

A Secret in the Oxford Sense: Thieves and the Rhetoric of Mystification in Western India

ANASTASIA PILIAVSKY

King's College, Cambridge

It is a secret in the Oxford sense: you may tell it to only one person at a time.

———Oliver Franks (*Sunday Telegraph* 1977)

Common sense commodifies the secret, alienating the value of its content from its social context. But a secret perfectly kept dies in its circle of initiates. Few secrets, however, are dead on arrival, since their seduction lies precisely in their revelation. Most things said to be hidden are in fact nurtured through the processes of calculated concealment, allusion, and revelation, the secrets propagating themselves through circles of conspiracy, rumor, and gossip. As Tim Jenkins observed, “What is concealed, and the reasons for its concealment, serve to distract attention from the dynamic of the secret: what at first sight appears to be static and indeed dead, possessed by and known to only a few, kept in some dark place, in fact has a life and movement of its own; the secret propagates itself through a structure of secret and betrayal” (1999: 225–26).

Acknowledgments: Field and archival research for this essay, conducted between January 2005 and December 2008, was funded by the Rhodes Trust, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and subsidiary grants from the Richard Ellis Katz Fund, the Ada Draper Fund, the Oxford Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, and Wolfson College (Oxford). Special thanks is due Paul Dresch, who read multiple drafts of this essay, and to Filippo Osella, Crispin Bates, Roeland de Wilde, Jonathan Norton, Paul Gledhill, the participants of seminars at the Universities of Oxford, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Sussex, and the London School of Economics, three anonymous *CSSH* reviewers, and David Akin for their comments. My biggest and ever growing debt is to the Karmawat, Chhattapal, Sisodiya, Nat, and Singh families, whose generosity, patience, and good humor made my work in Rajasthan possible. Needless to say, responsibility for any shortcomings remains with me. Transcription and diacritical notation follows J. T. Platts’ *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (1884), replacing “ı” with “ch” for readability. I use pseudonyms for place and personal names throughout to preserve confidentiality.

The studied movement of disguise and disclosure of secrets is intrinsic to power (Canetti 1962) and, as Simmel (1906) and Goffman (1959) taught, is a primary process of social life. Secrets incite suspicion and intimacy, jealousy, schism, and trust. Their power lies not in their content, which often proves a disappointment upon revelation, but in the rhetoric of their mystification. Mystified knowledge—the secret—can be owned, flaunted before or withheld from others, exchanged for allegiance, or sold (through treason or blackmail). Gossip, then, is not merely witness to the weakness of chinwags who cannot keep a secret. And to dismiss the stuff of such conversations as the flotsam of boredom and fantasy is to ignore an entire domain of social production.

This essay is about the life of one secret in the circles of its relentless revelation. More specifically, it is about the rhetoric of secrecy surrounding a caste of professional thieves called Kanjars in a rural part of the western Indian province of Rajasthan. Much of my material consists of what I initially dismissed as “mere gossip,” but which eventually came to the fore of my understanding not only of the social location of the Kanjar community but also of some basic aspects of local society. In popular rhetoric, official narratives, and their own presentation of selves Kanjars are a secret people possessed of secret knowledge, a secret tongue, and magical powers. Secrecy surrounding Kanjars is a matter known and circulated in the open. Unlike “public secrets” that are “generally known but cannot be articulated” and that are protected by the silence of their keepers (Taussig 1999: 5; also Herzfeld 1987: 95–122; 2005), Kanjar secrets are enthusiastically articulated by bazaar gossips, policemen, and Kanjars alike. Much like “the *active milling, polishing, and promotion of the reputation of secrets*” described by Paul Johnson in a Brazilian context (2002: 3, his italics; following Simmel 1906: 486), the discourse of secrecy that surrounds Kanjars generates mystified knowledge that acts as a screen for the absent, the well-known, and the banal. Whereas the public secrecy described by Taussig protects content that ought to remain hidden, mystification that surrounds Kanjars creates secret content where there is none. And it is not *what* is concealed, but the fact *that* something is hidden that is significant. The process of talking about Kanjar secrets creates a hidden and, as I shall show, essential social domain. Secret spaces, relationships, activities, and people like Kanjars play a crucial part in the maintenance of polite and proper life on display, making the generation of secrets a central aspect of public life. While rhetorically excluded from proper society, in practice Kanjars occupy some of its innermost domains.

SECRETS REVEALED

A few years ago I was in Jaipur, Rajasthan’s capital, drinking midday whiskeys with some aristocratic Rajput families, people I like to visit periodically to keep myself abreast of current gossip. Our conversation drifted leisurely from polo ground drama to the new zinc factory inauguration party, the matrimonial

matches to be made with the Jodhpur Rathores (a high-ranking Rajput clan), and the recent kills by man-eating panthers on the border with the neighboring province of Madhya Pradesh. I brought up Kanjars, an “ex-criminal” community connected in the minds of many with illicit liquor production, prostitution, and petty theft.¹ At the time, I had come to frequent some Kanjars in a local slum. I mentioned to my Rajput acquaintances, rather cautiously, that I had heard that certain families in their midst maintained mutually beneficial relationships with “criminal castes,” and that I wondered if the present company could help me to learn more about Kanjars and other such groups. Expecting tacit suspicion at best, I held my breath, prepared to blame the midday heat and the spirits for the implied accusation of criminal involvement.

Instead of suspicion, my question was met with enthusiasm, and brought forth a host of stories about the bizarre beliefs and habits of Kanjars. My Rajput informants, eager to see me fill my notebooks with Kanjar “ethnography,” overwhelmed me with “secrets” of Kanjar life. With a raised brow and in a lowered voice one of my informants said that Kanjars have many secret practices, the details of which he proceeded to describe; from the training of wall-climbing lizards (used in house burglary) to bizarre wedding arrangements, blood-thirsty goddess worship involving human sacrifice, and ritual rooftop defecation, my company claimed to know it all. In the heat of the moment someone even suggested that there was little need for me to spend time among Kanjars because I could learn most of their secrets from the present party and other similarly “knowledgeable people,” of whom, as I came to realize, there was never a shortage.

Common account describes Kanjars as an external people—socially, morally, and categorically. Their indecency is not simply common knowledge; it is proverbial. Across northern India, for instance, one often hears parents say to ill-behaved children: *Kanjarō kī taraf mat karo!* (“Don’t act the Kanjar way!” or “Don’t do it like a Kanjar!”), and “Kanjar” used as a term of abuse akin to the English “bastard” or “whore.” People describe Kanjars as *gandhā* (literally, “dirty”), a term that refers to things vulgar, uncivil, and generally unsuitable for decent folk; the fact of a young “English girl” living in their midst provoked much disbelief and consternation in the area.² The exclusion of Kanjars from mainstream society is reified in the observable sphere of everyday life. Kanjars almost invariably live in settlements (*bastīs*)—never

¹ According to the last *Census of India Report*, there were, in 2001, 159,761 Kanjars resident in India and 37,971 in Rajasthan, where they are classified as a Scheduled Caste. Historically, Kanjars have practiced a variety of trades, ranging from dancing and singing to genealogy, prostitution, mercenary thievery, and watchman-ship. The majority of Kanjars in southern Rajasthan, where I conducted most of my field research, work as watchmen-cum-professional thieves.

² Such perceptions are not new. In the eighteenth century, Punjabi poet Waris Shah wrote, “Kanjars know not what love is. God’s curse on the casual light-o-loves. Touch them not” (1966: 79).

villages (*gāonis*) proper—that are separate from ordinary multi-caste villages or in slums on the outskirts of cities and towns, where they are engaged (both in repute and in deed) in all sorts of immoral, illicit, and illegal activities: distilling, drinking, and selling country liquor (*dārū*); stealing, selling, and eating goats and sheep; and prostitution.

