

TRANSCULTURAL DIALOGUES

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Jacques Cloarec
FIND's Honorary President

EDITORIAL

Facing Ecological Challenges with Alain Daniélou

Dear Friends of FIND,

In the past weeks, newspapers from all over the world have been announcing that the world is in flames. Many urban dwellers pay little attention. Forests are burning, among other places, in Amazonas, Africa, Siberia and Indonesia. Human beings are destroying not only the biggest oxygen supply we have, but also the real source of Life for all species on this earth. But such catastrophes are perceived as far away from the city's problems. For Europeans, in particular, these catastrophes are ultimately not so bad as terrorism in Paris, London or Berlin. The assumption is that these wildlife problems do not concern us, that they are not primarily related to our lives.

In many of his texts and letters, Alain Daniélou spoke of Shaivism as the worship of Nature, basing his assumptions on the image of the pre-Vedic deity Paśupati (Lord of Animals) and of the marginal character of this religion in the face of urban elites. He was criticized for this, because the scholarly trend in the West related Shaivism with a later form of Hindu theism and assumed that it had more to do with monotheistic creeds than with a life guided by natural forces.

Regardless of the "objective aspect" of the debate on Shaivism, which I am not competent to clarify, I think that one point should be emphasised in the light of the present situation of the world. Daniélou was convinced that the source of all religions is found in the human being's reconnection with Nature, that Nature is not only what science describes and classifies (which is perfectly fine in the domain of experiments and technical manipulation of resources, but not beyond it), and that the

archaic attitude to Nature can teach us valuable lessons for the future.

During the last four and half years, *FIND Research and Intellectual Dialogue* has paid careful attention to such needs. Adrián Navigante has tried not only to do justice to some crucial indological matters related to Daniélou's heritage, but has also opened a debate going beyond the India-Europe axis and its scholarly and non-scholarly commonplaces. His transversal approach at the FIND "Transcultural Encounters" Forum, within the framework of FIND's Grant Program, as well as in different FIND interactions, has led to an expansion of the research and discussion field. This year, FIND's Forum will host African, Amerindian and Indonesian traditions to tackle the complex issue of Nature and Anti-Nature in Religions; our online review is also engaged in examining the relationship between human and non-human beings, with special attention to the environment. But even more: we have decided – as a crucial orientation of FIND – to meet the urgency of the so-called "ecological question" that is so mindful of the end of Kali Yuga. In this sense, it is insufficient to think that projects or interactions covering India and Europe are relevant *just for the sake of Indian and European culture*, rather than focusing on projects and interactions (in India, Europe *and beyond*) with an innovative approach through a new understanding of Nature.

To use Daniélou's words, I would say that the roots of paganism, a reconsideration of animism, a new perception of the divine in Nature, enhanced attention to tribal traditions, as well as the recovery of authors contributing to a change in sensibility and understanding related to this problem, have become a *desideratum*. Daniélou left us a clear trace of his engagement with this issue: the Labyrinth. The Labyrinth is not only the main branch of FIND, but also a place where the urgent needs of our times are met, especially the harmonious interaction between humans and non-humans, an interaction that goes beyond functional or utilitarian motivations.

It is with this spirit of change that FIND hopes to counterbalance the current destructive tendency that threatens to put an end to life on this planet.

With best regards,

Jacques Cloarec



Adrián Navigante

Director FIND Research and Intellectual Dialogue

FOREWORD TO THE BENGALI EDITION OF *GODS OF LOVE AND ECSTASY: THE TRADITIONS OF SHIVA AND DIONYSUS*

The following text is a slightly modified version of Adrián Navigante's foreword to the Bengali edition of Alain Daniélou's *Gods of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus*, recently published in Kolkata, India. The book was presented in March this year at the Alliance Française of Kolkata, hosted by the cultural program "Literary Evenings at Sampark", followed by a discussion on Alain Daniélou's thought in which Adrián Navigante and Sunandan Roy Chowdhury (Director of the publishing house Sampark and FIND's grantee 2018) shared their ideas with the audience.

