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The political as a practice: the sadhus' art of self-fashioning

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This paper examines the sadhus' ways of fashioning the 'self' and body, creating 'a style of existence' by one's relation to oneself as a model of life-style politics. The sadhu as non-sovereign subject, constitutes a new power relation in relation to himself, which Foucault calls 'self-fashioning' one's own existence, marking the radical impossibility of domination and control by the coercive institutions of society and state. This paper focuses mainly on questions of life-style politics as concomitant forms of politics, rendering dominant power relations ineffective in ruling over life, as well as how the sadhus' non-sovereign mode of life 'becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object' (Deleuze 1988).

Michel Foucault, in his later works such as *The Care of the Self*, was redefining the concept of the political not simply as an edifice of power, but as a set of practices that constitute an act of 'self-fashioning' of one's existence beyond existing power relations. In affecting oneself by oneself, one can create the new within the prevalent forms of power, thereby not only creating new forms of power but redefining oneself beyond a given power relation. Following Foucault, I first examine traditional understandings of the political as existing power relations based on social contract theory, and argue for the political as the 'art of living', or an 'ethics of self-fashioning' of one's existence by freeing oneself from one's political bond with the given power relations, and creating an alternative bond with one's own community. Second, I examine how the South Asian sadhu tradition can furnish an example of nonsovereign politics—an alternative practice of politics that does not pass through an existing mainstream social formation. The term 'nonsovereign' is first used by Foucault in one of his lectures at the College de France, and since then has rarely been used in academia. Sovereign is necessarily antithetical to 'nonsovereign'. By the term sovereign or sovereign power, Foucault refers to disciplinary power, a shift that Western culture made after the decline of sovereign forms of power around the turn of the Seventeenth Century.

But, I am using the term in a broader sense, which includes power of formation of the subject through self-constitution. The nonsovereign is both power (and potentiality) and being. With this name, the individual achieves a new status, more powerful revolutionary and poetic, than the status of the body¹ being trapped in social power (broadly construed as any form of power that oppresses individuals).

I argue that the frameworks of politics as power relations in a given state formation are incompatible with the understanding of a sadhu's politics of life. In sadhus' lives, power has a different connotation. It is understood as energy, spiritual force, and potency of body; experiences in life rather than the forms of domination and representation. As Chua suggests: 'Power saturates lived experience, and the ways in which it is felt, enacted and articulated require analyses that pay serious attention to the dynamic processes of everyday life'². Such an understanding of power as lived experience 'extends beyond genealogical, historicized approaches to models of power'.³ In other words, power (shakti) constitutes a politics of life or self, which is more like the power of the soul, the power of the divine force realised in or through the body, and different than the politics of the state.

If one of the important dimensions of the 'political' constitutes forming the 'self', forming the body⁴ and creating a 'style of existence' by one's relation to oneself, the question that I want to ask is how it opens up a nonsovereign or under-current politics. The question leads me to the ancient sadhu tradition, in a similar way that Michel Foucault was led to studying ancient Greek and Roman societies, not in search of the content (edifice of judicial sovereignty) of an alternative model of the 'political', shaping what we are, but in search of the way to it – the art of living, care of the self, or self-fashioning one's own existence. In my personal observation of the sadhus at Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2012, I was fascinated by the way sadhus constituted the 'political' for themselves, furnishing an example of how human beings self-organize themselves into communities capable of self-affectively relating to each other when defining who they are. This resonated with Foucault's own observations, namely

at the opposite extreme one finds the attitude that consists, on the contrary, in defining what one is purely in relation to oneself. It is then a matter of forming and recognizing oneself as the subject of one's own actions, not through a system of signs donating power over others, but through a relation that depends as little as possible on status and its external forms, for this relation is fulfilled in the sovereignty that one exercises over oneself. Sovereignty here does not

¹ Body here is not only considered as a biological site but a source of political possibilities that one creates by rediscovering its power.

² Chua & et al, p. 8.

³ Chua & et al, p. 8.

⁴ Chua & et al, p. 8.

refer to domination or mastery over others, but one's capacity to self-govern oneself. To the new forms of the political game, and to the difficulty of conceiving oneself as an acting subject placed between birth and functions, tasks and rights, prerogatives and subordinations, one was able to respond by intensifying all the recognizable marks of status or by seeking an adequate relationship with oneself.⁵

In many ways, the sadhu culture certainly reminds us of the ancient Greeks in that the 'political' is considered as 'caring of oneself'⁶. The idea of the 'political' as a capacity to self-fashion oneself repoliticises the conventional notion of politics as an edifice of juridical sovereignty. What makes the political and its new relation to ourselves is not an edifice of power but an ethics of the art of self-fashioning or beoming active transformatively. It moves away from a traditional understanding of the political as existing ideological power relations to an 'art of living' or 'self-fashioning' one's existence by oneself beyond the prevalent forms of power relations. Put differently, it maps out its new relation with oneself by moving to a self-sovereign model of lifestyle politics in which one constitutes one's 'political' through self-fashioning what one is.

Keeping in view this notion of the political as self-constituting oneself illustrated by Foucault in his analysis of ancient Greek life in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, my own journey through the ancient Indian world of the sadhus elicits frustration with general understandings of the 'political' and its relation to our identity, primarily in terms of conventional power relations such as 'sovereign power', 'disciplinary power', and 'society of control'⁷. This has led me to explore a nonsovereign way of 'self-fashioning' one's own 'political'. What interests me in the sadhus is not the salvation that they seek in life but the 'aesthetic of their existence', the way they self-constitute the political/social for themselves, constituting themselves as who they are; 'the precept according to which one must give attention to oneself...took the form of attitude, a mode of behaviour; it became instilled in ways of living...it thus came to constitute a social[political] practice'⁸. The sadhus constitute their own 'self' beyond the 'dispositif of power' (dominant power relations) in a very aesthetic manner⁹. If not 'beyond', they certainly redo/alter their existing political relation with the state and mainstream social formation in a new way. The sadhus' act of 'self-fashioning' one's own existence speaks against the idea that the body and self are merely a social formation.

⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: III*, p. 85.