The concept of a secret community—which links notions of power, secrecy, magic, and vice—has a long history in South Asian narratives, which warrants a brief note here. Ancient Indian literature (ranging from legal, statecraft, and liturgical texts to stories and epics) describes communities of peripatetic and jungle-dwelling peoples not only as socially, ritually, and morally set apart, or hidden, from ordinary society, but also as necessarily involved in thievery, understood as the art of disguises and the business of hidden possessors of secret knowledge and power.³ Respect and fear afforded to thieves in ancient writing has to do with their hidden nature, which has been cause for much fascinated elaboration in ancient narratives on the subcontinent. Much like my Rajput acquaintances in Jaipur, authors of texts about the secret thieving communities describe their hidden worlds in substantial detail, imagining them as hereditary trade guilds that are “banded, cartelized and organized groups, that live together” (Bloomfield 1926: 205). In various texts thieving communities are said to possess highly formalized sets of professional skills, wear distinctive clothing, and work under the auspices of their own deities.⁴ In short, the thieving communities of Brahmanical narrative have been imagined as castes like any other. Thieving, nevertheless, is a special business unlike pottery or the weaving of baskets. Contra Chris Bayly (1996) and Sandria Freitag (1998), who have argued that before the arrival of the British on the subcontinent theft was a legitimate part of South Asian politics, neither in ancient narratives nor in pre-colonial politics has thieving been treated as a plainly legitimate trade. In Brahmanical narratives, the hidden lairs of robbers are

³ The robbers of Brahmanical narratives dwell in the moonless night, the underground lair, and the jungle—the perennial periphery of civilized life in South Asia (Bloomfield 1923a: 195–96; Glucklich 1994: 192; Passi 2005: 514). Describing professional robbers as “invisible” (*aprakāśa-taskara*) people, Manu insists that theft itself is an art of deception and of disguise (Manu 1886: 9.258; Bhattacharya 1990).

⁴ For an overview of descriptions of thieving guilds in Sanskrit and vernacular Indian literature, see a series of articles by Maurice Bloomfield (1913; 1923a; 1923b; 1926). For descriptions of thieves’ professional practices, see, for instance, *Jātaka Stories* (1895, 5: 248), *Śūdraka* (1905: 47–49), Schiefner and Ralston (1906: 37ff), Parker (1910–1914, 2: 45–46, 326), Johnson (1920: 159ff), Bhāsa (1930–1931: 39), and Daṇḍin (1966: 1.48). A number of Sanskrit “thievery manuals” (*steya-śāstras*, *cora-śāstras*, or *steya-sūtras*) describing thieving societies and practices are now available in translation (Ṣaṇmukhaḥkalpa 1991; Aklujkar 1996; Passi 2001; 2005). These appear to be part of a larger genre of imaginative writing about thieving and thieves (Passi 2005). For the hereditary nature of the thieving profession, see *Jātaka Stories* (1895, 1: 68), Hemavijaya (1920: 66ff), and Bloomfield (1923a: 100–1). For descriptions of thief-deities and peculiar ritual practices, see *Śūdraka* (1905: 47–48), Bhāsa (1970: 46ff), *Parīṣiṣṭas of the Atharvaveda* (1909, 1: 128ff), Somadeva (1923: 141–42), and Bhāsa (1930–1931: 11.2 *et seq*). For descriptions of thieving “families,” see Johnson (1920: 165–66) and Somadeva (1923: 141–42).

dens not only of magic and power, but also of various bloodthirsty and barbarous vices. Although the colonial rubric of Criminal Caste shifted emphasis to the moral depravity and social danger of such groups, the idea of a hidden community of professional, hereditary, and deviant thieves, contrary to what the bulk of modern historiography would have us believe, predates British presence on the subcontinent.⁵

Describing Thuggee in the first half of the nineteenth century in terms reminiscent of older Brahmanical writing, William Sleeman (the British pioneer of the “discovery” and “eradication” of Thuggee) defined this “cult of murderous stranglers” as a secret society. His voluminous catalogue of the Thugs’ “underworld” included descriptions of their secret argot, ritual practices, omens, *modi operandi*, and bloodthirsty deities (1836; 1839).⁶ As Radhika Singha observed, it is through claims to “mystery unveiled and mastered that a group of officers of the Political Department had lobbied for operations against this [Thug] ‘murderous fraternity’” (1993: 83). By the late 1840s, Sleeman shifted his attention from Thugs to the newly discovered “fraternities of hereditary robbers” (1849), communities that by 1871 came to be defined as Criminal Tribes in colonial legislation. The Criminal Tribes, with Kanjars figuring prominently among them, continued to be defined as hereditary professional guilds engaged in a perverse and secretive trade. Although their criminalization in colonial law and the attendant policing and penal measures removed communities like the Kanjar still further from mainstream society,⁷ the terms in which Criminal Tribes were identified were not solely a figment of colonial imagination.

⁵ While the raid (*dhād* or *bhūmiyāvat*) has long been invoked (just like battles and hunting feats) in celebration of South Asian kingship (Skaria 1998; 1999; Kolff 1990: 61), in times of relative peace when polite communication was restored, robbery was removed from the public domain of courteous relations and relegated to the hidden domain of *jāṅgalī* burglars or rebel-kings (*bāgī rājās*). See, for instance, Denis Vidal (1997: ch. 2) on the structure of Rajput rebellion in southern Rajasthan: in order to oppose opponents through robbery, Rajputs styled themselves “rebels” (*bāgīs*), placing themselves, if only temporarily, outside of the regular princely order of politesse. Stewart Gordon likewise noted that the idea of a Criminal Tribe was not purely a product of colonial imagination, but combined old Brahmanical and Victorian anxieties about mobile people (Gordon 1985). For the dominant argument about the British invention of the concept of a Criminal Tribe, see, for example, Nigam (1990a), Mayaram (1991; 2003), Singha (1993; 1998), Freitag (1998), Major (1999), D’Souza (2001), and Radhakrishna (2001).

⁶ In the record of Sleeman’s interviews with his Thug informers, it is precisely this old conception of a deviant yet professional caste of marauders to which the Thugs appeal in their attempts to prove themselves “proper” robbers worthy of Sleeman’s patronage. An involved argument against the pervasive insistence on Sleeman’s invention of the outlines of Thuggee is beyond the scope of this essay. However, a more careful reading of the record of Sleeman’s interviews with Thugs, on which he based much of his description of the phenomenon, suggests that it was not Sleeman but rather his Thug interlocutors who insisted on the existence of a secretive, exclusive, and hereditary cult of Thuggee, attended with a host of special beliefs, ritual practices, language, etcetera (e.g., Sleeman 1836: 144–63).

⁷ On the special policing and penal measures, including forced resettlement and confinement in reformatory colonies, that were administered under the Criminal Tribes legislation, see Nigam (1990b), Tolen (1991), Radhakrishna (1992), and Major (1999).

The mystification of thieving communities took a new lease on life after India's independence. Retaining their criminal identity in official practice, if no longer in statute, Kanjars and related groups continue to be understood as a people hidden from moral society and the gaze of the law.⁸ In 1998, for instance, the chief minister of the Indian province of Madhya Pradesh lamented that the state's educational programs had little effect on "the *criminal instincts*" of Pardhis (another "ex-criminal tribe") because, as he explained, their instincts were nourished by the "*hidden nature* of their society, which is resilient to the ideas of modern education" (*Telegraph* 1998; my emphasis). A recent newspaper article about Kanjar peacock poachers described them as descendants of "famed highway plunderers ... said to be habitual criminals and always carry country-made pistols and crude bombs with them." The alleged inability of the police to track down the poachers is written off with the claim that Kanjars "disappear on the spot into their secret lairs" (Srivastava 2005). While local monographs on "ex-criminal castes" call for their "upliftment" (Bhargava 1949; Garg 1965; Shah 1967; Gandhi 2008), administrative descriptions of Kanjars propagate old notions of their secret nature.

Similar allegations fill the records of local police stations. In areas that house Kanjar settlements, "Village Crime Note Books" (or VCNBs), which are meant to be chronicles of crime in each village within the jurisdiction of a police station, emphasize the inherent secrecy of the Kanjar community. A characteristic account opens one such document:

This area belonged to the chief [*jaḡīrdār*] of the "Fararpur" estate [*thikānā*]. The chief used to live here. He used to collect land revenue [*lagān*]. But after the *jaḡīrdārī* system was abolished, the revenue was collected by the tax collector [*tahasildār*]. This area is three hundred years old. People of the following castes reside in this area: Rājput, Brāhman, Bālāi [Leatherworker], Regar [Leather Dyer], Rebārī [Herder], Dhākār [Farmer], Sutār [Goldsmith], Nāi [Barber], and Kanjar. Kanjars live in the southern and western corners of the village. These people are involved in burglary and cattle theft. They kill and steal goats. In the village there is a primary school, the village council [*pañchāyat*] headquarters, an accountant [*paṭwārī*] office, and other government offices. Agriculture is the local people's main occupation. Kanjars are involved in crime. ... They have their secret [*gupt*] methods [of stealing] and a language of their own [*pārsī*]. It is very difficult for the police to catch them (Lakshmipura VCNB 1973–present: 3).

