Auspiciousness: Coping With Kratophany

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Kratophany is the simultaneous devotion to, and fear of, the sacred (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004). It is experienced because the efficacious power of the sacred is unpredictably multi-valenced: it can be manifest in benevolent and/or malevolent ways (Belk and Wallendorf 1990). Our interpretive paper extends the consumer research literature by examining how Hindu Indians use auspiciousness, a favorable state that bodes well for the future, to cope with kratophany. Auspiciousness serves as a control mechanism that beckons benevolence, and a protective mechanism that wards off malevolence. Auspiciousness can be transferred, permitting the task of generating auspiciousness to be sub-contracted.

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The sacred, described as “more significant, powerful and extraordinary than the self” (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989, p.13) is distinguished from the merely special by the key characteristic of efficacy. Belk et al. (1989) also note that the sacred should be approached with care, because the sacred has kratophanous power. Kratophany—the simultaneous devotion to, and fear of, the sacred (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004)—is experienced by consumers because the efficacious power of the sacred is unpredictably multi-valenced: it can be manifest in a benevolent and/or malevolent way (Belk and Wallendorf 1990). Accordingly, when consumers seek the benevolence of the good-sacred, they likely also expose themselves to the malevolence of the bad-sacred (Belk and Wallendorf 1990). Consequently, consumers can simultaneously experience strong positive feelings (e.g. devotion) and strong negative feelings (e.g. fear) towards the sacred (Belk et al. 1989; Pimentel and Reynolds 2004).

Belk et al. (1989, p.8) suggest that ritual prepares profane persons to approach the sacred, and surrounds the contact of these profane persons with the sacred to forestall the unleashing of the evil powers of the sacred. We believe this implies that consumers require ways to cope, when faced with the kratophanous power of the sacred. Consumer researchers have not yet devoted much attention to discovering these coping mechanisms. Consequently, we begin to fill this gap in the consumer research literature by examining how Hindu Indians use auspiciousness to cope when faced with the tension inherent in their kratophanous reactions to the sacred.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Meaning of Kratophany

The term kratophany was introduced into the English language by Mircea Eliade, as a technical term meaning “an appearance of the sacred in which the experience of power dominates” (Miller 2005). Belk et al. (1989) introduced kratophany to the consumer literature as one of the twelve properties of the sacred, and explained kratophany as the ability of the sacred to elicit both strong approach and strong avoidance tendencies. More recently, Pimentel and Reynolds (2004) defined kratophany as the simultaneous devotion to, and fear of, the sacred. This later definition, which focuses on consumers’ reactions to the sacred, is consistent with the way the term has been used in more recent consumer research (e.g. Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004). Our reading of the relevant extant literature suggests that consumer researchers’ progress in understanding of kratophany may have been impeded because kratophany has been used to describe both the sacred, and consumers reactions to the sacred. We adopt Pimentel and Reynolds’ (2004) definition of kratophany, and carefully distinguish between “the kratophanous power of the sacred” (a property of the sacred) and kratophany (consumers’ strong, mixed reactions when faced with the sacred’s kratophanous power), throughout this paper.

Coping with Kratophany

Although Belk et al. (1989) give different examples of sacred entities associated with the benevolent good-sacred (e.g. gods) and malevolent bad-sacred (e.g. corpses) powers respectively, they then note that consumers fear malevolence, at the same time as they seek benevolence. Although some entities may be largely seen as benevolent, and some may be largely seen as malevolent, all sacred entities have the potential to be both benevolent and malevolent, provoking mixed feelings of awe and terror (Belk et al. 1989). We surmise from this that kratophany exists because the power of the sacred does not operate on a simple continuum. Instead, sacred power can be manifest along two orthogonal dimensions—a dimension of good-sacredness and a dimension of bad-sacredness. It is the two-dimensional nature of sacred power, coupled with its unpredictability, which generates the tension inherent in kratophany. Furthermore, even when particular sacred entities are usually perceived of as wholly benevolent, these entities tend to be approached with care, because the power of the sacred, irrespective of its valence, is understood to be dangerous to ordinary beings. It seems logical that consumers would employ coping mechanisms to deal the kratophanous power of the sacred. Accordingly, we ask what these forms these coping mechanisms might take.

