

# Related Beings

Cereals in  
transition

Peter Berger & René Cappers

Exhibition booklet



**FROBENIUS-INSTITUT**  
FÜR KULTURANTHROPOLOGISCHE  
FORSCHUNG



Photo: Elmer Spaargaren

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Photo: private

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## Acknowledgements

The exhibition “Related beings: Cereals in transition” has been inaugurated on 23rd of June 2023 as part of the annual ethnological summer symposium organized by the Frobenius Institute (FI). The idea of the exhibition was developed by Peter Berger and René Cappers when they were at the FI as Mercator visiting professors between March and June 2023. Next to these two, the team realizing the exhibition consisted of Marius Heimer (technical support), Jennifer Markwirth (layout) and Peter Steigerwald (digitization of the photo negatives and slides / production and mounting of the prints).

This exhibition booklet shows some of the photographs made by Peter Berger and René Cappers presented in the exhibition. The material exhibited in the showcase is not included here. However, we want to thank the Senckenberg Naturmuseum Frankfurt for generously providing the termite models and especially Hildegard Enting for making them.

## Related beings

### Cereals in transition

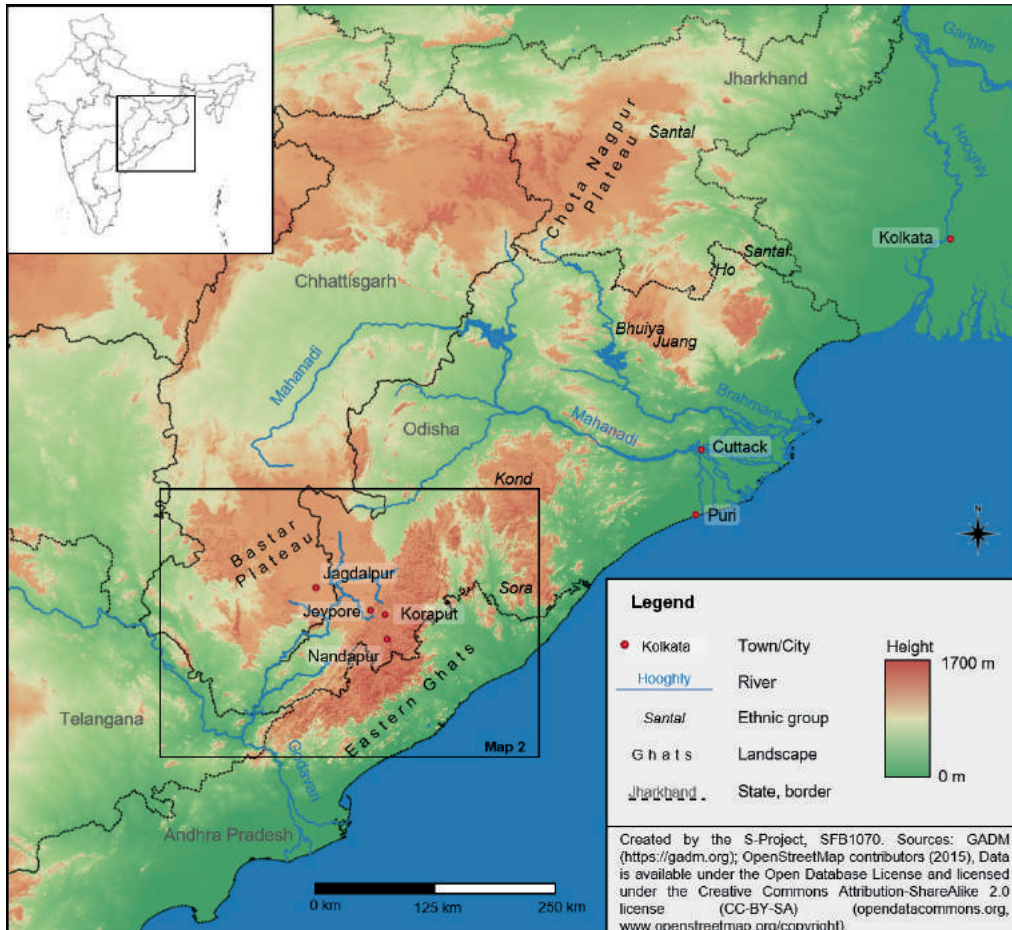
Cereals grow humans; termites cultivate fungi; a palm-tree nurses newborn human twins; an iron object becomes alive to ward off a sorcery attack; a female shaman (alias the earth goddess) uses her agricultural tools not for processing cereals, but to grind earth and pound dust; human blood is sprinkled over the soil and every kind of grain originates; termites evolve from cereals.