⁶ Taking care of oneself seems to be personal activity; how does it constitute our "political" and shape what we are, which in the usual sense demands engagement with others? What relationship does one keep with others when one engages to take care of oneself? Foucault answers "you should take care of the self for others who, in the community formed by the city-state, ensured your own salvation."⁶ Taking care of oneself guarantees your "ataraxy" and happiness, but it comes off with "heavy responsibility."

⁷ Deleuze talks about these three forms of power that move from one to another: from the centralized form of power such as the King, to the defused networks of power, to the surveillance State.

⁸ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: III*, p. 45.

⁹ Foucault, *Ibid*.

The acts of self-forming, and self-transforming practice, in its varied forms and manifestations, involve the relation with the others. That relation with others constitutes oneself as ethical as well as political subject: 'what establishes the relation with oneself and with others, and constitutes the human being as an ethical subject'¹⁰. Therefore, the freedom of the ethical subject, which is at the same time political too, consists in the possibility of choosing the kind of self-fashioning one wants. There are different techniques of the self, and those techniques have historical specificities of different ways in which individuals make themselves into certain kinds of persons and therefore of the historically specific forms in which individuals practice ethical freedom while living in a dominant power relation. This seems odd to Foucault, as articulated in *Discipline and Punishment* and *History of Madness*, particularly as he states: 'The idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me'.¹¹ Foucault's techniques or technologies of the self add to Habermas' classification of three kinds of social techniques – techniques of production, signification, and domination. In the section that follows, I will demonstrate how sadhus practice techniques of self, constitute alternative communities within and beyond a given social formation, and self-fashion who they are. First, however, a brief introduction to the ancient sadhu culture.

The sadhus – great renouncers of life – are also known as holy men, begging monks, fortune-tellers and mystic wanderers in India and Nepal. The Sanskrit term *sādhu* refers to renouncers who live a life apart from society in order to focus on their own spiritual practice.



Figure 1.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Essential works of Michel Foucault*, p. 200.

¹¹ Foucault, *Essential works of Michel Foucault*, p. 293.

The words come from the Sanskrit root *sādh*, which means ‘reach one's goal’, ‘make straight’, ‘gain power over’, or ‘accomplish’. Depending upon their sects, most usually decorate their bodies with ash and colours, and write their mandras on the body (see fig. 1). They wear malas (garlands) called rudraksha (see fig. 4), and wrap-around turbans of jata (see fig. 2). Their bodies index their identity. They are the ‘cultivators of interiority’. They are ‘in their pursuit of the “inner light”, the liberation from all earthly bonds and the “knowledge” of the absolute, they have chosen the way of asceticism and yoga. This implies a systematic “reprogramming” of body and mind by various methods, such as celibacy, renunciation, religious discipline, meditation and austerities.’¹² The outlandish bodily art activities are an act of devotion to their tutelary deity. The sadhus live together in the temples, live alone by themselves in small huts or caves, or wander throughout the country alone or in small groups. Their dress and ornaments differ according to their sect, but they usually wear yellow/orange robes, twist their matted hair in a knot on top of their heads, take vows of poverty and celibacy, and depend on the charity of householders for their food. Sadhus usually have only the possessions they carry with them: a danda (staff), a kamandalu (jar), a chilim (smoke pipe), an alms bowl, chimta (a fire tong), and an extra piece of cloth. Sadhus generally employ, to various degrees, ritual symbolism such as nakedness, matted hair, and covering themselves with ashes, which symbolize the sadhus’ individual identity and formal rejection of normative society.

We find in the sadhus a unique way of indexing the body as a site of the political; their impressive way of cultivating ‘interiority’ or virtues. Though there are various groups such as Jains, Sheikhs, Shaivas, Vaisnavs and Buddhists in South Asia, each cultivating the soul in unique ways, a comparative study of their various ways of ‘self-fashioning’ would shed great insights, though this is beyond the scope of this paper. We might, however, follow Gavin Flood, when he suggests that ‘the renouncer is a creative figure in the history of South Asia, and the concerns of the ascetic are focused on individual liberation, the cultivation of particular virtues and the development of a higher state of consciousness’¹³. This paper contends that the sadhus’ lives furnish the best example of a nonsovereign model of constituting oneself in a different social register. Their care of the self and body is in many regards extraordinary and novel in relation to other communities. For one, the sadhus are often considered the perfection of ascetic ideals in one’s spiritual life. By bringing them into discussion, this paper neither seeks to justify nor criticize the ascetic ideal, but rather seeks to find a political efficacy in their lives within such an ideal. Moreover, neither theological nor ethnographic in nature, the discussion of the political is via an analysis of aesthetics in nature. We therefore focus on how sadhus’ ascetic¹⁴ spiritual lives reveal to us new aspects of being political, of constituting one’s very subjecthood.

¹² Hartsuiker, p. 16.

¹³ Flood, p. 89.

¹⁴ Asceticism is generally considered nihilist or a negative force. But Nietzsche considers the fact that ascetic can also be a positive force. Every new force has to negate something else in inventing itself.

It must be stated that the sadhu's life is often viewed in a religious way and its political dimension is generally overlooked. Even the sadhu communities themselves view their acts of self-fashioning more-or-less as a way of achieving transcendence or salvation. The political efficacy of their practices is drawn here through an examination of their ways of life. We do this mindful of any unhelpful imposition of modern notions of the subject in the sadhus. The analysis is somehow more transcendental than immanent to sadhus' goals. The religious substance of their lives has been characterised in moral terms of 'finitude, the Fall, and evil, a mode of subjection in the form of obedience to a general law that is at the same time the will of a personal good'¹⁵. The moral codes with which they form their thoughts and desires govern their lives, but these codes are constituted from an 'altered ethics'; from 'a different way of constituting oneself as the ethical subject';¹⁶ of one's spiritual behaviour, which also constitutes a different model of the political in their life. The sadhus' spiritual practice of the body is considered as personal but it is very political—the personal as the political. The term 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' is often understood in relation to a certain religious practice, and is considered as a very personal affair. But, following Foucault, the spiritual also implies the political activity by which one cares for his/her self, namely 'the form of practices which...can transfigure and save the subject'¹⁷. The spiritual goal with the project of reprogramming body and self, constitutes a political dimension of their asceticism.