Belk and Wallendorf (1990) examine one such kratophanous sacred entity—money—in depth, and suggest that money can be perceived as kratophanous by consumers because it is viewed as having both malevolent and benevolent powers. We surmise from their work that if sacred power is NOT understood or perceived as multi-valenced (for example a child’s faith in a wholly benevolent God), then kratophany may be considerably lessened. Hence it is possible that consumers could cope with kratophany by choosing to view the sacred entity is purely benevolent (leading to a pure approach orientation) or by viewing the sacred entity as purely malevolent (leading to a pure avoidance orientation). To be precise, in these situations, choosing to perceive the sacred entity as wholly positive or wholly negative collapses the good-sacred bad-sacred dialectic to a simple continuum anchored on either end by the benevolent good-sacred and the malevolent bad-sacred respectively. However, a consumer with an approach orientation to the sacred would still need to undertake further preparatory rituals such as self-cleansing, because of the danger inherent in any contact with sacred power.

Two other consumer research studies have briefly discussed kratophany using the illustration of consumers’ relationships with inherited family heirlooms (Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004) and their college football teams (Pimentel and Reynolds 2004) respectively. In both cases, consumers highly value something (the heirloom or the team’s victory) while simultaneously fearing the loss of that thing. These two examples attest to the tension caused by the simultaneous antithetical reactions to the sacred, suggesting that when consumers do perceive sacred power as valenced, it is this uncertainty as to the outcome in a particular instance that causes the tension associated kratophany. For example, a confident custodian of family heirlooms or a devoted fan who is aware that loss can occur but who is sure that loss will not occur, will likely not experience kratophany. This suggests to us that a more sophisticated coping mechanism might involve attempts to reduce uncertainty. We believe that the Hindu Indian (“Hindu”) concern with auspiciousness may shed light on how consumers cope with kratophany by reducing uncertainty.

Auspiciousness

Auspiciousness is a favorable state that bodes well for the future (Inden 1985). According to Inden, the Roman Empire practice of augury—interpreting signs from nature in order to
determine the will of the gods—gave us the word auspicious, which comes from the Latin noun avis (bird) and the Latin verb spicere (to look at). Although we shall use the Hindu notion of auspiciousness to illustrate our discussion, we note for the record that auspiciousness is also an important conceptual category in other Asian cultures. Furthermore, we note that in contrast to Western consumers’ idiosyncratic use of rituals designed to generate favorable outcomes (such as personalized pre-game rituals undertaken by some professional sportspeople), auspiciousness systematically pervades Hindu Indians’ daily lives. Hindu Indians’ shared understanding of auspiciousness also suggests that such rituals are more likely to be publicly employed in India, as compared to the West. Almost every thing, creature, person, act, or event can be described in Hindu discourse as either auspicious or inauspicious. Anything that predisposes the gods to favor a human undertaking is auspicious. People, events, objects, words, numbers and points in time can be more or less auspicious.

Table 1 draws on the work of Indian sociologists to present examples of auspicious and inauspicious elements in Hindu discourse. As indicated in the table, Das (1982) points out that among Hindus, marriage and other rituals pertaining to life are regarded as auspicious while cremation and other rituals pertaining to death are viewed as inauspicious. Consequently in her view, auspiciousness is defined as pertaining to life and inauspiciousness as pertaining to death. In a similar vein, Marglin (1985) suggests that auspiciousness is reflected in festivities and inauspiciousness in mourning. Narayanan’s (1985) more nuanced example of the auspicious death of an elderly man pre-deceased by his wife and survived by his progeny suggests that inauspiciousness is anything that prevents the extended family from carrying out its dharma or destiny of biological immortality (Channa 2000).