Another document, the "Compendium Concerning Kanjar Gangs," an ethnography of sorts of local Kanjars compiled by police officers and kept on file in

⁸ In 1952, the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed and replaced with the new Habitual Offenders Act, whose provisions closely mimicked its predecessor's. Today the lists of "habitual offenders" are thickly populated with names of members of former "criminal tribes." In the police jurisdiction where I worked, for instance, twenty-four of the twenty-nine "habitual offenders" on file belong to "ex-criminal tribes," and twenty-two are Kanjars.

the district police headquarters,⁹ opens with the following statement: “The Kanjar caste is a criminal caste. From ancient times these people have roamed about committing group crime [including] theft, roadside burglary, looting, and dacoity [gang robbery]. They are a caste that is addicted to crime. They are very difficult to find because they can run very fast and when they commit a robbery, they disappear into the jungle or cross over the [state] border” (Compendium n.d.).¹⁰

Kanjar secrecy comes almost as an afterthought and an apology in both documents, each of which makes a point of noting the inability of the police to round up Kanjars. As we shall see, there are reasons for such disclaimers, and the mystifying rhetoric they invoke masks a certain set of relationships meant to be hidden from the official gaze. The same terms and images—lizards, addiction to crime, magical healing techniques, secret tongues, and supernatural endowment—are as much part of the official story as of rumor in the bazaar. VCNBs are curious places where popular images fill official documents and are cast as expertise and consequently as official knowledge. A section of regular entries in one such notebook reads as follows:

August 9, 1995

Today I came to the village of “Lakshmipura” to investigate case #264, 265/95 and I inspected the area. The village people believe that “Suresh” associates himself with Kanjars and takes their stolen goods. This will be investigated. The entries are complete and correct.

Signed, SHO [Senior House Officer] of the Farapur police station....

December 17, 1996

The SHO checked the area during his patrolling session and blocked off all passable roads for the inspection. No Kanjars were found. The entries are complete and correct.

Signed, SHO of Farapur station

September 12, 1997

Today the Kanjar settlement was raided for the arrest of “Raj.” He was not found. Most Kanjars run away upon the approach of the police. They cannot be caught. The entries are complete and correct.

Signed, SHO of Farapur station

December 16, 1998

The SHO came together with the police force in search of the criminal “Suresh” in relation to case #273/98 with accusation under IPC section 379 [theft]. He raided the settlement and made the arrest. He checked for the presence of the criminal “Gopal,”

⁹ The “Compendium” is compiled and updated by the district police office staff by the order of the district superintendent of police. It combines information collected from Kanjar informers by officers designated as “Kanjar experts” (to be discussed) and “people’s knowledge” (*logō kī jānkaṛī*) about Kanjars gathered by more junior officers.

¹⁰ The “Compendium” proceeds to describe the deities worshipped, garb worn, and foods consumed by Kanjars, who, the document claims, are hopelessly “addicted to crime.” It goes on to mention miraculous bone setting practices, which involve the patient’s overnight immersion in a barrel of cow manure, and describe a practice of rearing lizards used in wall-climbing burglary. A segment entitled *riwāj aur ādat* (customs and habits) states that Kanjar youths are considered unmarriageable until they partake in at least two burglaries.

who was not found to be present in the village. But we heard that he visited “Fararpur” town. His accomplices cannot be found. The entries are complete and correct.

Signed, SHO of Fararpur station

May 11, 2000

Today we made a patrolling round of the village, talked to the village people and collected information from reliable sources. The entries are complete and correct.

Signed, SHO of Fararpur station (Lakshmipura VCNB 1973–present, ad loc.).

The primary sources for such chronicles are the stories villagers tell about their Kanjar neighbors. The constables inevitably “hear that so and so visited the town,” “the village people believe that so and so associates with the Kanjars,” and so forth. The information is always gathered from “reliable sources” and the entries invariably end up “complete and correct.” This particular VCNB, which documents thirty-four years of patrolling one village, records only a single instance of direct communication between police staff and local Kanjars: a particularly earnest officer noted that he conveyed to the residents of one Kanjar settlement the evils of meat eating, drinking, and theft. Otherwise, the record is filled with reports of Kanjar disappearing acts. Whilst one may expect official accounts to be free of rumor and fantasy, in fact police and bazaar knowledge share a great deal. Contrary to the global rhetoric of modern statehood, state authorities are not separate from “the people”; police officers are people too, and police accounts of Kanjars are as full of folkloric stereotypes as is drunken gossip. Popular narratives not only inform, but also legitimize police records. While statements regarding Kanjar magical disappearances may raise an anthropologist’s smile, for villagers they are matters of obvious fact. When I relayed the content of some police descriptions of Kanjar to local farmers, they nodded with approval: “Of course,” said one, “everyone knows that Kanjars can disappear—they have magic [*jāḍū*]¹—nobody knows how they speak and how they steal and where they go and whence they come.” The police, however, make it their business to know more about Kanjars than do ordinary tattlers. But such knowledge is not meant for the official chronicles.

The record contained in police stations is what officers call a “formality” (using the English term), necessary as evidence of their work. “Real information” (*pakkī sūchnā*), as one sub-inspector explained, does not make it to paper. “True Kanjar knowledge” (*sachchī Kanjar jānkarī*) is almost never written down because what is written is no longer hidden. Instead, records of contact with and information about Kanjars are passed down orally from one officer to the next within police stations and district police circles. In stations with Kanjars or similar “ex-criminal castes” under their jurisdictions, a constable and an assistant sub-inspector are typically designated for communicating with and gathering information about Kanjars. These officers often remain in their posts for many years (well beyond the maximum two-year term prescribed by the *Rajasthan Police Act* [2008: 14]), during which they cultivate

close relationships with local Kanjars. Some bonds between officers in the lowest ranks may reach across generations, since positions in the police are often inherited. These officers are usually assigned to the circle of regular inspection in Kanjar villages, and can be often found in civilian clothes, chatting with Kanjars in villages or the bazaar.

Some of these men become what are known in the police as “Kanjar experts.” These are district-level officers, no lower than sub-inspector in rank, responsible for collecting intelligence from and about Kanjar gangs. It is under their supervision that the Kanjar “ethnographies” kept in the district headquarters are compiled. Most Kanjar experts have extensive experience and knowledge about the life and work of local Kanjar communities and most have long-standing relationships of patronage with Kanjar villages that they “adopt” (infin. *god lenā*) and with influential Kanjars in them.¹¹ The practice of “adopting” thief-villages is a common institution of patron-client bonds between “criminal” communities (whether thieving, liquor distilling, or prostituting) across Rajasthan and northern India at large.¹² Relations of patronage are typically initiated by the senior house officers (SHOs) of local police stations, who establish connections with village leaders, usually heads of thieving parties, who become both informers (*mukhbīrs* or *mukhbars* in Kanjari) and mediators between the police and their community. In exchange for information and a share of spoils, SHOs direct their staff to turn a blind eye to the activities of informers and their parties, stop or minimize the filing of false cases, “write off” arrest warrants at little or no cost to their informers, and make the filing of court cases redeemable with moderate payments.¹³ The best Kanjar clients are, of course, those most heavily involved in thieving, ideally gang leaders.¹⁴

Claims to Kanjar magic and secrecy written into police ethnographies leave the reader mystified, as they are meant to; within the police, information about Kanjars is framed as privileged knowledge, or “expertise.” Transmitted orally from one expert to the next and masked on paper by allusions to magic and secrecy, what the police do know about Kanjars is preserved within and through the rhetoric of secrecy. The relations and activities screened by this

¹¹ If collaboration is not forthcoming, a standard way of acquiring information is to “convince” (as one sub-inspector put it) some Kanjars to be informants. To make sure that I understood what he meant by “convincing,” one Kanjar expert pointed to a riding crop displayed on his bedroom wall. “Hunter,” he named it. It was the first English word I had heard that evening.