TRANSCULTURAL DIALOGUES



Sundan Roy Chowdhury and Adrián Navigante at Sampark Literary Evenings, 17 march 2019.
photo by Amanda Viana de Sousa

This book, which first appeared in 1979, is above all an archaeology of religious experience, and for this reason it is perhaps worthy of an attentive reading, especially in our own time. A study of Shiva and Dionysus would be impossible today, mainly because religious comparatism, which was quite acceptable – even beyond evolutionist parameters – after the Second World War, is now suspected of presenting arguments too general for the demands of specialized research and elements taken out of context and over-interpreted out of recognition, but also because one of the main ideas of Alain Daniélou’s book is

about a primordial religion, a kind of trans- or pan-cultural substratum related to the forces of Nature and necessarily leading to a radical affirmation of Life (epitomized in the figures of Shiva and Dionysus). Our time is one of relativism and fragmentation, characterized mainly by a cult of death and a denial of roots and experiential sources other than those serving pragmatic and ideological interests. In view of this, does Daniélou’s book really deserve an attentive reading? Does it deserve a reading at all? Does it offer anything that may be deemed relevant for our present era? There is a difference between an “outdated” and (in the words

Daniélou affirms that “Dionysian” is the name of the Shaivite religion in the West, owing mainly to his conviction that pre-Christian cults and pre-Vedic religious forms share a common substratum.

of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche) an “in-actual” book. The first is one belonging to the past with no message whatsoever for the present. The second is a book that goes against the (present) mainstream but has something important to say, a book compelled to wriggle its way through many different kinds of resistance in order to demonstrate its value. Alain Daniélou’s book belongs to the second category. It is an in-actual book with a considerable potential both for Indian and Western readership, because it faces the most important challenges of our time.

In the first place, an archaeology of religious experience is not just an objective study of religious phenomena. In this book, Alain Daniélou not only delves into very interesting and relevant historical elements of both Indian and Western culture, but also conveys a message and a new world vision, advancing a singular elaboration of his own learning process in the context of Hindu Shaivism and its possible adaptation (and transformation) in the West, owing to correspondences in several ancient European cultural layers. His elaboration of Shaivism seems to go beyond its context of origin, but in fact (if we follow the main arguments) it recaptures the broad spectrum of what for Daniélou constitutes its archaic significance.

Shaivism, in the work of Alain Daniélou, is a very complex dispositive that differs considerably from any scholarly definition of it. We know that the textual sources of Shaivism can be traced back to epic poetry (especially

Mahābhārata), with the fusion of the Rudra cult (of Vedic origin) and a figure of Shiva that blossomed later on in the Puranic literature (*Śiva-, Liṅga-, Skanda- and Kūrma Purāṇa*, among others). Basing his hypothesis on iconographical material from Mohenjo-daro, Daniélou traces the cult of Shiva back to the Indus Valley civilization, thus aligning himself with British archaeologist Sir John Marshall who, back in the 1930s, interpreted the famous Paśupati seal as a proto-form of Shiva supported by features worthy of notice: the tricephalic character of the figure, bringing it close to mediaeval representations of the god; the yogi-like posture, reminding us the Yogīśvara aspect referred to in *Skanda-Purāṇa*; the head crowned with bull’s horns, opening a field of speculation on bull deities; and its ithyphallic character, relating to epithets of Shiva denoting overflowing – and erotically encoded – life-power (for example, when we consider epithets like *ūrdhva-liṅga* and *ūrdhva-retas* relating to the thirteenth chapter of *Mahābhārata*). Such an archaeological hypothesis, which cannot be declared false, enabled Daniélou to conceive Shaivism not as a post- but as a *pre*-Vedic phenomenon.

Now, one of the main and most stimulating points of this book is the fact that Daniélou’s aim was not to discuss the archaeology of the Shiva cult, but rather to amplify its symbolic, religious and philosophical significance, the relevance of which not only concerns ancient Indian civilization but also contemporary issues both in India and Europe, such as the general social and identity crisis, the disorien-

tation of youth and the destruction of natural (and for Daniélou “sacred”) places through an increasing process of abstraction carried out by religious and political institutions. Daniélou’s thesis is that the religion of the Indus Valley (judging from its remaining fragments) was kept alive by the Dravidian layer of Hinduism that not only made its way into Puranic literature, Tantrism and part of the Bhakti cults, but also influenced the Brahmanic tradition, creating a fruitful tension with it. In other words: what Daniélou finds at the very origins of Indian civilization is not a mere archaeological object of study with no influence on the present, but a living religious and cultural complex permeating many aspects of the Hindu tradition and even overstepping the geographical limits of the Indian subcontinent, that is, something decisive in understanding the singularity of Hinduism and even the potential of some hidden, forgotten or repressed layers of religious experience in the Western tradition.