Every married Hindu woman, during her husband’s lifetime, is perceived to be the concrete embodiment of temporal auspiciousness, as shown in her colorful attire, jewelry and the red dot on her forehead (Carman 1985). But, as soon as she becomes a widow, she is viewed as inauspicious, and generally avoided (Srinivas 1952). Yagi explains the difference in auspiciousness between the two as a function of their ability to bear “fruit” (1999 p.275). Hence Yagi (1999) views auspiciousness as conduciveness to future prosperity, much like the concept of “lucky” numbers found elsewhere. In a similar vein, Inden and Nicholas (1977) define the Hindu term mangala to mean luck or well-being. Srinivas, on the other hand, writes that “mangala [an emic term referring to the marriage ceremony which involves the tying of a sacred thread or mangala sutra around the bride’s neck] is an auspicious or good-sacred ceremony” (1952, p.74), and later implies that inauspiciousness relates to bad-sacredness. Thus, we seek to clarify the relationship of auspiciousness to the Western concept of “luck” and its relationship(s) to the benevolent and the malevolent sacred.

**METHOD**

We utilize data from depth interviews conducted with twelve Hindu Indian informants. Two of our informants were resident in India, two were resident in Australia, and eight were resident in New Zealand. The ten non-resident Hindu Indians we interviewed had spent the majority of their adult lives in India, had married Hindu Indian spouses in India, and continued to maintain strong ties with India after immigrating to Australasia. Our informants, eight of whom were female, ranged in age from 24 to 77. In keeping with interpretive research norms, we utilize the use of pseudonyms to preserve our informants’ anonymity. We employed the constant comparative method of analysis, engaging in open ended and axial coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes and developing interpretations after each wave of data collection. Our emergent insights then informed and directed the next phase of data collection. Our interpretations in each phase were informed by the relevant literature.

**FINDINGS**

Hindus utilize as many auspicious elements and signs as possible, and avoid anything remotely inauspicious. Auspicious times, places, persons, colors, and objects seem to be valued by Hindus because they attract the benevolence of cosmic powers.

**Auspiciousness is a control mechanism**

Our informants found it easy to list objects, times or places that are auspicious and those which are inauspicious. We spoke to Sudha (IF 77) and her daughter-in-law Shaila (IF 39) about the meaning of auspiciousness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rituals</th>
<th>Auspicious</th>
<th>Inauspicious</th>
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<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Pregnant Woman</td>
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<td>Colors</td>
<td>Red</td>
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<td>Numbers</td>
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<td>Directions</td>
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<td>Days</td>
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1Based on information in Das 1982; Srinivas 1952; and Yagi (1999)
Sudha: auspicious events mean something good…
Shaila: good
Sudha: …inauspicious events are the opposite of that.”
Shaila: “if we want to do something, we note it from the
calendar—in India we get calendars that show certain
dates that are auspicious…lucky days! It’s something
to do with lucky and unlucky.
Int: lucky and unlucky?
Sudha: we may see from the calendar which days are good.
Shaila: we do the same with numbers too. Some are lucky and
some are unlucky. Nine is a lucky number…
Sudha: seven also.

According to these comments, auspicious bears some relationship to “lucky” and “good”. However, another informant was careful to distinguish the concept of auspiciousness from that of luck. To Geeta (IF 44) an auspicious object is more than a lucky object, as luck implied (to her) something that cannot be controlled. Instead, auspiciousness was explained as something that helped a person increase the chances of a favorable outcome by increasing the probability the gods would approve of their undertaking. This seems to imply that Hindus attempt to exert control over their lives by using auspicious elements and signs. According to Geeta,

“a Hindu believes that there are definitely some things that are better than others and some times that are far better than other times, they are the auspicious times. There are definitely times that are bad or things that are bad that as a Hindu we must avoid. These are the things that have not met with God’s approval. Who are we to decide for ourselves what we want to do? Inauspicious times are the worst times or things possible—yes there are ‘neutral’ times or things but they are avoided for the big decisions as they can be seen as just as bad as the inauspicious times. If we have three choices, have God on our side; have him against us or have him not care, I would like God on our side all the time. If he does not care about our decision either way then it is not auspicious, he is not against us so it is not inauspicious or dirty, but he is not in approval—therefore for the big decisions we cannot go forward.”