¹² Of sixteen Kanjar settlements in the administrative block where I conducted most of my research, twelve are currently “adopted.”

¹³ “Writing off” means to report the absence of wanted offenders to court. Whereas unprotected thieves may get away with paying 100–200 percent of the (often much inflated) value of property they are accused of stealing, protected thieves are normally expected to contribute 25–50 percent of their loot to their patron-station in return for being cleared of the charge.

¹⁴ This system is patterned on the system of Thug approvers established by Sleeman in the early nineteenth century under the scheme of the Department for the Suppression of Thuggee and Dacoity, which “made use of informers who turned state’s evidence” for the Department (Cohn 1996: 10; also Wagner 2007).

rhetoric are of interest, and I will return to them, but first I shall turn to what Kanjars themselves make of such claims.

NURTURING SECRETS

When I first arrived at my field research site, my Kanjar informants insisted that nobody outside of their community knew their language.¹⁵ Not only was it unknown to outsiders, they said, but it was intrinsically unknowable to them. As Kanjars (much like their neighbors) explained it, this language (*āpas kī bolī*, literally “insider language”) did not lend itself to learning as such. Rather, it propagated itself as instinctual knowledge, acquired only through being born and raised within the Kanjar community. As I slowly picked up the Kanjari dialect (which turned out to be a slightly modified form of the regional Mewari language), consternation spread: either I too had magical powers, much like the Kanjars, or I had been sent in by *sarkār*, the government, itself subject to much mystification. As I picked up more words, Kanjars themselves began to insist that there was yet another level of secrecy to their language, a secret tongue (*pārsī*) beneath their everyday speech. This tongue turned out to be a professional argot consisting of no more than a few dozen words. As my friends in the settlement taught me more of this language, others insisted on the existence of two, four, or even a dozen secret tongues aside from that which I was learning, so that no matter how much I tried I would never have the “total knowledge” (*toṭal jānkaṛī*) of their secret language.

One of the foremost gang and community leaders in the village, who became my best informant and friend, nevertheless persisted in teaching me the tongues, which constitute a kind of pig Latin, formed by standard substitutions of phonemes and additions of prefixes. Our lessons were a transgression, since while others are to know *about* Kanjar secrets, they are not to be privy to their content. (It was such deviousness that made for his thrill in teaching me the tongue.)¹⁶ Each time I came up with a “secret” word, my Kanjar neighbors and hosts assumed that I had not “learned” it as one does English in school, but had absorbed it on the basis of a natural, albeit a strange, predisposition. As it grew increasingly apparent that I was beginning to grasp the content of

¹⁵ Most of my field research was conducted in a Kanjar settlement of “Lakshmipura” near a medium-sized market town of “Fararpur” in southeastern Rajasthan.

¹⁶ The use of “secret languages” is common among professional communities across South Asia: Cāraṇ genealogists use a specialist language called Dingal to make their records (Shah and Shroff 1958; Smith 1975; Ziegler 1976); merchants employ special terms to conceal matters from buyers; and each rank-grade in the police has its own argot used to keep things from outsiders as well as from officers of different rank. David Washbrook (1991) pointed out that Sanskrit too functioned as a Brāhmaṇ argot. For a more general discussion of secret languages in an Indian context, see Mehrotra (1977).

most “secret” conversations, local Kanjars reached a general consensus: I must have been a Kanjar in a previous life.¹⁷

Another sphere of secret knowledge is comprised of the “eighty-four wisdoms” (*chaurāsī buddhiyān*), known only to Kanjars.¹⁸ At the end of my stay, my friend (the one who had taught me the secret tongues) and I drove my motorcycle beyond the boundary of the settlement and settled under a banyan tree for my long-promised lesson about them. The eighty-four wisdoms he revealed turned out to be a varied collection of thieving *modi operandi*, ancestral practices, and regulations regarding matters like bride price and incest. As many of the wisdoms replicated the speculations that I so often heard in the bazaar, I had to hide my disappointment. The long-awaited revelations of ancient mores and secret practices, from the use of wall-climbing lizards to human sacrifice, reiterated what I had thought to be tall tales on the lips of others. When I asked my friend why I had not observed any of this in their village, he explained that these were very old practices and that, although humans were no longer sacrificed and lizards no longer reared, it was important that all Kanjars knew these “secret signs of [their community’s] distinction” (*gupt pahchān*). The divulgence of these wisdoms, I was warned, would bring about the “ruin” (*barbādī*) of their community. Much like their neighbors, my Kanjar hosts also claimed that each member of their family had a treasure (*arj*) hidden in the jungle. I never learned the location of any such treasure, and neither, I believe, did my Kanjar informants. Such revelations echoed an observation made by Paul Dresch, anthropologist of Arabia: “The experience [of fieldwork] was not well described as simply ‘dialogue.’ Nor was it ‘data collection.’ It was more like a trade in secrets, though in a curious way. The more thriller-like the material, the less difficult to gather, to the point where one [is] constantly being told things unfit for print: the more mundane and empirical the published facts, by contrast, the more collecting them resembled clandestine intrigue” (2000: 109–10).

While anthropologists are spoon-fed sensational material, the plain stuff of ethnographic interest may long remain obscure to, and deliberately obscured from, the ethnographer’s sight. While many secrets are imposed on the researcher, matters that ought to be more mundane are often learned obliquely in the long and laborious course of fieldwork. The basic data of ethnographic writing are others’ secrets—family relations, household economics, or religious affinities—which are rarely mentioned in everyday conversation and are often

¹⁷ By the end of my field research, I realized that a number of other non-Kanjars who frequented Kanjar villages, whether to drink or make deals with them, also had a basic grasp of the Kanjar argot, although they often did not often advertise the fact. Most Kanjar experts and other police officers likewise were privy to these languages.

¹⁸ Eighty-four is a conventional count of parts that must make up a whole. Rajasthani merchants, Gujarati Gujars, Brāhmins, and Thugs alike claimed to comprise a community of eighty-four clans or tribes (Tod 1920, 1: 120; Elliott 1859, 2: 58ff; Wagner 2007: ch. 4).

revealed only uncomfortably. The very process of asking questions about such matters can raise alarm, making otherwise innocuous information suddenly unfit for discussion, leaving the interview not only a less than desirable but a potentially detrimental ethnographic tool. The “secrets” you ask for are then replaced with the secrets informants are happy to tell. Do you want secrets? We will supply you with some! Such readily divulged secrets, although often un-publishable, carry ethnographic weight of their own. Not only do they forge a sense of intimacy among their keepers, as Dresch suggests, but they also define a sphere of their keeping as special. By relaying them, informants make anthropologists feel that they are “in” of exceptional value and interest, often without actually letting them inside.

While little of the contents to which I thus became privy came as a revelation, the presentation of certain knowledge as hidden proved instructive. As it turned out, secrecy was just as central to Kanjars’ presentation of selves as it was to their mystification by others. The trick here lay in revealing *that* secrets exist while concealing *what* they were (cf. Johnson 2002: 3). Unease surrounding the revelation of wisdoms and tongues had nothing to do with a fear of policemen learning things that they either already knew (such as the *modi operandi*) or did not care to know about (such as bride wealth prescriptions). Instead, revelations of secrets, by making obvious things that are meant to be hidden, threatened the mystery and the invisibility that are so central to the role of Kanjars in local life. As one of my Kanjar informants succinctly, if enigmatically, put it, “Our secrets [*gupts*] are our watering well [*kūnā*],” invoking a local metaphor for a source of livelihood.

SECRETS CONCEALED

Contrary to the claims of popular discourse, Kanjars are centrally involved in the proceedings of local life: they are connected to various “patrons” (*jajmāns*), employers, and “friends” (*dosts*) for whom they perform crucial services. Such relationships can constitute one-off employment or outlast several generations. Village communities hire Kanjars as watchmen and a number of Rajput landlords (*zamīndārs*) in the area continue to employ them as watchmen, thieves, and intelligence agents.¹⁹ One Rajput of my acquaintance, for instance, told me that his

¹⁹ Plunder is a long-standing element of statecraft on the subcontinent (Gordon 1969; Vidal 1997; Kasturi 2002: chs. 5 and 6), recommended as early as the third century BCE in Kautilya’s statecraft treatise and still widely employed today. Indian rulers of various ranks—heads of states, gentry and village and landholders alike—have long employed the services of professional marauding communities (many of them hillsmen or itinerant groups, some of which rose to the status of Rajputs) for tax collection, intimidation, and intelligence gathering (Gordon 1969; Kolff 1990; Guha 1999; Skaria 1999; Mayaram 2003; Wagner 2010). In 1809, Thomas Broughton, a British envoy to the Maratha Court, described the employment of Meenas by Sheo Singh (the youngest son of Raja Man Singh of Jaipur), who deployed them to raid his father’s territories so as to force him to grant him an estate (1892: 85, 105). Vidal (1997) describes more recent raiding politics among Rajputs in late colonial Rajasthan. By the end of that century, the

Kanjar “servant” (*kamīn*) had been in his family’s service for three generations, helping them to “push down others who stuck their heads up too high.”