At first sight, the argument of the book seems to be the following: Shaivism, in the form that Daniélou attempts to reconstruct from the civilization of the Indus Valley to the theistic religious and philosophical system uninterruptedly transmitted through a succession of masters and disciples (*sampradāya*) down to our time, had a Western analogy in the Dionysian religion of ancient Greece. The main difference is the lack of continuity of transmission in the West, resulting in the disappearance of the Dionysian religion shortly after its expansion in late antiquity and its co-existence with other so-called “oriental cults” of the Roman empire (like those of Isis and Mithra). From this perspective, the comparison between the two gods (and therefore the intended parallel between the religions in question) remains asymmetric and somehow contradictory: what possible use is it to indicate a religion like the Dionysian mysteries if it is no longer alive? And even further: what is the purpose – if not a scholarly

one – of comparing a dead religion (Dionysism in ancient Greece and Rome) with a living tradition (Shaivism in India)?

However, a closer look at the book reveals another type of argumentation. This is Daniélou’s thesis of proto-Shaivism (retraceable to Mohenjo-daro) as a religious substratum surpassing the frontiers of India – as well as the specific period in which that form of pre-Vedic civilization is circumscribed – that provides the basis for a comparatist bridge. Daniélou sees in the prehistory of the Dionysian religion (that is, in Minoan Crete) the same scaffolding as in Mohenjo-daro, and this is not a mere analogy. In fact, he affirms that “Dionysian” is the name of the Shaivite religion in the West, owing mainly to his conviction that pre-Christian cults and pre-Vedic religious forms share a common substratum. What does this substratum look like? Daniélou provides not only symbols (the bull, the serpent, the tiger, the phallus), but also very specific features of a religious world-view that enable him to link the Shaivite tradition with its strong continuity over millennia and the religion of Dionysus, which is apparently accessible only to researchers of Greek and Roman antiquity. The foundations of this world-view are the following: 1. A philosophy of divine immanence: there is no discontinuity of levels in the manifested world, that is, the mineral, vegetable, animal and human domain, as well as the subtle world of spirits and gods, exist through and for each other and make up the divine body. 2. A non-centralized philosophy of integration: every aspect of the universe can be used to achieve self-realization and reach the divine, that is, no species is privileged and therefore there is no need for separate levels including some aspects and excluding others. 3. A way of thinking distinguishing two sources of religion: the first *and chosen* one belonging to Nature (where each being plays its role in the divine game and maintains the harmony of the whole) and the second *and rejected* one

belonging to city-life and cultural abstraction (where nature is destroyed, religious experience becomes moral rules and conventions have more value than intuition and inspiration).

It is easy to deduce, from the above-mentioned foundations, that (as Daniélou himself writes) “Shaivism is essentially a religion of Nature” (p. 15, English version), and that Dionysism is the Western variety of Shaivism mainly because Dionysos, like Shiva, is a transgressive god. In which sense transgressive? Mainly in the sense that he radically questions the social norms that conciliate the progressive alienation of human beings in the hands of institutional powers. This alienation consists of the structured belief (fed by a powerful ideology

of the XX century leading to a radical change in the world-view of what is supposed to be the parameter of universality. European colonialism did not only bring destruction and exploitation, but also curiosity about the other and the need for a better understanding of it. Through ethnological works, the awareness of the “otherness” embodied in non-industrialized and non-alphabetic cultures has permeated the defence mechanisms aimed at perpetrating the cultural homogeneity of European expansion. The result has been a radical change in self-perception and a learning process that has only just begun, the main features of which are the relativisation of taken-for-granted conceptualisations such as the dichotomy nature-culture, revision of

One of the main aspects of Daniélou's view on Shiva and Dionysos is his insistence that Nature is not only a quantifiable set of objects (trees, plants, animals, etc.), but a mystery-field full of divine forces.

with manifold embodiments) that religion has to do with 1. recognition of an abstract principle detached from all possible levels of perception (empty metaphysics), 2. submission to life-denying moral principles (one-sided and even formal asceticism), 3. affirmation of an absolute truth to the detriment of all other perspectives (religious fundamentalism). Daniélou's critique also extends to secular fundamentalisms, whose political consequences are disastrous for the configuration of a “global culture”.