Geeta’s observation—that small tasks can be undertaken in neutral times, but important tasks cannot—implies to us that while it may be acceptable to risk failure with regard to trivial tasks, important tasks need every assistance possible, so as to ensure success. As Dinesh (IM 55) put it, auspicious objects are like “…runway lights for a plane—the better the light, the more chance there is that Ganesh [a Hindu god] will visit us and give us success.” We surmise from Dinesh’s observation that auspiciousness can serve to beckon the benevolence of the sacred.

Later Vijay (IM 25) elaborated, “…the gods are often called upon for daily as well as life altering events. However, the big decisions require far more effort and planning—the women are the ‘prayer warriors’ for the family and are seen as responsible for the [husband’s] health.” As we shall show, this is because auspiciousness can be transferred from one entity to another, and hence allowing the task of generating auspiciousness to be sub-contracted to another.

Auspiciousness can protect

In traditional Hindu belief, the bride and groom ascend to a temporary elevated state, and are believed to be the embodiment of deities (in the case of Brahmins) or royalty (in the case of non-Brahmins) during the marriage ceremony (Dumont 1972). Situating a ritual performance in an auspicious space and time while employing

the use of auspicious artifacts facilitates this movement between liminal and bounded states (Das 1982). Accordingly, several of our informants described preparations for a typical wedding. First, a priest is consulted to select the most auspicious date and time for the wedding, with respect to the birthdates of the bride and groom. Prior to the wedding, the bride, groom, and any ritual objects to be used in the ceremony are purified while the selected venue is physically and ritually cleansed and decorated. Often a dais is erected in a hall or under an awning outside the home. The location in physical space that houses the birth, marriage or death acts as what Eliade (1959) terms an imago mundi (a representation of the cosmos on the earth). For example, during the ceremony, the bride and groom often sit on a mandap, a raised platform, under a canopy with four pillars. The material directly over the place where the bride and groom sit is often an auspicious red color. The Hindu bride is most often dressed in a new, auspiciously red sari, and adorned with auspicious jewelry. Other ritual attempts to generate auspiciousness are made. Vijay, recollected his own wedding day in India:

“The hawan [sacred fire altar] was prepared in the center of the largest room in my ancestral home. As the wedding began, Anita [the bride] and I were seated in front of the hawan ... and we added ghee [clarified butter] to it when instructed by the pandit [priest]. He would sing mantras [invocations] and after each one we’d add some ghee and the guests would add sawdust [sweet smelling wood grains].”

Just as the central mall in Heritage Village was designed to allow its visitors to experience a time and space separate from the profane world without (O’Guinn and Belk 1989), the transcendence of spatio-temporal boundaries is also experienced at the focal point of the Hindu wedding ceremony, the hawan. The perfumed smoke of the fire, the burning of incense and the chanting of mantras all serve to transport the participants to the liminal zone of the axis mundi, where they may commune with the sacred. The hawan is sacralized by the addition of ghee [clarified butter] which is considered the most distilled essence of the cow which is revered as sacred by Hindus (Korom 2000).

Sudha explained to us that the date for a marriage is fixed after checking that it is an auspicious date for both groom and bride (as determined from their respective birthdates). However, she elaborated “Fate picks the date of death but within that you can pick your timings [for the cremation]. But if possible they do the cremation on the day of death. But they can pick mornings or evenings depending on which is more auspicious.” We learnt from Sudha that since the date of births and deaths cannot usually be chosen, special care must be taken to remove auspiciousness e.g. by engaging a religious leader to engage in special prayers in order to “stop bad things from happening”.