The sadhus' own formation of the self and body is a political model that counters the idea of the self and body as a specific 'reproduction' of power/state formation. It actually reduces the effects, domination and control of power. Life is liberated from the oppressive form of social form of power. This very autonomy amounts at its fullest; and 'is this not a privileged moment for seeing the development and formation of the question of the truth of the subject'¹⁸? The death of the renouncer as a householder and his new birth as a sadhu creates a possibility for an 'ethics of self-fashioning' that entails the 'aesthetics of existence' and the positive aspect of ascetic ideals.¹⁹ Such an ethics pushes the limits of institutional practices of the given power relation, modifies the values it imposes on us, and helps us to think and act otherwise. 'Unbecoming' the traditional institutional forms of political practices is to become other than what is anticipated, making life into an art. This gives us a chance of 'caring of the self' for oneself. The sadhus renounce mainstream society, family and their all relations with the past and accept new values of the sadhu community in search of salvation. In other words, the sadhus free themselves from their political bond with

¹⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: III*, p. 239.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 140.

¹⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 19.

¹⁸ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 254.

¹⁹ Nietzsche argues that the act of self-denial in ascetic life is also affirmation. In order to affirm life, one has to deny it, undo it.

mainstream politics and society and form an alternative bond with their own sadhu community.

The sadhu community is a break from the mainstream Indian/Nepali society as it is free from the social bonds of family and the restrictions of caste imposed on them by the existing power relations, giving us a glimpse of an alternative political community. The world of the sadhus offers a home for all those who are misfit in the traditional household life including widows, orphans, homeless, old, disabled people, neurotics, criminals, and spiritual radicals (this amalgam of social milieus constitutes various types of sadhus²⁰. Some of them are unexceptional while others are genuine in their pursuit for their spiritual goal). The sadhu society recodes or re-inscribes traditional household identity. They all feel a mystic oneness in the alternative community even though a very few sadhus still maintain the hierarchy of caste in their new communities. Sondra Hausner writes:

A Sadhu in his thirties whom I met in Hardwar had joined an ascetic order as orphan child...Because of its insistence on confronting the limits of householder life, Sadhu society also certainly includes former criminals, people with mental illness, and runaways—those who are not easily accepted back into householder society, and who need an alternative social institution.²¹

The sadhus constitute themselves in a different political register by renouncing the mainstream social norms of Indian life. Renouncing his birth family and community for the search for God, the sadhu enters into his new community consisting of Brahma as well as gurus and fellow sadhus. Such acts of 'unbecoming' past societal life and becoming a different being forms the very basis of the political in constituting a new being in their existence.

In the following section, we examine three major sects of the sadhus in order to show how they self-fashion themselves beyond the domination and control of normative Hindu society; how they escape being the object of the political strategy, of a general strategy of power; and how this is a nonsovereign formation of the power constituting oneself in what one thinks, feels and acts, which shapes what they are.

²⁰ See J. Copeman and A. Ikegame, *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2012).

²¹ Hausner also cites ethnographer Robert Gross saying, "asceticism provides a viable alternate life style for individuals living within the rigid hierarchically stratified system of the caste society," p. 44.



Figure 2.

The first major sect of the sadhus, the Vaisnav or Saivav, practice austerity in several ways. Some practice breathing, some practice fasting, some practice tapasya (meditation), and some inflict pain on themselves. All these practices are intended to deface the social inscriptions in the form of dietary systems, breathing systems, and listening systems imposed on their bodies, and they transform their bodies into clean and holy entities as with the temple. The body is regarded as inherently dirty, and in need of transformation toward a clean shrine for the god to dwell in. The austerities are also intended to revitalise body's power, mastery over passivity, docility and impotence:

Tantric masters discovered long ago that success in both the outer world and the spiritual realm is possible only if we awaken our latent power, because any meaningful accomplishment, and especially the attainment of the ultimate spiritual goal, requires great strength and stamina. The key to success is Shakti – the power of soul, the power of the divine force within. Everyone possesses an infinite (and indomitable) shakti, but for the most it remains dormant. And those whose shakti is largely unawakened have neither the capacity to be successful in the world nor the capacity to enjoy worldly pleasures. Without access to our shakti, true spiritual illumination is not possible. Awakening and using shakti is the goal of tantra, and this is why tantra sadhana is also known as shakti sadhana.²²

²² Tigunait, p. 2.

The practices of cleansing the body are complex, and speak of a politics of life or the political as a self-formation. All austerities are intended to regulate the habits of the body into different modes.²³ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elucidates how the body's habits are normalised to meet the specific needs of power, or how it is made passive. He states, for instance, that 'a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved...in every society the body was in the grips of very strict power, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations'.²⁴ Certainly the renouncer upon entering into the sadhu society has to normalise the body in a way that the society expects, but the unique aspect of the sadhu society's treatment of body is that it does not treat the body as 'docile' but as a very active site in which all possibilities of salvation can be realised. More interestingly, the practices on the body, and decorations, are intended for the realisation of salvation. The body is not a sick, governable and normalized passive object but an active agent that embodies a new spiritual power. The whole body is regarded as a complex, multilayered indivisible synthesis of psychic, somatic, emotional, sensory, cognitive, and visionary forces. This is broadly held throughout South Asian societies, and differs in important ways from Foucault's treatment of body in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Madness*. We find, for example, that

one of the central features of Foucault's argument is that changing European conceptions of the body made various disciplinary techniques possible and effective as mechanisms of control. The docile body-stripped of meaning and regimented according to programs of utility and efficiency-became the building block of state power as reflected in such seemingly dissimilar and unrelated phenomenon as assembly line choreography, prison architecture, school-room etiquette, hospital sanitation, and the collection of census data. In his genealogy of the body, Foucault refuses to accept that these and other technologies of control in modern life can be explained, or made sense of, with reference to the logic of post-Enlightenment reason or rational analysis. Rather they are the product of a history of errors and "contingent conjunctures" that must be understood not through a decoding of symbols but in terms of a somatic, materialist expose of power.²⁵

By giving a new habit or mode to the body and acting contrary to so-called human nature, the sadhus 'reverse all values' of a householder society, which regulate the body and self and invent what Nietzsche calls 'second nature' in them.²⁶ The body is the primary object of attention of the sadhus. This type of sadhus (fig. 2) performs various postures,

²³ For instance, the ethics of listening as a way of cleansing heart described by in his essay echoes Sadhu's own intended goal of listening God's sermons "For the possessor of such a defective heart, the only solution, according to the author, lies in cleansing (tahara) the heart, both by giving up the sinful acts that led to such a state and by repeatedly listening, with intention and concentration, to sermons, exhortations, and Quranic verse." Different cultural traditions have such arts of living with the same ulterior motive of cleansing body and purifying soul. P.627. *The Ethics of Listening: Cassette-Sermon Audition in Contemporary Egypt*, Charles Hirschkind, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Aug., 2001), pp. 623-649.

²⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 136.

²⁵ Alter, p. 50.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, 1874.

known as asanas to cleanse the nerves and stimulate the flow of prana (breathing) and master the regulation of body. All sadhus fast on ekadashi, the eleventh day after every full and new moon, when phalahari eat only fruits, dhudharis drink only milk. Some sadhus wear 'chastity belts', on their loins to keep sexual feelings from distracting them from feeling holiness. They also refrain from eating foods such as ginger, garlic or anything that they consider might stimulate sexual urges. Some take a vow of silence for several years.

Practicing such forms of austerity, the sadhus can achieve control of their bodies, their breathing, their habits, their stimulations, their passions, their malfunctions, their diet, and their cosmetics.²⁷ They are self-sovereign over their bodies in all ways, which can be said to neutralise power's efficacy over their bodies. Their practices of bodily power/energy not only resist social power or mainstream society's (in the form of authority, customs and laws) attempts to normalise the body, but also shows that one can govern oneself without power's normalization of one's body.

The attempt by the dominant mode of power relation 'to classify and regulate all forms of experience through a...frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation'²⁸ falls short in the life of the sadhus.²⁹ Foucault realises the existence of such a mode of resistance, which escapes power relations, namely:

something in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power, something which is by no means a more or less docile or reactive primal matter but rather a centrifugal movement, an inverse energy, a discharge.³⁰

The sadhus are the masters of their bodies, and I argue here that the political task is to rediscover the power of body. They constitute and control their bodies' regulation of prana (breathing), its blood circulation and the flow of desires. It is not a body constructed by dominant power relations but is self-constituted by the sadhus themselves. Social power does not succeed in inscribing on the sadhus' body, such as its sleep patterns,³¹ diet patterns, labour patterns, etc., but these are all self-constituted and ruled by the sadhus themselves. Some sadhus develop extraordinary power over their bodies, and manage extraordinary feats such as the ability to withstand very cold water for hours in winter, or remain by the fire hot summer; or bury themselves in sand for hours; or can walk on broken glass or nails.

²⁷ These things seem only personal but they are political too. In a similar case, Richard Rorty misleadingly accuses Foucault of turning away from political issues focusing on very personal activities of the self in his later writings. Foucault claims that one's relation to oneself is not just personal activity but also political one. "Foucault's sense of the political has nothing to do with an overtly political project: "I mean that the questions I am trying to ask are not determined by a pre-established political outlook and do not tend toward the realization of some definite political project." *The Foucault Reader*, p. 375. It is a "politics as ethics" and "ethics as an art." It is more self-fashioning oneself than being defined by a dominant power relation.

²⁸ Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. II*, p. 25.

²⁹ By standing on their heads, the *Sadhus* reverse all the values of householder society. This posture symbolizes the "transvaluation" of all values, not through some abstract theory but by a concrete practice.

³⁰ Foucault, *Power and Knowledge*, p. 137.

³¹ There is a popular saying that when the world is at work, *Sadhus* are at rest (during the day) and when the world is at rest, the *Sadhus* are at work (during the night).

All these practices, and power over the body, are what the sadhus constitute themselves in them: 'you may be weaker than the whole world but you are always stronger than yourself. Let me send my power against my power'.³² The self which exerts its own power against itself constitutes a radical sense of political individualism. All the inscriptions that society imposes on their bodies in their past lives have been washed out and made pure with the enunciation rituals performed when they first enter the new community of sadhana (meditation): 'The new bodies which Sadhus ritually...[constitute] are untainted with the social residue of their previous lives and can propel them into states of potential religious and cosmic realization.'³³

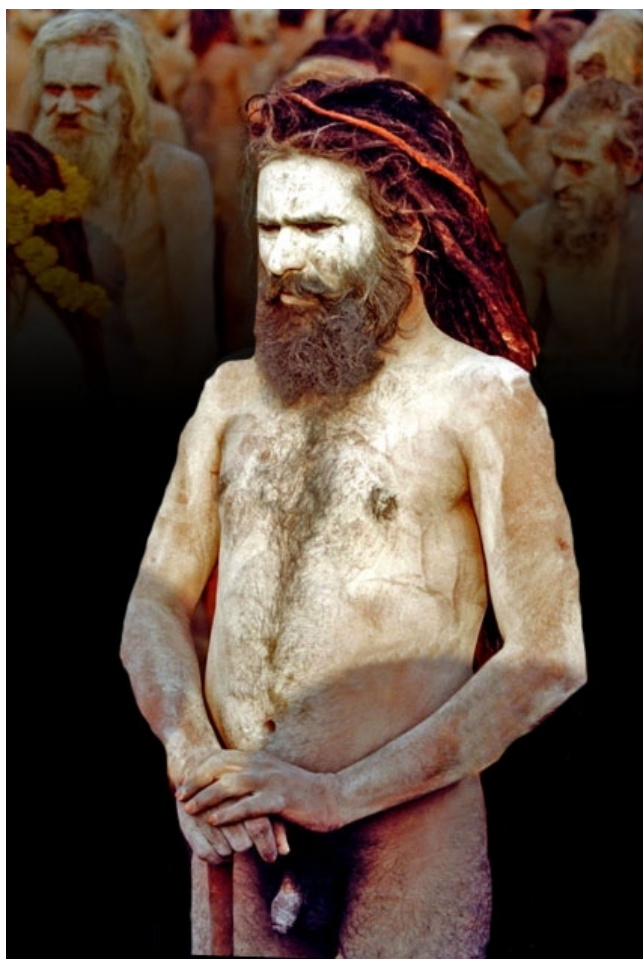


Figure 3.