Thieving groups have played an important part of local affairs, and continue to do so, through their involvement in rural systems of watch and ward, intelligence supply, and conflict management on political levels ranging from princely disputes to disagreements between farmers. Others have noted the policing and spying functions of such groups (e.g., Bayly 1996: 163ff, 372ff),²⁰ but little has been said about their role in disputes. A clandestine nocturnal raid (*gemī* in Kanjari) of a house is the standard method of “pushing down” (infin. *dabānā*) others. While such raids can bring material gain for participants through thievery, their main aim is not resource extraction, and the commissioning party often gains little or no material profit. Instead, the raid is employed to intimidate opponents by penetrating the rivals’ homes so as to “expose weakness” (infin. *kamjorī dekhānā*) and leave them in a subordinate position relative to the supplicant. If successful, raiding contests are resolved with the reestablishment of rapport between the opponents and the restitution of stolen property.

Almost a year ago, a Rajput of my acquaintance awoke to find the contents of his living room (including a coffee table, chairs, curtains, stationery) neatly arranged in his garden.²¹ The burglars took nothing, but had left a clear message; the terms of sharing a field, on which he had been unable to agree with his cousin, were soon negotiated and courteous rapport between the two restored.²² Such raiding tactics are not restricted to conflict negotiation within the Rajput elite, but are a common means of communication in local

employment of robbers was so common as to be subject to formal arrangement, and British officials were well, albeit anxiously, aware of this. As early as 1774, Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of India, referred to the landholders of Bengal as the “nursing mothers” of criminal groups (O’Malley 1925: 305–6). Later Sleeman observed, “A Rajput chief, next to leading a gang of his own on great enterprise, delights in nothing so much as having a gang or two, under his patronage, for little ones. There is hardly a single chief, of the Hindoo military class, in the Bundelcund, or Gwalior territories, who does not keep a gang of robbers of some kind or other, and consider it as a very valuable and legitimate source of revenue” (1844, 1: 188). For more on the landholders’ patronage of thieving communities in Rajasthan, see Tod (1920, 2: 493).

²⁰ For more on watchmen in the governance of rural India, see, for instance, Griffiths (1971), Chatterji (1981), and Arnold (1986).

²¹ A similar episode was reported in 1923 in Calcutta. The police report states that upon arrival in his new posting, a British sub-inspector was approached by local Kanjar watchmen who suggested that he would not manage without their help. The officer refused them, and in a week the contents of his office were neatly laid out in front of his house and in his back garden. Nothing was missing, but the message was clear, and soon thereafter he employed local Kanjars as watchmen and approvers (Pinhey 1925).

²² Not all conflicts are so easily resolved and some raiding contests may last for months or years. Some may employ a more desperate—and dangerous—“game” (*khel*, as Kanjars call it) and plant incriminating matter (such as opium poppy) in the opponent’s home, which is then used to blackmail him. This tactic can result in penal consequences (the standard prison term for opium possession is ten years), violence, and destruction of the relationship between the two parties.

society.²³ In the decades since independence, however, many bonds between Kanjars and their Rajput sponsors have been severed along with other types of local patronage (*jajmānī*) ties. Today only two Rajput families in Fararpur continue to employ their family Kanjar clients.²⁴

Kanjars also find employment as “watchmen” (*chaukīdārs*) in villages, orchards, fields, and family homes. For them, watchman-ship (*chaukīdārī*) is one of the most reliable sources of income and almost two-thirds of adult men in the settlement of my research are currently so employed. In fact, it is the only legal source of income in the community aside from small-scale cash crop agriculture. Yet this legal and fully legitimate business depends on illegal activity. Watchmen’s duties lie both in policing their assigned domains (including preventing theft, tracing culprits, and retrieving stolen property) and in negotiating conflicts within the communities of their watch. Kanjars are liable, in effect, for protecting villages from themselves, their responsibilities being restricted to the control of their own gangs, families, and villages. More often than not, however, watchmen are engaged in negotiations of disputes within their patron-communities. When family conflicts arise, it is the watchman who is called upon to facilitate communication, and, if that fails, to “put pressure” on the unruly party through the thieving tactics already described.

SECRET AGENTS

Involvement of Kanjars in local politics and social control is not confined to the “shadow economy” of informal relations, but is also central to the formal arena of local state governance. I have already noted that many Kanjars work for the police, providing them with crucial intelligence, means of control, and a source of income.²⁵ In return for their services, a blind eye is turned to their activities, a practice that both Kanjars and police officers term “adoption.”²⁶ Such arrangements explain why most active Kanjar gangs remain protected on the territories of local police stations, and why “history sheeters” (recidivists with a criminal “history sheet” on file with the police) remain so elusive in police conversations and official records. It is also why, these days, Kanjars rarely raid areas outside

²³ Most services of the sort are commissioned on a one-off basis by men of different castes.

²⁴ After joining the Union of India after 1949, the Rajput rulers and smaller chiefs lost their ruling and taxation rights, and after 1971 also their privy purses. Many could no longer afford to employ even a small fraction of the men previously in their service, leading to the dissolution of most relationships that they had maintained as *jajmāns* (patrons). Prior to Independence, for instance, the highest-ranking local Rajput (styled Rāwat Sawai) in the area of my research supported twenty-seven servants at his household temple alone. Today, only one man attends to the shrine. Most bonds that Kanjars had with their Rajput *jajmāns* have also been severed.

²⁵ Kanjars are often employed by policemen to provide information about activities of other Kanjar gangs. Such means of control are commonly employed by Rajasthani police, who patronize a few central figures in an illegal business to keep smaller gangs from proliferating. See de Wilde (2009: 127ff) on police using this same method to control opium trafficking in Rajasthan.

²⁶ For further detail of such relationships between Kanjars and the police, see my forthcoming essay on borders (Piliavsky n.d.).

the jurisdiction of their patron-stations, and target neighboring villages with increasingly frequency. Such local concentration of their activity has provoked a rise of violence both within and against their community, something I describe in greater detail elsewhere.²⁷ While standing beyond the pale of formal legitimacy, such relationships with the police constitute the habitual and often socially sanctioned realities of local political life. As raiders, watchmen, informers, and mediators, Kanjars are employed when communication between different parties falters.

Observers of Indian political negotiations—whether in caste and village councils (*panchāyats*) or the National Parliament—have marked them as lacking dialogue. Communication in *panchāyats* has been described as a trade in complaints, accusations, apologies, and “conciliatory” speeches, directives that neither respond to what was said nor provoke a rejoinder; that is, they consist of a monologic exchange of declarations not meant as responses or contributions to a dialogue (Gupta 1997: 48ff). The same communicative asymmetry marks proceedings in the Indian National Parliament, where havoc often ensues as parliamentarians rise out of order to shout out speeches that have little to do with discussion agendas, the particular questions raised or the authority of the speaker (Spary 2010).²⁸ Such a monologic style of communication defines interaction not only in the parliament or the village council, but also in communicative contexts ranging from the household to the courtroom.²⁹ As some of my informants explained, respect (*izzat*) due to superiors (*barā*) prevents rejoinders from inferiors (*chhoṭā*), for it causes “anxiety” (*gabar*) within the community and brings shame (*śarm*) onto not only the offending party but also onto the community at large. Put simply, in the context of

²⁷ When violence is directed at Kanjars, police patronage often proves ineffectual. The village where I conducted most of my research was the site of one of the gravest attacks on a Kanjar community. On 23 June 1990, the village was demolished, ten Kanjars were clubbed to death, and a hundred were seriously injured by a mob of four thousand farmers. For more on the increasing alignment of thieving beats with police jurisdictions as a cause of growing violence against the Kanjar community, see Piliavsky (n.d.).

