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Gavri (alt. Gauri). Gavri (alternate transliteration Gauri) is a 40-day cycle of dance dramas performed by Adivasis (or Tribals) of southern Rajasthan. The performance cycle combines references to religious themes with enactments of secular and current events, giving voice to multiple aspects of local Adivasi socio-cultural identity.

Gavri is associated with the Bhils of the Aravalli mountain districts. "Bhil" is a Census category for one of the many Scheduled Tribes of Rajasthan; some identified as Bhils by those outside their community reject this term as derogatory and use other terms for self-designation. Gavri is therefore performed by people who may identify themselves as other than Bhil, although most scholars of the ritual cycle describe Gavri as an expression of Bhil identity and solidarity.

The performance cycle is believed to have its origins in a springtime celebration of the goddess Gauri, a form of Parvati. A festival honoring Gauri in Udaipur City during the month of Vaishakh (April-May) was adapted by rural Adivasis to the autumnal rainy season. Gavri now corresponds with the agricultural cycle, beginning after maize planting and concluding prior to harvest.

Because of the expense and manpower required to complete the performance cycle a village undertakes it only once every several years, and performances rotate between villages from year to year. Gavri is planned and executed by men; women participate only as observers. The right to portray female deities is inherited through patrilineal descent; female deity roles, or Rai, are performed by sons or other male descendents of previous

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performers. Supporting and non-religious roles are open to any males from the village.

A day's performance, lasting from sun-up to sun-down, consists of several episodes, each with its own theme. Bhopas, local religious specialists, begin the event by invoking Gauri and her consort Mahadeo, also known as Shankar. Religious episodes, in which Gauri is represented as Rai and Shankar as Buria, the hero of the performances, are interspersed with secular pieces good-naturedly mocking local people and events.

During the festival cycle performers abstain from sex and liquor consumption, and eat only one meal a day of lentils and rice. As the actors put on their costumes and make-up (sunglasses, watches and other consumer goods now supplement the performers' traditional dress and jewelry), they transform themselves into the deity being portrayed. They remain transfixed throughout the performance; drummers and other musicians accompanying them maintain a similar level of intense concentration.

Performers, accompanied by their families, travel by foot to other villages where in exchange for the performances they are fed and housed. Hosts may be related to the performers through marriage, daughters and sisters from the performers' village having married into the host village. Performers from mixed-caste villages perform in villages into which women of other castes have married. Performances are also given for creditors and others with whom the performers have business relationships.

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The Gavri performance cycle reinforces religious imagery, and marks social and economic connections between villages and between castes and classes. It is therefore what anthropologists call a total social phenomena--one in which religious, economic, political and aesthetic aspects of society are brought into play simultaneously.

(527 words)

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