Daniélou's return to Nature is not illusory or naïve. On the contrary, it is a vision in tune with the most interesting contributions of human sciences today, especially those of ethnology and anthropology in the last decades

(negative) value judgements on tribal cultures and non-urban religions, critical reflection on the limitations of truth parameters related to modern science and an increasing sensitivity to the value of experiencing other paradigms from the inside. Today, it is evident that what Europeans called “universal” was, to some extent, a projection of the very peculiarities they wished to expand. However, transcultural contact implies change, and this change is not one-sided. Today, after profound exploration of primal cultures outside the Indo-European axis, so-called “objectivity” towards Nature is largely proven to be a particular form of abstraction belonging to Western modernity, and this abstraction, in spite of its cultural benefits, is – among other things – responsible

for the ecological crises ravaging our so-called “global civilisation”. One of the main aspects of Daniélou’s view on Shiva and Dionysos is his insistence that Nature is not only a quantifiable set of objects (trees, plants, animals, etc.), but a mystery-field full of divine forces – forces that some human beings, such as Shamans or Vedic rishis or Tantrika, can understand and re-channel without damaging and destroying them. In short: his vision is not romanticism about Nature, but a realistic view of its complexity and the interdependence of that complexity with cultural forms that the dominant world-view of the West cannot control or even reach.

With the passage of time, and in view of the global situation today, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Alain Daniélou’s book, mainly written to show Western culture that the tradition of wisdom deemed lost since late antiquity can be found and even reactivated, is also important for post-modern India. There is always something very positive in change, because change is renewal, but in post-modern India, the young especially are becoming aloof and unaware of their own tradition, which begins, not with Gandhi and Nehru, but with the cluster of meanings around the Paśupati seal

of Mohenjo-daro more than three millennia before Christ and continues through manifold ramifications, versions and subversions, commentary and critique, to end (or perhaps more optimistically: still goes on) with a precious remainder of men of wisdom behind a massive proliferation of charlatans trying to quantify spiritual knowledge and experience by using the same logic as the global market, quantifying and reducing every manifestation of human agency to an emptied token of virtuality. The problem with modern India is not that it still copies the West – contributing in part to the perpetuation of a lower form of cultural colonialism – but that it copies the worst of it (massive industrialisation, uncontrolled consumerism, shallow imperatives of success and nihilistic fragmentation and dissolution of meaning), without realising that within their grasp are local treasures that may even have a reverse effect upon disoriented Westerners. With *Gods of Love and Ecstasy*, Daniélou shows that the triumph of life (to use the apotheotic expression of the poet Percy B. Shelley) becomes visible in spirits that do not remain in the shadow of their own self-sufficiency and keep reintegrating knowledge and experience according to the parameters of new contexts. •



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THE IDEA OF “INDIA”, THE SEA, AND SHIVA IN WEST-AFRICAN VODUN

There are many ideas of “India”. In Mami Wata Vodun practice in coastal Togo and Bénin, the idea of India is not simply one of geography or theology. Rather, “India” offers boundless aesthetic and spiritual opportunities in both time and space, extending beyond the visible, tangible, human domain into a world where eternity and divine infinity subside into the here and now.

All photos belonging to this article are taken by the author.

This essay stems partly from previously published works.
See Rush 1999, 2008ab, 2009, 2013, 2016.



Fig.1 Wall mural with Mami Wata and Shiva Mami Dan. Painted by Joseph Ahiator. Lomé, Togo, December 1999

This essay, stemming from decades of research on West African Vodun, demonstrates how and why this idea of “India”¹ has been seamlessly absorbed into Vodun practice through exploring the profound impact of the sea and its India spirits on coastal Mami Wata Vodun. Not only is the sea regarded as a source of vast spiritual strength, but it is also known to bring powerful foreign spirits from faraway lands for local veneration. One such land is a mythologised “India”, represented concretely by images and objects imported from India and used in Vodun veneration and with an abstract reference to the sea. I demonstrate this influence through Indian chromolithographs (in paper or digital form), examining how and why these foreign prints have been absorbed into Vodun practice, how a single artist/adept and one priest have adopted and adapted these im-

ages into their own local visual theologies, and how Hindu gods and goddesses, in conjunction with the sea, fully inform Mami Wata Vodun. The following exploration sets the backdrop for a short reflection on time and space travel with a focus on Shiva Mami Dan (right side of fig 1).

Vodun and Mami Wata

Vodun is the predominant religious system in coastal Bénin and Togo organised around a single divine creator and an uncountable number of spirits, including Mami Wata. Much more than a single spirit, Mami Wata is an entire pantheon. For any new problem or situation that arises needing spiritual intervention or guidance, a new Mami Wata spirit arises from the sea. The pantheon of Mami Wata sea spirits represents wealth, beauty, seduction, desire, fidelity, femininity, human anomalies, and

modernity, among other things. Veneration of these sea spirits is reliant upon imported chromolithographs, which have come to represent “India Spirits”.