²⁸ While in the context of the *panchāyat* the order of super- and subordination is clearly set, in the parliament, where the order of precedence is unclear, discussion often degrades into disorderly shouting with no regard for the general agenda or the authority of the speaker. In the Lower House, in 2007 alone, disruptions cost 128 hours of parliamentary sitting time (Spary 2010: 338). Such parliamentary communicative disasters have been dubbed symptomatic of the decline of India’s political institutions (Rubinoff 1998), and the “disease of democracy” (Chatterjee 2007).

²⁹ Unilateral, top-down communication is the general rule in families and households, where superiors give directives and inferiors receive instruction. When dialogue does occur, it often provokes conflict that is frequently accompanied by shouting matches or even the use of physical violence. References to rules of communication on the subcontinent are scattered throughout ethnographic writing (e.g., Babb 1975: 51; Fuller 1992: 4); Osella and Osella (1998) offer a nuanced discussion of the physical and verbal form of hierarchical, and subversively egalitarian communicative forms among youths in South India. Nevertheless, a focused ethnography of the Indian communicative terrain, of the sort produced by William Beeman (1986) in reference to Iran, is yet to be written.

interaction between rank unequals, dialogue amounts to speech out of turn and, as such, to a violation of the relational order. In order to avoid such violence, people employ clandestine means of communication, such as raids, and hidden go-betweens like Kanjars.

The monologic communicative style bespeaks a key aspect of local social life. The order of ranked relations which structures local society—referred to as “hierarchy” by old convention—assumes an asymmetry of exchange, communication, and rapport. This means that the order of communicative precedence is set in accordance to the social structures of super- and subordination: fathers have communicative precedence over sons, husbands over wives, elders over youngsters, patrons over clients, and so on. When the order of rank is unclear (outside of the particular locality, among unranked cousins or “friends”), difficulties of communication arise.³⁰ Conflicts of interest and the need to speak out of turn do transpire and they call for a medium of communication. Not everyone can take on this role. If dialogue is prevented by a set order of relatedness that defines relationships within and between communities, such as castes, villages, or households, then conflict management calls for mediation from outside the ranked structure order—it requires external agency.

Mystified and rhetorically hidden, Kanjars are external to polite society, and it is their position as outsiders that makes for their involvement in some of the innermost negotiations of local life. This is best illustrated with an example: a lengthy dispute between a Gujar (herder) man and the wife of his younger brother, which was mediated by the family’s Kanjar watchman. The woman stole five goats from the elder brother and sold them in a village some twenty kilometers away, and her brother-in-law was at a loss as to how to resolve the matter. Over the following two months, the watchman made a series of visits to both parties, relaying the concerns, and finally threats, of one to the other. The conflict was ultimately resolved with the woman paying for the goats and the watchman receiving one-fifth of the sum. To my query as to why they could not just talk to each other, the Kanjar watchman, exasperated with yet another obtuse question, explained: “She is his younger brother’s wife [*chhoṭī bhābhī*]! How could he speak to her?” The victim of theft could not himself discuss the matter with her; as in most *jātis* in Northern India, contact between Gujar men and their younger brothers’ wives is strictly constrained and the relationship is visibly marked with the veil and the physical distance which men keep from their younger brothers’ wives (Freed and Freed 1964: 153; Mandelbaum 1970, 1: 64–65). Verbal communication between them is almost entirely banned: inasmuch as a woman cannot directly address her husband’s elder brother, she is also spared the obligation to

³⁰ See, for instance, David Pocock on the perils of de-contextualized and unranked caste relations within the Gujarati diaspora in East Africa (1957).

respond to him. Any persistence on his part to provoke dialogue would be interpreted as a violation of her, his, and the family's honor. Besides, as my Kanjar host explained, as an elder (*baṛā*), it was shameful for him to openly "beg" (*māṅgnā*) for the return of the goats. The family needed an "outside man" (*bahār kā ādmī*) for "instructing" or "counseling" (*saṁjhānā*) the woman.³¹ "I am," he added, "just such a man!" It was on this prohibition that the younger brother and his wife attempted to capitalize: by deputing the wife to steal the goats, he deprived the plaintiff of any obvious response.

Quiet resolution of conflict and the maintenance of integrity of families, or other communities, relies on preserving "respect" or "honor" (*izzat*) in the eyes of the "public," be this public one's caste, village community, or the crowds of the bazaar. While Kanjars are rhetorically removed from polite society, they have access to internal family dealings, and it is by employing them that families save their face. Because Kanjars are hidden from—and thus not part of—public life, families can make them privy to their internal dealings without fear of their exposure to people who matter, and on whose judgment family honor relies. It is the Kanjars' discursive removal from society that gives them access to some of its most intimate social domains that ought to be kept apart from the public sphere. This presents us with a paradox: life on display relies on persons and relations that must be kept hidden. In other words, the hidden is an intrinsic part of the public sphere. The secrecy of Kanjar persons, which locates them within this invisible sphere, sustains the visible face of social life.

The involvement of Kanjars in local relations does not always take the deferent form of "explaining" and much of it consists of penetration by raiding. The course of such raiding is meant to be hidden, from both state law and the public gaze. The clandestine ethic of thieving negotiations is maintained as much by perpetrators as by raid victims. Kanjars see their thieving activities as an art of disguise, an idea that, as I have already noted, has a long history. They pride themselves on entering, robbing, and leaving homes unobserved, and look down on those they call "new players," who steal in broad daylight, leave evidence of their presence, or struggle instead of fleeing upon discovery. Victims of raids that they know were commissioned are no keener to have such violations exposed. In the course of my fieldwork, not a single such burglary was reported to the police or otherwise made public by victims and I learned about them only through my Kanjar contacts. If rumors about such actions do seep into the public sphere, they are assessed as matters of course. People describe raiding politics as the "internal matters" (*andar ke māmle* or *andar kī bāt*) of the parties involved, which are not meant for judgment. In other words, commissioned raids are commonly treated not as violent, detrimental,

³¹ *Samjhānā* means literally "to make understand" or "explain," appealing to reason thought to be blurred by passion in dispute (Carstairs 1957: 47).

or criminal, but, on the contrary, as legitimate and indeed socially constitutive practice.³²

The growing involvement of Kanjars in state policing creates yet another domain of relations meant to remain unseen. With the decline of Rajput patronage, new relationships of patronage have been forged between Kanjars and the police. That most Kanjars in the business of thieving are informers for the police, however, reveals more than the practical detail of such arrangements between Kanjars and their police patrons, bespeaking something much more general about the workings of modern governance and statehood at large. One sub-inspector described the space occupied by the “secret agents,” as officers jokingly call their Kanjar informers (using the English term):

According to [state] law, the government workers [*sarkārī naukar*] and the criminals [*aprādhī log*] should not have any connections [*sambandh*]. We [police officers] have to catch them, but how can we do that without knowing them or talking to them? The police stations have no funds for informers. But we need criminals to give us information [*sūchnā*] and to connect us to criminal networks [he uses the English word]. So, we build relationships [*ristā*] with them. I don’t have money to give away, but I give food and clothes [to my informers]. We need to fill our quotas,³³ so how can I not nurture friendship [*dostī rakhnā*] with Kanjars?

The rhetoric of separation between the government (*sarkār*) and the criminals (*aprādhī log*) invoked by the officer creates a gap where crucial links ought to lie. The contrasts between formal and informal, official and unofficial, criminal and legal, or government and society that ground modern state ideology draw boundaries between persons and within spheres of relationships that are not, and cannot be, kept pure of each other (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1991; Fuller and Harriss 2001). The old Indian dictum that “it takes a thief to catch a thief” is contrary to the idea that those who steal and those who police are not only different people, but are in principle part of separate social and institutional spheres. As the sub-inspector points out, much policing in fact takes place through the agency of those formally designated as criminals, making the formal logic of modern statehood fundamentally incompatible with the observable realities of local practice. This disjuncture creates a sphere of social relations that must be kept secret, and this is where Kanjars step in. Relations within this sphere, which is habitually glossed over or written off as “criminal” or “corrupt,” must be kept opaque not only to maintain the reputable standing of state servants, but also to uphold the very idea of the state as distinct from society. The mystification of Kanjars, which propagates popular stereotypes in official paperwork—the claims to their invisibility or magical escapes—is not only a mask of this hidden sphere of relationships; it reinforces

³² By contrast, theft that is not commissioned brings public condemnation and has provoked an increase in violence against the culprits.