The Naga Babas (see fig. 3) are the second sect of sadhus in this discussion, and are distinguished by their nudity, seen as a pure form of life, and indeed the very truth of life. Verrier Elwin (1960) suggests a genealogy for the word naga:

³² Rose, pp. 68-69.

³³ Hausner, p. 50.

The most likely derivation to my mind is that which traces "Naga" from the word Nok or people which is its meaning in a few Tibeto-Burman languages, as in Garo, Nokte and Ao. It is common throughout India for tribesmen to call themselves by the word "naga" meaning "man" an attractive habit which suggests that they look on themselves simply as people free from communal or caste association.³⁴

We might theorise that prior to the birth of sovereign power, nudity is seen as holy or 'divine madness', or in the words of Foucault 'secrete delirium'.³⁵ The two meanings of nudity relate, one the one hand, to attraction and power, and on the other, to shame - invented with the practice of covering the body, which is ugly, thus reducing the body to powerlessness. The first meaning is primitive and the latter historical. We see society 'reproducing' life in other ways at certain historical moments, making nudity unholy or shameful. Shame is a political construct that society imposes on the bare 'pure body' in the name of social ideals. 'The difficulty of moving beyond shame', Sara Ahmed writes, 'is a sign of the power of the normative [sovereign power], and the role of loving others in enforcing social ideals'.³⁶

The naked body is deemed shameful when the sovereign feels that it is 'unreproductive' for its interests; shame is given the sign of madness, and it becomes the 'pure spectacle' of shame regulated by sovereign power: 'Madness became pure spectacle, in a world over which Sade extended his sovereignty and which was offered as a diversion to the good conscience of a reason'.³⁷ Subjects were asked to maintain certain morals, read scriptures, behave well, dine well in order to avoid madness. Shame, on the other hand, is used as a surveillance of morals in the service of society; to tame the madness of the population. But the sadhu revives the idea of their god's madness as a sign of divinity. Madness is no longer a monster inside oneself, nor an animal, but a sign of divinity. We might say that divine madness³⁸ in the naga babas is something sovereign power's 'technologies of domination' cannot detect as it operates within fields of nonsovereign power. It is the power of the divine immanence, which Foucault calls 'undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself',³⁹ in which an individual constitutes himself/herself in relation to the self through the practice of the body. There was, in other words, no shameful madness in antiquity.

³⁴ There are references to militant *Naga mendicants* in Verrier Elwin's *Nagaland* (1960) and E. M. Foster's *Passage to India. I am interested only in the etymological meaning of the "naga" for my purpose here and am not referring to any of the Tibeto-Burmese speaking peoples, such as those of Nagaland state in India.*

³⁵ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p 96-97.

³⁶ Ahmed, p. 7.

³⁷ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p. 69-70.

³⁸ The word "divine" does not refer to supernatural or spiritual power in my present discussion. It rather refers to the "immanence of life," leading to the idea of parallelism between physical and spiritual exercises. I think divine is pushed on the direction of transcendent by the sovereign at some historical time because that is what it could not control. The sovereign separates its subjects' body and its desires or passions and purifies the soul.

³⁹ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p. ix.

On the contrary, madness was considered holy. The madness of Christ was considered as the glory of the humanity and the way Yahweh reveals his plan. It is the power of the people to awake to a new truth. Furthermore, Foucault suggests “delirium[madness] is the dream of waking persons’.⁴⁰ There are several myths in the ancient Indian literature in which the Lord Shiva would walk naked in his madness across the Himalayas fully intoxicated by marijuana. But society at a specific historical time imposed shame on the human body: “It could be said that shame would function as part of the honorific codes that regulate sovereign power...”⁴¹ The sadhus, on the other hand, have no fear of walking bare bodied. When naga babas walk the street without fear or shame, it resists existing social power, which imposes shame on the body for its proper political management and control. Some see nudity in the sadhu tradition as an absolute renunciation of attachments to the material world, a complete control of sexuality and the sensual body.

However, we suggest here that it is less resistance as a celebration of life,⁴² without fear from ‘rules of the conduct’ imposed by dominant social values. Nudity in a sense renders society ineffective. This is the reason we occasionally see people march naked in the public squares as a resistance against sovereign power’s unjust moves. Remaining nude or semi-nude especially in the cold of winter is considered a severe austerity, and an emulation of Shiva, who himself would walk in the nude in the cold Himalayas. There are no inscriptions of sovereign (society) in their bodies. To show freedom from society’s rules of the conducts, such as rules of the sacred, cleanliness and morality of the householder’s life, the naga babas walk in nakedness. In her novel, Gita Mehta suggests ‘to demonstrate total freedom from ‘attachment,’ normative rules of cleanliness (and sometimes of morality) are deliberately broken. Thus the profane becomes sacred, the sacred profane’.⁴³ The naga babas, likewise, are believed to be capable of placing curses on people. They are thus believed to be powerful. Mehta writes that people believe they ‘levitate and...place irrevocable curses on any who displeased him.’⁴⁴ Nagas are also considered warrior ascetics who fought against the British Empire. According to Mehta, parents often tell stories of naga ascetics to children, ‘twenty thousand Naga ascetics, naked and ash-covered with matted locks, had come down from their caves in the Himalayas to do battle with the red-coated Englishmen ambitious for empire.’⁴⁵ Naga babas thus remain emblems of power in Hindu society. Their nude bodies are understood to oppose prevalent beliefs about nudity as shameful madness or a malfunction of the body.

The Aghori (see fig. 4), the last section of the present discussion, is a sub-sect of Shaivas, and are known as the Kapalikas or ‘bearers of skulls’. The word aghori in Sanskrit means non-terrifying. Aghoris worship the terrifying manifestation of Shiva, also called

⁴⁰ Foucault, cited in *The History of Madness*, p. 103

⁴¹ Binkley, Dolan et. al, p. 53-77.

⁴² In the Hindu myth, there is a story of the Lord *Shiva* celebrating sex with his wife *Parvati*.