In their myths, rituals and agricultural practices, indigenous communities (Adivasi) inhabiting the highlands of Central India called the Eastern Ghats demonstrate the entanglement of a multitude of beings. Adivasi livelihoods based on the cultivation of rice and millets, especially finger millet, are currently the target of massive state interventions. Because of their nutritional properties, drought and disease resistance and low ecological footprint, millets have recently been discovered as the “smart food” for the future and 2023 has been declared as the UN International Year of Millets. Accordingly, state funded “Millet Missions” promote the cultivation, distribution and consumption of millets, also among the Indian urban middle classes.

As part of three international collaborative projects on “Cereal Cultures” (funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Dutch Research Council (NWO)) socio-cultural anthropologists and archaeobotanists

investigate these ongoing dynamics between local cultivation practices and worldviews in relation to the policy measures of NGOs and the state, also against the backdrop of shifts in cultivation practices in the past.

This exhibition highlights some aspects of these processes. The sub-title “Cereals in transition” refers to different dimensions of transformations. First, farmers have been choosing between different kinds of grain since the beginning of agriculture, favoring at a certain moment in history one cereal over another. The specific properties and affordances of cereals have often been crucial in this selection process, for instance, with regard to the amount of labor that needs to be invested. Second, the current policy measures introduce new crops, new technologies, new food products and thereby transform local practices. Finally, “Cereals in transition” refers to the local worldviews of interrelated beings mentioned above, in which humans, animals and plants potentially and situationally transform into one another, especially in the domains of myth and ritual. The fundamental activity in this process is sacrifice, as it is blood that is the major catalyst and agent of transformation. From the local point of view, sacrifice and agriculture are necessarily intertwined in the attempt to navigate the flow of life.



## Landscape of the plateau of the Eastern Ghats, about 900 meter above sea level



This is the setting in which myths, rituals and agricultural practices unfold. The village in the center of the photograph is nearly invisible, hidden behind mango, jackfruit and tamarind trees. It is bifurcated by a perennial river into which the paddy fields have been constructed in terraces. This ancient cultivation technique is characteristic of the region. Because of the water erosion of many years, one has to climb down to the low-lying paddy fields. Complementary to the paddy fields are the dry-fields, on the same level as the village, where especially finger millet is cultivated. The millet has already been harvested and has been stacked on wooden scaffolds just next to the threshing grounds. Still in (yellow) bloom are the niger-seed plants. The hills surrounding a village are variously covered with scrub, forest or (more recently, as on the right side of the photograph) with cashew plantations.

## Dry-fields and termites



On her way to the wet-rice fields, a woman is traversing the dry-fields on which finger millet is primarily grown. Between the fields, termite mounds emerge out of the ground. These animals are soil-transformers and cultivate a fungus that enables them to consume plant material. Local views do not consider termites as pests but associate them with life and wealth.



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## Polishing finger millet

Polishing a meal-size quantity of grain of finger millet by pounding takes little time and energy.

## Preparation of local beer



A mixture of moist grain kernels of finger millet and rice germinate by which starch is converted into glucose. This is the first step in beer making. The mixture is covered with a *siardi* leaf (*Bauhinia vahlii*) to prevent evaporation of water.