³³ For officers, making arrests concerning, and resolving, a target percentage of reported cases is crucial for their careers and salaries.

the very logic of modern statehood that makes this sphere “criminal” and, in principle, hidden. Much as behind-the-scenes negotiations and thieving contests serve to uphold the public honor of families and the respectability of Rajput families, it is the relationships that stand in the shade of officialdom that maintain the face of the state.

For Kanjars, this secret sphere is not only a space where the enterprising thrive, but also a domain of vulnerability that remains largely invisible to international watchdog organizations, Delhi officials, the press, and “the rule of law.” For the many Kanjars who do not have the good end of arrangements of patronage with the police, this carries tangible consequences. Those not under police tutelage are subjected to persistent predation, “erroneous” convictions, or prolonged incarceration without trial or evidence. Even for well-established informers, police patronage can be fickle, and they often find themselves as vulnerable as their unprotected caste-mates. As I write, my Kanjar host who taught me the secret tongues and the wisdoms, and who is one of the area’s most successful informers, has been in prison for more than two months, put there by a new and “unfriendly” head of police station. When Kanjars disappear into jails for months at a time or are murdered by upper caste neighbors, nobody is surprised: they are, after all, master-illusionists, ever disappearing into “the jungle” or their secret lairs. This is how one jailer explained the absence of seven Kanjar inmates from his records³⁴: “Nobody ever knows where Kanjars are—they are always coming and going [*āte-jāte rahate*]; sometimes they are here and other times they are not. How can I keep track of them?” While for some Kanjars the rhetoric of secrecy may be a “watering well,” for the community at large, it is a screen that conceals sites of vulnerability, violence, and abuse. The necessary outsider is also an expendable victim and even a required one.

CONCLUSION

Kanjar secrets turn out to be hollow, their contents being either well known or spurious. And yet, the rhetoric composed of such secrets defines persons, relations, and activities rhetorically excluded from but in practice central to local life. As such, these secrets are socially constitutive and they create a domain in which Kanjars play a central role. This invisible domain is not simply a mask of the illicit, the vicious, and the devious. On the contrary, the generation and preservation of this hidden sphere protects various proprieties behind which it stands. As Andrew Shryock observed, “The production

³⁴ Policemen frequently put Kanjars in jail without warrant or trial, often in order to extract a “bail” sum for their release. Such temporary incarcerations are left unrecorded, provided the head jailer is willing to accept a small “fee,” usually a small fraction of what the Kanjar families pay to the police. Because there are virtually no inspections of prisons, jailers and police officers have little fear of being caught.

of identities meant to be public, that have publicity as part of their function, will create, of necessity, a special terrain of things, relations, and activities that cannot themselves be public but are essential aspects of whatever reality and value public things might possess" (2004: 3).

The opaque life behind the visible public domain is not only epiphenomenal, but also fundamentally constitutive of life on display. The secret life of Kanjars is intrinsic to the public face of respectable relations. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the rhetorical exclusion of Kanjars from visible social arenas locates them in some of the most intimate social spaces. These are not only household affairs and relations between cousins, but also matters that lie in the gap between the formal presentation of the state—as transparent, law-upholding, and separate from society—and its everyday life. The contradiction between the idea of the state that blindly maintains law and order for all and the observed fact that the state requires the criminal—whether as described in this essay or in the popular television series *The Wire*—blurs the familiar illusion of the state's separation from society.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, P. 1988. Some Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, 1: 58–89.
- Aklujkar, A. 1996. *Dharma-Caurya-Rasāyana* as a Text and as a Work of Brahmin Fantasy. *Amṛtamandākinī. Dr. G. B. Palsule Felicitation Volume*. G. Palsule et al., eds. Pune: Dr. Palsule Satkar Samiti, 239–60.
- Arnold, D. 1986. *Police Power and Colonial Rule: Madras, 1859–1947*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Babb, L. A. 1975. *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bayly, C. A. 1996. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beeman, W. O. 1986. *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bhargava, B. S. 1949. *The Criminal Tribes: A Socio-Economic Study of the Principal Criminal Tribes and Castes in Northern India*. Lucknow: Universal Publishers.
- Bhāsa. 1970. *Avimāraka, Love's Enchanted World*. J. L. Masson and D. D. Kosambi, eds. and trans. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Bhāsa. 1930–1931. *Thirteen Trivandrum Plays by Bhāsa*. 2 vols. S. C. Woolner and L. Sarup, eds. and trans. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bhattacharya, C. A. 1990. *The Concept of Theft in Classical Hindu Law: An Analysis and the Idea of Punishment*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Bloomfield, M. 1913. The Character and Adventures of Muladeva. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 25, 212: 616–50.
- Bloomfield, M. 1923a. The Art of Stealing in Hindu Fiction. *American Journal of Philology* 44, 2: 97–133.
- Bloomfield, M. 1923b. The Art of Stealing in Hindu Fiction, Part II. *American Journal of Philology* 44, 3: 193–229.
- Bloomfield, M. 1926. On Organized Brigandage in Hindu Fiction. *American Journal of Philology* 47, 3: 205–33.

- Broughton, T. D. 1892. *Letters Written in a Mahratta Camp during the Year 1809*. London: Archibald Constable and Co.
- Canetti, E. 1962. *Crowds and Power*. Carol Stewart, trans. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Carstairs, G. M. 1957. *The Twice-Born*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Census of India Report*. 2001. Indian Census Commission.
- Chatterjee, S. 2007. Disruptions Have Become a Disease. *Times of India*, 10 Sept: 4.
- Chatterji, B. 1981. The Darogah and the Countryside: The Imposition of Police Control in Bengal and Its Impact (1793–1837). *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 18, 1: 19–42.
- Cohn, B. S. 1996. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Compendium concerning Kanjar gangs resident in “Gopalpur” District [Jilā “Gopalpur” Meīñ Rahane Wāle Kanjar Gaing Sambandhī Kampendiyam]. n.d. Record Office of the “Gopalpur” District Superintendent of Police.
- Daṇḍin. 1966. *Daśakumāracarita of Daṇḍin*. M. R. Kale, ed. and trans. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Dresch, P. 2000. “Wilderness of Mirrors”: Truth and Vulnerability in Middle Eastern Fieldwork. In P. Dresch, W. James, and D. Parkin, eds., *Anthropologists in a Wider World: Essays on Field Research*. Oxford: Berghahn Press, 109–27.
- D’Souza, D. 2001. *Branded by Law: Looking at India’s Denotified Tribes*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- De Wilde, R. 2009. Opium Poppy Husk Traders in Rajasthan: The Lives and Work of Businessmen in the Contemporary Indian Opium Industry. PhD thesis, London School of Economic and Political Science.
- Elliott, H. M. 1859. *Memoirs on the History, Folk-Lore, and Distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India*. London: Trübner.
- Freed, R. S. and S. A. Freed. 1964. Spirit Possession as Illness in a North Indian Village. *Ethnology* 3, 2: 152–71.
- Freitag, S. 1998. *Sansiahs and the State: The Changing Nature of “Crime” and “Justice” in Nineteenth-Century British India*. In M. Anderson and S. Guha, eds., *Changing Concepts of Rights and Justice in South Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 82–113.
- Fuller, C. J. 1992. *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fuller, C. J. and J. Harriss. 2001. For an Anthropology of the Modern Indian State. In C. J. Fuller and V. Bénéï, eds., *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*. London: Hurst, 1–30.
- Gandhi, M. 2008. *Denotified Tribes: Dimensions of Change*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers Distributors.
- Garg, R. P. 1965. *Dacoit Problem in Chambal Valley: A Sociological Study*. Varanasi: Gandhian Institute of Studies.
- Glucklich, A. 1994. *The Sense of Adharma*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Gordon, S. N. 1969. Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders, and State-Formation in 18th Century Malwa. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 6, 4: 416–29.
- Gordon, S. N. 1985. Bhils and the Idea of a Criminal Tribe in Nineteenth-Century India. In A. A. Young, ed., *Crime and Criminality in British India*. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 128–39.
- Griffiths, P. J. 1971. *To Guard My People: The History of the Indian Police*. London: Benn.