⁴³ Mehta, p. 249.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

Bhairavanath and were known to perform human sacrifice,⁴⁶ which often involved offering their own flesh to the deity in ritual acts of self-mutilation. Drinking out of a kapala (skull cup) symbolises the sadhu's ability to take part in the life-force of the deceased, taming it with the use of mantras. Carrying a skull also symbolises conquering the duality of life and death. This sort of Aghori practice of playing with the terrifying force of death ridicules society's death punishment.



Figure 4.

For an Aghori, death or any cruelty imposed by society is not a threat. He symbolically challenges society by playing with death, and it can be considered as a celebration/self-fashioning of life even in the face of death. Nietzsche suggests that 'Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems [like death], the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian'⁴⁷. Aghoris self-fashion life even in the face of fear and of the cruelty of life. They ridicule the illusion of the flesh and give a form to what an Aghori looks like:

death is harnessed to the cycle of regeneration and converted into birth. One of the key ways...by which this restitution of life is dramatised is by the elaborate construction, and subsequent negation, of its antithesis – decomposition and decay. An emphasis on biological

⁴⁶ The practice of human sacrifice no longer exists among this group of *sadhus* today. Moreover, these *sadhus* are not many in number in these days. But they still eat flesh of a dead human body. However, I am not interested in the cannibalistic implication of this practice here. What interests me with such practice is an *Aghori's* capacity to constitute a different form/habit of the body beyond the normalizing effects of normative rule (sovereign power) of the Hindu society.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, p. 562-563.

processes is used to darken the background against which the ultimate triumph over biology (and hence death) can shine forth all the more brightly...The vigil of the Aghori on the cremation ground reveals this process clearly, for his morbid revelry in putrescence only serves to underline his claim to have transcended the world of biology and pollution, and to have conquered death. By wallowing in decay and death the Aghori histrionically proclaims his victory over them.⁴⁸

For the Aghoris 'bad is good, death is life, dirty is clean'.⁴⁹ All illusions including the concept of death as a terror are recognized as imposed on bodies by society and the only way to make society ineffective is to gain power over the elements of creation (including the cycle of life and death) by themselves. They drink alcohol, eat meat, and use obscene language, transgressions that defy conventional Hindu rules of purity and pollution, and thus transcend in the most overt and concrete manner all dualities imposed by sovereign power. Creating a different world and transferring oneself through a different tradition and living in it with a different nature is a terrifying, monstrous movement.

But the objective is to free oneself from the bondage of moksha (the cycle of birth and rebirth), and to unite with the supreme self (Paramaathma). The concept of moksha (liberation) itself resembles the concept of immanence because it is through the practice of the body that a sadhu realizes liberation. But society distances moksha, attributing transcendence to it in order to make a specific 'reproduction' of sick people who do nothing but cry for nonexistent transcendence for their liberation so that society can control their body and thought.⁵⁰ The divine or Brahma is not transcendent (everything is Brahma in Hinduism), it is also an unacknowledged experience of the body. Shiva, for them, is not an otherworldly entity⁵¹ but a realization of the immanent power of the body through its practice. In other words, there is little point in dismissing sadhus by calling them otherworldly.

There is no death for the Aghoris, as death is life.⁵² There is no duality between death and life. The political 'reproduction' imposed by society makes this cycle of birth and rebirth its object by introducing the idea of death in the populace. By transcending the duality between death and life, Aghoris prevent society from making their lives its political object. Their practices are seen by the society as terrifying (drinking water from a skull, and eating human flesh, for instance) so they overcome terror by engaging with it routinely. Death as a terrifying entity is imposed on life by society to manage and control the population. This 'characteristic privilege' of 'sovereign power to decide life and death',⁵³ is greatly challenged by the Aghoris' fearless overcoming of the duality between life and death. The

⁴⁸ Bloch and Parry, p 26-27.

⁴⁹ Hausner, p. 37.

⁵⁰ The whole idea resonates with Nietzsche's idea of "slave morality" in his book *Genealogy of Morals*.

⁵¹ Deleuze says transcendence does not mean other worldly, but it is immanent to body.

⁵² There is a popular belief in Hinduism: "Ante mati sa gatih," which Robert E. Svobodap interprets as "Whatever you are thinking about at the moment of death determines your next rebirth." See Svobodap, p. 89.

⁵³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 136.

Aghoris say that there is no death but only life. This is usually understood in terms of a popular concept of reincarnation in Hinduism. However, there is a possible political interpretation, namely that portraying death as a non-terrifying or loving entity as life, they challenge the domination and control of sovereign power. Some may argue that the fear of death is innate. We might argue that it is a 'political reproduction'. The classic example of Adam and Eve suggests a lack of consciousness of life and death. It is God (a form of sovereign power) that politically reproduces such a concept in them.

The other thing that the Aghoris resist is the distinction made between good (clean) and bad (unclean). The invention of the distinction between the ideas of good and bad has also its ideological origin. It is a political construct. The origin of the idea of a distinction between good and evil is what Nietzsche has traced to the birth of priesthood in his *Genealogy of Morals*. For the Aghoris, there is no evil, everything emanates from Brahman. According to them, anything in this universe is the manifestation of God (God as immanence), so everything is as pure as God and is God-like. There is no evil or bad in the world. Society (like the priesthood in the case of Nietzsche in *Genealogy of Morals*) imposed the idea of bad or evil on its people at a certain historical time⁵⁴ in order to control and dominate them.

The Aghori sadhus believe that every human is a dead body (shava) because human pleasures inscribed on the human bodies are political reproductions. They achieve great siddhis (powers) through their sadhana (spiritual practices) by overcoming the false desires of the manipulated body. So, their primal energy and exceptional power exceed any form of sovereign power. Such a formation of exceptional power in one's body is a nonsovereign way of being self-sovereign. So, this is an instance of the nonsovereign model of constituting oneself beyond the power of society without challenging its narratives but simply making it ineffective to act over the field of one's body. This is what can be considered a creation of a new subject, inventing a new mode of existence, a new mode of "conative drive," in other words, a new way of being political.

