiders are more amenable to the Raja’s discipline. Their security is entirely in his hands since they have no backing in the country. They are unlikely to carve out for themselves positions from which they may challenge the Raja’s authority, as a local man might be able to do. They can be dismissed at will, and the people of the country remain indifferent to their fate, or may be glad that they have gone. Finally, aliens shield the ruler from unpopularity. They are scapegoats when things go wrong and the blame falls not on the ruler, but on those who advise him, or who fail to carry out his orders and intentions, or who misinform him about the true state of things.” (Bailey 1963: 176)

Thus, one can recognise an alien element transplanted into the local society – the Bengali or coastal belt society, often subsumed under the prerogative and abusive term “Kataki” / “Katki” as derived from Cuttack, the place of birth of most of the new administrators – although in retrospective the category “Katki” could be assigned to almost all administrators coming from outside Bonai (a notable exception is Punjab). Thus, around 1935 in Bonai itself there is no qualified middle class – apart from the recent immigrants represented in photographs.

However, it is likely that the photographs were taken keeping a third actor in mind – the British. Not only the life style, the kind of modernity so much sought after in the pictures, e.g. by playing tennis or by dress material such as the Raja’s black jacket, is more British than

“Katki”. Moreover I would argue that the selection of photos itself was not coincidental, but respect to the British overlords.

What is not shown in the pictures?

Significantly, important parts of the Dossehra festival have not been included in the album. While great importance has been attached to sports activities, theatre performances etc. the traditional hierarchy other than the royal family, i.e. the only Zamindar of Bonai, a Bhuyan as well as the two Jagirdars, two Gonds, do not appear in photographs at all, even though their presence would have been essential during the procession to the Dossehra field. The Paiks are documented, but not their immediate overlords or rather little kings in relation to the Bonai Raja. Perhaps the Raja did not want to assign any importance to them. In fact, there is a custom in Bonai that during his coronation the Raja sits on the lap of the Bhuyan Zamindar known as Samanto, the most powerful tribal chief. Besides, the Raja had to get from his chair or gaddi once the Samanto approaches the Raja. Thus the relation between Raja and Zamindar is ambiguous in several ways. Additionally in the early 1930s there was a prolonged legal battle regarding forest rights between the Raja and his administration, notably the Diwan, on one hand and one of the two Gond Jagirdars. In such a situation the Raja certainly had no interest in revalorizing one of his Jagirdars. Thus, apart from the Raja the traditional elite of Bonai are more or less absent. The photographs, therefore, also seem to speak of inherent tension in the traditional rank system.

Furthermore, during my anthropological research in Bonai I came across various forms of symbolic human sacrifices around Dossehra. On the day of Vijaydossemi a special ritual used to be performed in the palace in the presence of the Raja, his Rajpurohits and other Brahmins as well as the Jagirdars and Zamindar. Two people known as Ankulia² and Baktaria would sit in front of the king clad in yellow cloths with a yellow turban. They would each hold a big battle axe. The royal priests would go to the Jagannath temple to bring the royal sword (patkhanda), which was held on the necks of both. Ankulia, a Kansari, and Baktaria, a Bhuyan, had already been garlanded with hibiscus flowers – an indicator of the intended sacrifice. After the ritual both had to leave not only the palace, but Bonaigarh for a day, before they would be allowed to return. Only after they had left would the Raja proceed to the Dossehra field to watch the archery and other competitions. These rituals were discontinued about 20 years ago.

¹ F.G. Bailey, “Politics and Social Change. Orissa in 1959”, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, p.176

Apart from those two sacrifices certain people were obliged to offer pumpkins to goddesses, which were hidden under clothes. The gourd which the Dandapat, one of the two tribal Jagirdars, had given as 'bethi' was given as sacrifice for Mahana Khanda the same night, i.e. on Vijaydossomi. Mahana Khanda was another sword inside the palace which was taken out only during the coronation of a new Raja and was associated with Goddess Durga. Another pumpkin would be given by Paudi Bhuyan – or a person among them known as Bandiria – and is said to have been sacrificed for Kant Kumari.

Not only the symbolic human sacrifices, but also the blood offered to Kant Kumari in the armoury (khandaghar) – 16 pots of blood, in which the deity used to be kept for a night – are not documented. One may speculate that those rituals took place either inside the buildings or during night time and therefore – due to the technical equipment – such parts were not included. However, it is quite clear that the first picture shown, the Raja holding Goddess Kant Kumari after she had been handed over to him, was taken during night time – according to the traditional and present schedule. Thus technical limitations were apparently not the reason for the selection of motives. Rather the British influence and the campaigns against human sacrifices as embodied in the Meriah Agency in Orissa seems to be the real reason for hiding these rituals.

Dossehra and the two levels of rule

Taking into consideration what on one hand has been consciously visualised in the Dossehra album, and thus canonised as well memorised, and what on the other hand has been ignored and purposely left out, one can recognise two planes of ruling – the traditional, "feudal" order and the modern, bureaucratic order. The former is manifested and displayed during Dossehra in various relations between the Raja and gods and goddesses and between the Raja, communities, and their representatives, i.e. the Raja and the Paudi Bhuyan, the Raja and the brahmanical priests etc. However, the photographs exclude the traditional rank order to a large extent and, thus, document, existing internal tensions. At the beginning of the 20th century, the latter order was installed in Bonai in a process of "modernisation". As the pictures document, the relatively new and alien administration remained largely separated from the traditional order and only the Raja bridged the gap between them – as divine ruler and head of state maintaining redistributive long-term relations as well as rather short-term market-like relationships respectively. Both ways of ruling apparently co-existed and did not necessarily conflict. However, in this representation, the Raja probably tried to hide

² Some derive the name from an = without and kulia from kul = caste and thus explain that the Ankulia was

traditional elements that were criticised by his overlords in favour of apparently more modern aspects, valued by the British.

considered as outside the caste system.