We surmise from Sudha’s comments that during dangerous times of transition such as birth, marriage and death, auspicious symbols do more than just attract the benevolent attentions of the good-sacred—they also serve to repel the malevolent attentions of the bad-sacred and/or protect from the danger inherent in sacred power.

Auspiciousness can be sub-contracted

Many Hindu marriages involve the tying of a sacred necklace made of gold and black beads, called a Mangal Sutra—literally “auspicious thread”—(in North India) or a tali (in South India) around the bride’s neck. Maya (IF 44), a medical professional now residing in Australasia, was asked about her Mangal Sutra. Maya told the interviewer that she was planning to buy a bigger and more expensive one when she made her next trip to India. This more
elaborate Mangal Sutra was to be purchased to serve as evidence of her now improved financial status. When asked how she would dispose of the old one, she reacted in surprise, “Oh you can NEVER [emphasis present] sell it, you have to melt the old one and use the gold to help make the new one. If not the new one will not be genuine…it will not be auspicious”. It appears that the sacred powers contained in the Mangal Sutra reside in the gold and black beads it is made of, and can be transported by incorporating said gold and beads into another Mangal Sutra.

This ability to transfer auspiciousness from one element to another, coupled with Vijay’s remark that “women were the prayer warriors of the family” led us to ask whether auspiciousness be transferred between individuals as well. Can auspiciousness be generated by one party, while its benefits are enjoyed by another? Further probing elicited that Hindu women’s responsibilities extend well beyond the modern Western notion of women ensuring their husband’s good health by managing their nutrition and medical care. Hindu women are also expected to pray, fast and wear auspicious symbols in order to ensure their husbands’ longevity.

This “sub-contracting” of auspiciousness—generation to the women of the family begins at marriage. One informant, Tara (IF 42) explained that once married, a bride’s new focus was expected to be the well-being of her husband. According to Tara,

“These glass bangles …are rings of glass with a bit of silver. They are a symbol for maternity … after marriage, in India, glass bangles are a must for every married woman. And you must be very careful that you don’t break them…glass bangles give long life to your husband…The toe rings as such, that is also part of married….uh…uniform that you have to wear…this Mangal Sutra [pointing to the gold necklace she was wearing] is another thing that every Indian woman wears, these black beads are what we call a symbol of marriage. Every married woman wears these… This ….is also for the longevity of your husband…. everything for the husband, so we …we’re happy.”

The tinkling sounds made by jewelry such as bangles and anklets are believed to be pleasant to the gods. According to Shukla (2000), a bride not wearing the marriage jewelry of toe rings, anklets, and most importantly, bangles, can become a bad omen for the husband. Wearing the jewelry does not just generate positive outcomes for the husband, it avoids the negative outcomes generated by not wearing the jewelry. We perceive from this that auspiciousness simultaneously functions to approach the good-sacred and repel the bad-sacred.

The relationship between auspiciousness and sacredness can be further unpacked by looking at the kratophanous power gold jewelry such as the Mangal Sutra. These strong, ambivalent reactions inherent in kratophany, are evident when we consider the reversal of the rituals involved in marriage when a woman becomes a widow. During the marriage, the adorning of the bride with auspicious gold jewelry prepares the bride to join the groom in a temporary elevated state, as they are believed to be the embodiment of a god/goddess (in the case of Brahmins) or royalty (in the case of non-Brahmins) during the ceremony (Dumont 1972). While the couple is in this common state of elevation, the bride is incorporated into her husband by virtue of the marriage rites which usually include the groom or the officiating priest tying a golden thread bearing the Mangal Sutra pendant around her neck. Since Hindus view the wife as incorporated into her husband’s body, his death means that she is permanently associated with death and bad-sacredness. Thus the voluntary removal (Srinivas 1952) or forcible stripping (Firth 2001) of auspicious wedding jewelry from a widow, is an obvious reversal of the adorning of the bride, to prevent attracting the attention of bad-sacred powers.