We turn now to the earlier claim that the death of the past life of the sadhu, as a householder, and his new birth as a renouncer, creates the possibility for a politics of self-fashioning by creating a new way of being a subject or constitution of oneself. The sadhus' renunciation of households, society and material possessions might generally be considered escapist. Renouncers of life may be seen as escapists or nihilists because they do not will the passion of life. They actually have an 'aversion' to the life of the senses. In this paper, however, it is argued that renunciation affords a condition for the invention of a new way of being a subject; a new way of defining oneself in relation to oneself.

In many regards this follows Nietzsche's explanation of nihilism. Here, nihilism is not always negative, as 'it makes negation a power of affirming' where destruction becomes a creative force. The sadhus' quest for the pure, ultimate and ideal soul, negates everything earthly. If the political is understood as self-constitution of individual or group, their quest

⁵⁴ I am not explaining how this occurred at a historical time because that is not my purpose in this article.

for the pure soul is political, no matter how they regard their salvation. Here, we suggest it can have a political implication. It starts up with everything positive, affirmative and joyful in their lives. By rejecting the traditional household and following the ways of the sadhu's life, they are able to create their own communities in which they express their creativity of self-fashioning. Positive nihilism negates other things in order to create what the nihilist wants. For example, a key concept underlying sexual austerity in the sadhus is to transform the "inner heat" of the sexual urge into spiritual energy: "virile force and spiritual power, the flame of sexuality, which has to be fanned by austerities, feeding the bonfire of mystical ecstasy. Shiva is the erotic ascetic. The extreme asceticism constitutes inner power, which is compare with firepower. "Fire from his third eye burns up Kama, the cupid god of Love." The Sadhus develop various techniques of transformation of sexual energy, kama, into spiritual power. In other words, Sadhus transport their lust into spiritual energy⁵⁵, which gives them a new joy of the body; a new way of being a subject otherwise. So, it is not giving up desire but transforming it into a more joyous kind. This can be an alternative way of fulfilling bodily desire or the force of immanence. It's a creation of a new form of passion; a new political act. It is an act of attention, a quality of a waking, which produces insightfulness and unselfish acts. The Sadhu's life is a yes to the eternal recurrence (production of the highest form of life) in the sense that it does not let any doctrine rule life but creates a new mode of the subject, a new way of being political: 'We...want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who creates themselves'.⁵⁶

The other way of being a new subject and experiencing a new mode of life can be seen in the sadhus' break from conventional society. The normative construction of Hindu society guides the 'rules of conduct' for its individuals. But, the sadhus separate themselves from mainstream society, merge with their own renunciators' community and practice a life of spirituality. They even separate themselves from themselves, putting life beyond the individual or person, having been liberated from persona or individual or collectives, the Sadhus explore 'a world of impersonal and pre-individual singularities...a free and unbounded energy. These are nomadic singularities which are no longer imprisoned within the fixed individuality of' the sovereign⁵⁷. The sadhus feel richer than the sovereign with the few possessions they carry with them. They experience a palatial comfort, a new mode of joy, living in their small huts or caves known as kuti in the jungle or around the ancient temples.

Following Burgess, we identify 'rituals and identifiers employed to sustain such a state of separation from the caste system and mainstream society as a whole, such as the

⁵⁵ Spiritual energy is not a realization of transcendence but rather an immanent experience of one's bodily pleasure.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 266.

⁵⁷ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 107.

sacramental use of ganja and the growing of long matted locks',⁵⁸ known as jata, as a sign of renunciation. Such separation from the householder society allows the Sadhus the pleasure of 'rejoining oneself as the end and object of a technique of life, an art of living. It involves coming together with oneself, the essential moment of which is not the objectification of the self in a true discourse, but the subjectivation of true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on oneself',⁵⁹ The subjectivation of power enters when one relates with the prevalent form of domination and control. But, the Sadhus relate to themselves in terms of defining themselves through the self-constitution of the self and body. So, the Sadhu's life gives us the techniques or practices through which one creates and "cares of the self."⁶⁰ The sadhu's life 'intensifies the relation to political action rather than hindering it...[the] distance between me and the world, hollowed out by care of the self, is constitutive of action, but of a regulated, specific and deliberate action. One cares for oneself not in order to escape from the world but in order to act properly in it'.⁶¹ The detachment from the world and oneself creates an emptiness, which allows the care for the others. These sadhus are not escapists but they are tragic characters who say a 'joyous Yes' to the world. Is this not a great art to give a style to life by oneself? Are not these Sadhus, who form their own bodies and thoughts, the artists of life? Nietzsche says 'To "give style" to one's character – a great and rare art!'⁶² For Nietzsche, life is an art. Breaking from our fetishistic attachment to society and symbol systems, the alternative model of micropolitics focuses on the 'direct, non-symbolic awareness of one's body from the inside'⁶³. There can be existence or reality apart from language, discourse and the symbolic order, which rebuts Lacan: there is 'no such thing as a pre-discursive reality', 'every reality is founded and defined by a discourse'⁶⁴. This postulate on the nature of reality excludes physical sensations, bodily feelings, emotions and fantasies—an entire gamut of human experience that occurs before or separate from discourse.

The world of the sadhus is one of the best examples of how one can constitute a different mode of power relation in defining him or herself. The sadhus do not seek macrological forms of ideology to transform themselves; they do not seek a collective political enunciation; their intentionally and voluntary actions are not subordinated to sovereign power. Rather they would give the 'rules of conduct to themselves'; each group (or member) of a sadhus community has kept singular way of changing themselves, of setting 'the rules

⁵⁸ Vincent E. Burgess, 2007, 'Indian Influences on Rastafarianism', unpublished Senior Honors Thesis, Ohio State University. Having long hair in the Nineteenth Century Europe would be considered as a rebellion. That's why I am reinforcing the idea that all those activities of the *sadhus* are not only personal but they are very political as well.

⁵⁹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 333.

⁶⁰ See Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. III*.

⁶¹ Gros, p. 702.

⁶² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 232.

⁶³ Milner, *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men*, p. 263.