Known commonly as the Vodun of wealth and beauty who commands the sea, Mami Wata is recognized for her allure as a source of potential wealth, both religious and economic. The Mamisi, “wives” or devotees of Mami Wata, venerate their own demanding spirits from the sea as well as new spirits addressing the needs of a quickly changing society with an aesthetic and spiritual flair that not only includes “India Spirits”, but *requires* them. Life’s recently introduced or previously unfamiliar uncertainties of modernity are often embraced and made sense of through Indian imagery used in Mami Wata religious practice.

The Sea

Along this West African coastline, the sea -- with its force and intensity, potency and vigor, and unpredictable temperament -- is more than anthropomorphic: it is deistic. The sea gives and takes, it sustains life and it can kill. Importantly, the sea offers the most fervent spiritual authority along this coastline, the abode of Mami Wata.

India Spirits are invariably from the sea and deeply associated with an idea of India, rendering “India” and the sea synonymous; they are known yet unknowable, a paradox mediated through veneration. The terms “the sea” and “India” are often used interchangeably regarding Mami Wata Vodun, especially in reference

to India spirits. Whenever I inquired of the origins of India spirits, the answer was invariably the sea, often with an arm gesturing in the direction of the coast. It is not uncommon to see the words “Sea Neva Dry” painted on Mami Wata temples known for their India Spirits, as a reference to the fact Mami Wata and her India Spirits will always exist because, unlike rivers or lakes, the sea will never dry.

This Atlantic coastline simultaneously effaces and defines the meeting of land and sea: that is, where Africa and “India” merge. It is a place where awareness can be Janus-faced, and where space and time can and do alter. Because the sea is as deep as one’s own imagination, and vice versa, the breadth of India Spirits, associated India arts, and India experiences is inexhaustible. At the same time, this coastline – liminal as it may be – is a gateway to centuries of very real transatlantic interactions and exchanges from before the slave trade to the present. In effect, along this West African seaboard, two simultaneous processes occur for which the sea functions as both a passage-way to vast cultural and spiritual potential and an exceedingly lucrative portal to centuries of travel and commodities exchange.

Chromolithographs of India Spirits

Even though the idea of India in Mami Wata Vodun practice probably emerged no earlier than the 1950s, it is the ancient, essentially elastic, conceptual system of Vodun, which has allowed it to thrive. The integration of Indian images into Vodun epistemologies is exemplary of the overall incorporative sensibilities of

Not only is the sea regarded as a source of vast spiritual strength, but it is also known to bring powerful foreign spirits from faraway lands for local veneration.



Fig. 2. Market stand with the image of Sathya Sai Baba to the right of an image of Shiva. Asigamé market. Lomé, Togo, January 2000.

Vodun. Although, at some point, these images were newly seen, they have been approached in Vodun as something that was already known and understood; as something already familiar within the Vodun pantheon. These images of Indian gods have not been *combined with*, but rather they *are*, local gods.

Elaborately detailed Indian chromolithographs have been incorporated into Mami Wata veneration precisely because of the open-ended structures and richly suggestive imagery that allow them to embody a wide range of diverse ideas, themes, beliefs, histories, and legends. The prints themselves serve as both instructions and vehicles of divine worship; they suggest rules of conduct, recount legendary narratives, and act as objects of adoration. The specific animals, foods, drinks, jewelry, body markings, and accoutrements found in these chromolithographs have become sacred to the

Vodun spirits represented.

Such prints are available for purchase at local markets in Togo (fig 2). Others are available from local Indian stores in the form of decorative promotional calendars. In the past decade, the vast internet image archive has amped up accessibility to anyone with a smart phone who seeks visual representation of Hindu and other Indian deities or religious figures. These readily obtainable images, either in print or digital form, go hand-in-hand with Mami Wata artistic and spiritual propensities: the super-abundance of flowers, gold, jewels, coins, and other luxurious items surrounding the spiritually charged deities depicted in many of these images function as links into particular India Spirit sensibilities. For example, a three-dimensional Mami Wata shrine in a Vodun temple, overflowing with bottles of perfume, powder, fruits, candies, incense, cowry shells, etc. can be



Fig. 3 Mami Wata lithograph. Author's collection.

represented by a chromolithograph or even an image on one's cell phone, as an ethereally collapsed, ready-made two-dimensional shrine. In Vodun, the immediate visual impact of these images provides an aesthetic and spiritual synesthesia that quickly induces a divine presence. In other words: these images work. Visual and spiritual saturation in an economic and portable, even digital form, attests to the potential of chromolithography in Vodun.