The new bride is adorned by the groom’s family with auspicious jewelry to anchor her to her new identity. Once the bride is absorbed into the groom’s self, she is does not need to transcend the boundaries of the groom’s extended family but enters it as part of the groom. Consequently, the extended family’s boundaries are maintained intact throughout the process—the groom ascends to a higher cosmic plane temporarily and returns to the extended family augmented with the bride as his “half-body.” When the new wife utilizes auspicious symbols to attract the benevolence of the gods for the benefit of her husband and his extended family, she is also helping to ensure her own favorable destiny since she is now as one with them. Thus selection of auspicious dates, times, and spaces, and the use of auspicious symbols are motivated by the desire to attract the benevolent attentions of the good-sacred while repelling the malevolent attentions of the bad-sacred.

**DISCUSSION**

Hindus believe in karma—that one’s present social status is prescribed by one’s actions in a previous incarnation (Channa 2000). Thus Hindus are commonly thought of asfatalists and perceived to be very different from North American societies where the majority of individuals are believed to seek to control their own destiny. Yet, Hindus’ concern with generating auspiciousness is second only to their concern with attaining and maintaining purity.

When we recognize that purity is viewed as the absence of pollution, which in turn is viewed as “essentially that which cannot be controlled” (Hershman 1974, p.290), we begin to understand that the Hindu attempt to be pure and auspicious is an attempt to control one’s condition by avoiding or removing that which cannot be controlled.

Hindus are concerned with using auspicious symbols to attract the benevolence of the gods and avoiding inauspicious symbols to avoid attracting the attention of malevolent beings. We note that this concern with auspiciousness is heightened at times of birth, marriage and death—all dangerous transitions where we are forced to face the kratophanous power of the sacred. We view this concern with auspiciousness as an attempt to indirectly control (via the superior powers of the gods) what one cannot control directly. Thus, Hindus are, after all, concerned with control. The need to exert control over one’s destiny is universal- and it will find expression in some way, despite the constraints of society and religion. Consequently, even those in the West who seek to exert personal control over their lives, may seek to indirectly control those aspects of their lives cannot be directly controlled. For example, the popular media abounds with stories of people fighting a terminal disease who seek to dominate the uncontrollable by using science, litigation, religion or even, magic. Like purity and pollution, science and litigation operate on a social plane. Like the sacred gods, religion and magic operate on a cosmic plane. Our Western equivalents of auspicious symbols, such as lucky numbers, prayerbooks, magic crystals, and inalienable jewelry, are used to attract benevolent cosmic powers to control what we cannot control, on our behalf. Thus marketers are increasingly faced with consumers who seek to control every aspect of the consumption experience but then may be dissatisfied when the product, service, or experience consumed is not exactly what they had anticipated. For example, while awaiting the discovery of a magical weight-loss pill or elixir of life, some consumers seek to transform their bodies or regain their youth with the aid of a surgeon’s scalpel (Schouten 1991) in an attempt to control their appearance, and perhaps, their destinies.
How does the Hindu conceptualization of auspiciousness inform consumer research on luck, chance, and negotiation? Our realization that consumers employ auspiciousness in attempt to indirectly control their destiny offers insight into the krataphonous power of the sacred. Krataphony may explain the revulsion and vindictiveness consumers experience when omnipotent surgeons and revered ballplayers fail to provide them with the favorable outcomes they seek. We call for research that looks at, if, and how, science, religion and magic inter-relate in the lives of postmodern consumers actively seeking to participate in production and consumption processes (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

Thus our explication of auspiciousness sheds light on the distinction between the good-sacred and the bad-sacred. Sacred powers, whether benevolent or malevolent, cannot be controlled by mere humans. Hence the use of auspiciousness represents a way of manifesting attempts to attract benevolent powers and the removal of inauspiciousness is an attempt to forestall malevolent powers while also protecting oneself from the danger inherent in sacred power. What other coping mechanisms do consumers employ, when faced with the krataphony of the sacred? Research into these coping mechanisms may shed further light on the nature of the krataphony and the impact krataphony on consumers.

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