⁶⁴ Jacques Lacan, p. 32.

of conduct'. The Nietzschean project of 'Be yourself' in your mind and body (that includes our values as well) is what find is expressed in the lives of these sadhus. A lot of people associate sadhus' rules of conduct with ascetic ideals or nihilist denial of forces of life. But, I argue that the Sadhus' rules of conduct are positive phenomena. I asked a Sadhu "Why do you restrain your body, your desire?" And the Sadhu said, "The desire you have is not your desire. The true desire of the human being is to seek God. God is what one should desire."⁶⁵ Though I am not interested in seeking God, his remark reminds me of Deleuze and Guattari, who illustrate in the *Anti-Oedipus* that what we desire is not our desire. Our desires are formed by our interaction with power relations. This explanation helps us better understand the ways the Sadhus want to relate themselves to the power relations in a new way by constituting their own desires or rules of conduct by themselves without relating to the given power relations.

Foucault's "What is Enlightenment?" deals with the same question of how to reduce power relations while at the same time increasing the capacity to act or desire for oneself. It is people's own endeavour to create their own bodies, desires and thoughts without letting them be receptive to exteriority. Enlightenment is the practice of the body and realization of how such a practice reduces the grasp of power relations over oneself. So, the sadhus' enlightenment practices '...revise the understanding of the self, society, and the universe by directing them intentionally toward an alternative mode of existence within the dominant environment [power relation]'⁶⁶. The sadhu's renunciation of society and its political domination and control of life inaugurates a new way of being political by forming new subjectivity, different social relations and alternative power formation, transfiguring life, a true model of the enlightenment by being true to oneself. In such an understanding of enlightenment as a practice, the ascetic sadhus' life unfolds a radically different conception of political being than what is found in the dominant political worldview, and this conception grounds a different type of power relations (nonsovereign relations) from sovereign power (social power).

Let me then further discuss how a different type of power relations works in a nonsovereign formation of subjectivity in the sadhus. The sadhus are self-sovereign over their lives since they reside outside the field of the laws not disobeying society in a straight confrontation as armed rebellions do but making the laws simply ineffective to normalize them.⁶⁷ The laws ban taking marijuana, walking naked in public places, eating dead human flesh, and self-immolation. Society controls such activities as illegal. But, the sadhus do all that. Marijuana is considered Prasad, a holy food of the Lord Shiva (most supreme God for the sadhus as well all for the Hindus), and freely distributed on the day of festival called Shivaratri. The naga babas (fig.3) walk naked around the temple, the river and his kuti (hut).

⁶⁵ Based on my personal interview with the *Sadhu* at Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2011.

⁶⁶ Valantasis, p. 797.

⁶⁷ See also Hardt and Negri's *Declaration*, especially p. 40.

The Aghoris eat dead human flesh and play with ghosts and spirits. These sadhus are above the sovereign's laws in Indian and Nepali society.

In the past, political institutions such as the King in Nepal would receive blessings and spiritual guidance to rule the country from a particular sect of sadhus called Gorkhnath. There is also a myth that when Prince Sidhardha Gautam (later called Lord Buddha) was riding through the city in his chariot, he saw, among other types of folk, a renouncer (sadhu) walking in the street. He was inspired to become a renouncer and left his society as a prince of the Shakyan dynasty. These inspiring sadhus are self-sovereign residing above sovereign power (king), which sometimes seeks spiritual cooperation from them to work effectively.

The sadhus' self-sovereign nonsovereignty does not reside within the state of exception from the rule, which simply imposes rules outside the rules imposed by him on the population. What the sadhus do is to impose rules on themselves. The nonsovereign power that sadhus embody in Indian/Nepali society limits the concept of society in which the hidden power of a sovereign itself is suspended before the nonsovereign of the sadhu. For example, the sadhus reduce social power to non-power. The law becomes 'undecidable' and ungraspable and ineffective: '...law increasingly renounces that symbol of sovereign privilege'.⁶⁸

Working outside the field of society and resisting to the power's domination through the ethics of self-fashioning (Foucault) is the norm for the cultural tradition of the nonsovereign sadhu.⁶⁹ I asked a sadhu in Pashupatinath: 'How do you relate yourself with the state (that's the simplest term I could use with him to make him understand the meaning of a sovereign power) and its laws?' He responded with, "Nothing! We do not live in a state. If we do, we have our own, the kingdom of the sadhus with its own laws of practices."⁷⁰ In the kingdom of the sadhus, sovereign's signification turns into nil: 'a being in force without signification',⁷¹ which cannot command or impose anything. Society neither signifies nor controls sadhus' way of life. What commands nonsovereign power among the sadhus are not the laws of sovereignty but the immanence of life-power or capacity of ethics of self-fashioning one's own existence or identity by oneself – 'I constitute myself'.

In other words, the ways in which the sadhus decorate their bodies, practice sadhana (meditation), control their diet, among other practices, constitute what they are. In the life of the sadhus, society is valid but impotent to normalise their bodies and thoughts, to classify them into class or ideology. The nonsovereign is not a class or category because it does not encounter a prevalent ideology of power relations, which I hesitate to think about when I define the 'political'. The nonsovereign subject resists any class/ideology of society which

⁶⁸ Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 92.

⁶⁹ The *sadhus* can ride for free in public vehicles and can eat fruits from people's gardens. They do not have to produce their identity cards to the border patrol officer when they travel through the border between India and Nepal. This extrajudicial political privilege is an instance of constituting a new power relation out of what you practice in life.

⁷⁰ Based on my personal interview with a *sadhu* at Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu, Nepal.

⁷¹ Giorgio Agamben, 'Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy', <http://themessiahandthesovereign.blogspot.com/>.

takes 'life as a political object...turn[s] back against the system that was bent on controlling it'⁷². It does not command the ascetic sadhu life. In fact, sadhu asceticism has banned society from influencing on its life.

In conclusion, the model of the 'political' constituted by the sadhus' practices of fashioning the self and body and creating 'a style of existence' by one's relation to oneself can be a model of life-style politics. Such a concomitant form of politics renders a dominant [social] power ineffective to rule over life. Thus, in the nonsovereign mode of the sadhu's life, "life becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object"⁷³. The nonsovereign subject like a sadhu constitutes new power relations in relation to himself (Foucault calls it 'self-fashioning one's own existence'), marking the radical impossibility of domination and control by the coercive institutions of society and the state. 🙏

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⁷² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol II*, p. 145.

⁷³ Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 92.

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