- Guha, S. 1999. *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gupta, D. 1997. *Rivalry and Brotherhood: Politics in the Life of Farmers in Northern India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hemavijaya. 1920. *Katharatnakara. Das Märchenmeer: Eine Sammlung Indischer Erzählungen von Hemavijaya*. J. Hertel, ed. and trans. München: Georg Müller.
- Herzfeld, M. 1987. *Anthropology through the Looking Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herzfeld, M. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge.
- Jātaka Stories, or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. 1895. 6 vols. E. B. Cowell, ed. and trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, T. 1999. *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Johnson, H. M. 1920. Rāuhineya's Adventures, the Rāuhineyacarita. In *Studies in Honor of Maurice Bloomfield* (edited by his pupils). New Haven: Yale University Press, 159–96.
- Johnson, P. C. 2002. *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Condomblé*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kasturi, M. 2002. *Embattled Identities: Rajput Lineages and the Colonial State in Nineteenth-Century North India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kolff, D.H.A. 1990. *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakshmipura VCNB. 1973–present. Record office of the “Fararpur” police station.
- Major, A. J. 1999. State and Criminal Tribes in Colonial Punjab: Surveillance, Control and Reclamation of the “Dangerous Classes.” *Modern Asian Studies* 33, 3: 657–88.
- Mandelbaum, D. G. 1970. *Society in India*. 2 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Manu. 1886. *The Laws of Manu: Translated, with Extracts from Seven Commentaries*. G. Bühler, trans. and ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mayaram, S. 1991. Criminality or Community? Alternative Constructions of the Mev Narrative of Darya Khan. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) 25, 1: 57–84.
- Mayaram, S. 2003. *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mehrotra, R. R. 1977. *Sociology of Secret Languages*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Mitchell, T. 1991. The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics. *American Political Science Review* 85, 1: 77–96.
- Nigam, S. 1990a. Disciplining and Policing the “Criminals by Birth,” Part 1: The Making of a Colonial Stereotype—The Criminal Tribes and Castes of North India. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27, 2: 131–64.
- Nigam, S. 1990b. Disciplining and Policing the “Criminals by Birth,” Part 2: The Development of a Disciplinary System, 1871–1900. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27, 3: 257–87.
- O'Malley, L.S.S. 1925. *History of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa under British Rule*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot.
- Osella, C. and F. Osella. 1998. Friendship and Flirting: Micro-Politics in Kerala, South India. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.) 4, 2: 189–206.
- The Pāriśiṣṭas of the Atharvaveda*. 1909. G. M. Bolling and J. von Negelein, eds. and trans. Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz.

- Parker, H. 1910–1914. *Village Folk-Tales of Ceylon*. 3 vols. Dehiwala: Tisara Prakasayako.
- Passi, A. 2001. *Dharmacauryarasāyana (L'elisir del Furton Secondo il Dharma)*. Milano: Edizioni Ariete.
- Passi, A. 2005. Perverted *Dharma*? Ethics of Thievery in the *Dharmacauryarasāyana*. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 33, 4: 513–28.
- Piliavsky, A. n.d. Borders without Borderlands: On the Social Reproduction of State Demarcation in Western India. In D. Gellner, ed., *Borderlands in Northern South Asia* (forthcoming from Duke University Press).
- Pinhey, Samuel G. 1925. Letter (No. 35), 28 May. West Bengal State Archives. Foreign (Internal-A), May 1925, proceedings 118–22.
- Platts, J. T. 1884. *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*. London: W. H. Allen and Co.
- Pocock, D. F. 1957. “Difference” in East Africa: A Study of Caste and Religion in Modern Indian Society. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13, 4: 289–300.
- Radhakrishna, M. 1992. Surveillance and Settlement under the Criminal Tribes Act in Madras. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 29, 2: 171–98.
- Radhakrishna, M. 2001. *Dishonoured by History: “Criminal Tribes” and British Colonial Policy*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- The Rajasthan Police Act 2007*. 2008. Jodhpur: Kanoon Prakashak Agency.
- Rubinfoff, A. G. 1998. The Decline of India’s Parliament. *Journal of Legislative Studies* 4, 4: 13–33.
- Samukhakalpa: Ein Lehrbuch der Zauberei und Diebeskunst aus dem Indischen Mittelalter*. 1991. G. Dieter, ed. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- Schiefner, A. Von and W. S. Ralston, eds. and trans. 1906. *Tibetan Tales, Derived from Indian Sources*. London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner.
- Shah, A. M. and R. G. Shroff. 1958. The Vahīvacā Bāroṭs of Gujarat: A Caste of Genealogists and Mythographers. *Journal of American Folklore* 71, 281: 246–74.
- Shah, P. G. 1967. *Vimukta Jatis: Denotified Communities in Western India*. Bombay: Gujarat Research Society.
- Shāh, V. 1966 [1766]. *The Adventures of Hir and Ranjha*. M. Hasan, ed., and C. F. Usborne, trans. Karachi: Lion Art Press.
- Shryock, A. 2004. Other Conscious/Self Aware: First Thoughts on Cultural Intimacy and Mass Mediation. In A. Shryock, ed., *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 3–28.
- Simmel, G. 1906. The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies. *The American Journal of Sociology* 11, 4: 441–98.
- Singha, R. 1993. “Providential Circumstances”: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation. *Modern Asian Studies* 27, 1: 83–146.
- Singha, R. 1998. *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Skaria, A. 1998. Being *Jangli*: The Politics of Wilderness. *Studies in History* (n.s.) 14, 2: 193–215.
- Skaria, A. 1999. *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sleeman, W. H. 1836. *Ramaseena, or a Vocabulary of the Particular Language Used by the Thugs*. Calcutta: G. H. Gutman, Military Orphan Press.
- Sleeman, W. H. 1839. *History of the Thugs or Phansigars of India*. Philadelphia: Carey and Hart.
- Sleeman, W. H. 1844. *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*. 2 vols. London: J. Hatchard and Son.

- Sleeman, W. H. 1849. *Report on Budhuk Alias Bagree Decoits*. Calcutta: J. C. Sherriff, Bengal Military Orphan Press.
- Smith, J. D. 1975. An Introduction to the Language of the Historical Documents from Rājasthān. *Modern Asian Studies* 9, 4: 433–64.
- Somadeva. 1923. *The Ocean of Story: Being C. H. Tawney's Translation of Somadeva's Kathāsaritsāgara (Or, Ocean of Streams of Story)*. C. H. Tawney, trans. and ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas.
- Spary, C. 2010. Disrupting Rituals of Debate in the Indian Parliament. *Journal of Legislative Studies* 16, 3: 338–51.
- Srivastava, Piyush. 2005. Forget Tigers, Peacocks Are Going Extinct Too. *Indian Express* (Lucknow), 17 Aug: n.p.
- Śūdraka. 1905. *The Little Clay Cart (Mr̥cchakaṭika)*. A Hindu Drama Attributed to King Śūdraka. C. R. Lanman, ed., and A. W. Ryder, trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sunday Telegraph*. 1977. A Secret in the Oxford Sense. 30 Jan.: n.p.
- Taussig, M. 1999. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- The Telegraph* (Calcutta). 1998. Gang of Pardhis Busted. 31 July: n.p.
- Tod, J. 1920 [1829–1832]. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan of the Central and Western Rajput States*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tolen, R. J. 1991. Colonizing and Transforming the Criminal Tribesman: The Salvation Army in British India. *American Ethnologist* 18, 1: 106–25.
- Vidal, D. 1997. *Violence and Truth: A Rajasthani Kingdom Confronts Colonial Authority*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Wagner, K. A. 2007. *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India*. Basingstoke: Pallgrave Macmillan.
- Wagner, K. A. 2010. Confessions of a Skull: Phrenology and Colonial Knowledge in Early Nineteenth-Century India. *History Workshop Journal* 69: 27–51.
- Washbrook, D. 1991. “To Each a Language of His Own”: Language, Culture, and Society in Colonial India. In P. J. Corfield, ed., *Language, History and Class*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 179–203.
- Ziegler, N. P. 1976. Marvari Historical Chronicles: Sources for the Social and Cultural History of Rajasthan. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13: 219–50.