## Termites and finger millet: the “sky-wall” of the Nandi festival



The Joria community performs a festival that closely connects finger millet and termites. The mural referred to as “sky-wall” in the songs that are sung while creating it shows the sun and moon, stars and many feet generating paths, paths of the gods. The basket at the bottom of the mural contains two figurines made from the earth of a termite mound and termite eggs, resting on grains of finger millet. This deity is referred to as “Earth Beauty, Dust Beauty.”



© Peter Berger 2000 / source Frobenius-Institute

## Dancing the deity in the Nandi festival

In an endless procession, the goddess referred to as “Earth Beauty, Dust Beauty” is danced through the village. In a local myth, cereals originally came to the world of humans “dancing from village to village.”

## Humans-animals-stones-plants: transformations of the person



Parenga and Gadaba communities perform a final death ritual (called Go'ter or "tearing") that demonstrates the entanglement of beings in a very tangible way. The deceased temporarily come back to life in the body of water buffaloes that are dressed and equipped with all kinds of objects for the underworld. Stones that are erected and branches that are planted also represent the dead. Here, women feed and mourn their relatives.

## Final farewell



On the main day of the Go'ter festival, the buffalo-dead are led out of the village and tied to branches that have been erected in the dry-fields, where finger millet is mainly cultivated. Soon, some of the buffaloes are ritually killed in the fields and the others will be taken away to different villages. Now is the final moment for mourning and words of consolation.



© Peter Berger 1999 / source Frobenius-Institute

### **The river-soil deities (Kamni): The owners of the paddy fields and parents of rice**

Wet-rice fields are conceptualized by the Gadaba as affinal, that is, as in-laws. Accordingly, the whole rice cultivation process is considered as making suit for the bride (the rice). Before the harvest, the parents of the rice and the owners of the fields (represented as two mud figures) receive sacrificial offerings, just next to the paddy fields.



© Peter Berger 1999 / source Frobenius-Institute

## Sacrifice for the paddy

After threshing, the whole paddy harvest is piled up on the threshing ground and a sacrifice is performed. The low-lying paddy fields can be seen in the background; behind them, the dry-fields stretch up the hill.



© Peter Berger 1999 / source Frobenius-Institute

## The rice-bride

After performing a sacrifice on the threshing ground, the first basket of rice (called *joni tifni*) is ritually taken to the house. It represents a bride and stands pars-pro-toto for the whole harvest. *Tifni* is the name for the basket of this size; *joni* has multiple meanings: crop, yield and vagina.

## Rice-bride in the sacred room of the house



On the day of threshing the paddy, first the *joni tifni* is brought to the house and placed next to the sacred post in the inner room. The head of a piglet from the sacrifice for the owners of the rice fields (Kamni) has been placed on top of the basket. After the basket has reached the house, the whole harvest is brought into the small inner room.





## Consuming the rice-bride as sacrificial food

Months after the paddy harvest, in the context of the April festival, sacrificial food is cooked by the woman of the house in the inner room, from the rice brought into the house in the *joni tifni*. The consumption of this food reconstitutes the house community. In the context of life-cycle rituals, the feeding with this sacrificial food ritually transforms the person.



© Peter Berger 1999 / source Frobenius-Institute

### **Climbing up the *salap* tree (*Caryota urens*)**

This palm-tree is highly valued by all indigenous inhabitants of the region, as it provides juice that is considered as “milk of the earth goddess.” A branch is cut and the juice is collected in a pot suspended from the branch. When fermented, this beverage is mildly alcoholic. Here, a man is climbing the tree to harvest the juice.



© Peter Berger 1999 / source Frobenius-Institute

## Anti-sorcery ritual to ward off an attack against a palm-tree

Like human or animal bodies, houses and fields, also palm-trees can become the target of sorcery triggered though envy. Here, a local healer is performing an anti-sorcery ritual so that the juice of the tree is flowing again. Because it concerns liquid that comes out of the earth, the river-soil deities (Kamni) are addressed in this ritual, who are also considered as the owners of the paddy fields. The healer is performing an invocation, holding his ritual weapon (*jupan*, which is displayed in the showcase) in his right hand.

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