By far the most popular chromolithograph representing Mami Wata is based on a late-nineteenth century chromolithograph of a snake charmer in a German circus (fig 3. for a complete history of the image see Drewal 1988). This Mami Wata image, painted on the left side of figure 1, and found in most Mami Wata temples, is only one of the many representations found in Mami Wata religious practice. There are also representations of figures from the *Ra-*

mayana and other Hindu lore and world religious histories, including prints of Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Shiva, Dattatreya, Hare Krishnas, Shirdi and Satya Sai Baba, the Buddha, Guru Nanak, al-Buraq, the Pope, Eve, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and various Christian saints. Secular images such as animals and floral arrangements are common as well, and also influence the content and appearance of shrine offerings.

A few examples of India Spirits in Mami Wata Vodun

In talking to Vodun priests, priestesses, and sellers of India Spirit images through the years, I learned quickly that my basic knowledge of Hindu, Sikh, and other deities represented in these prints was not applicable to my attempts at identifying or understanding the wide range of Vodun India Spirits. Initially, each time I asked someone to share with me the name of



Fig 4. India Spirit wall mural painted by Joseph Ahiator in Mami Wata temple in Cotonou, Bénin, January 1995.

the deity represented in a print, I was told Mami Wata. I desired more precision so I started asking questions differently. Instead of asking who was represented in the image, I identified the image with its standard Indian name asking if that was correct. I was quickly corrected and given the Vodun name.

For example, at a market stand I visited often in Lomé, Togo, what I interpreted as Krishna with Radha was deemed incorrect. Instead, I was told that the image represented Mawu-Lisa, the androgynous dual deity in the Vodun pantheon. What I identified as the Sikh image of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, I was told was the Vodun spirit Ablólisodji, or Liberty on a Horse. What I was certain was the Buddha, I was corrected and told that the image represented the Vodun spirit Confusci. Once again, I was quickly corrected when I asked about an image of Durga whom

I was told was Mami Sika, or Mother of Gold. The image of Lakshmi usually retained the Indian name, though she was sometimes simply called Mami Wata.

After much trial and error, I finally understood that depictions, in general, of Krishna with snakes --either playing a flute while dancing with a snake or standing on top of snakes, for example-- were not, in fact, Krishna, but Edan/Dan, the serpent Vodun. (Edan is the Ewe/Mina word and Dan is the Fon word for snake; they are mutually understood in both languages.) I slowly learned that just about any India Spirit print, containing one or multiple snakes, represented the Edan/Dan. Nonetheless, each time I thought I finally understood which Vodun spirit was represented, I learned otherwise. For example, when I identified a four-armed Krishna with crossed legs on a throne of coiled snakes

as Edan, I was, once again, corrected. This image, I was informed, is called Aida Wedo, shortened from Dan Aida Wedo, the rainbow serpent Vodun, part of the overarching group of Edan/Dan spirits, but not the same. In fact, many images were interpreted slightly differ-

Hanuman/Gniblin

Hanuman --commonly known in the *Ramayana* as Prince Rama's loyal servant and protector who carries the essence of Rama or Rama and Sita with him wherever he goes— is sometimes referred to as Gniblin Egu in Mami Wata

Much more than a single spirit, Mami Wata is an entire pantheon. For any new problem or situation that arises needing spiritual intervention or guidance, a new Mami Wata spirit arises from the sea.

ently depending on with whom I was speaking. After years, I learned to anticipate a range of names for each print.

A few examples of Mami Wata India Spirits

Ghanaian/Togolese artist Joseph Kossivi Ahiator (1956-2011) was the most sought-after India Spirit temple painter in Bénin, Togo, and Ghana. He consulted his own array of chromolithographs when commissioned to paint Vodun temples, and then elaborated the images based on his own dreams coupled with the dreams and desires of the temple owner. Ahiator, a Mami Wata adept himself, was very connected to the sea. He was born with India spirits and he visited India often; sometimes in his dreams, sometimes while at the beach. These travels thoroughly informed his art. In the early 1990s, Ahiator created his first India Spirit mural in a Mami Wata temple in Cotonou, Bénin (fig. 4). Around the same time, he created a similar mural in Lomé, Togo. Neither of these murals exists today due to the wear and tear of time. A short discussion of three of these Mami Wata India Spirits illustrated in figure 3 follows.

Vodun. Featured prominently in the centre of Ahiator's mural (left side of fig. 4) is the powerful half-animal, half-human super-being called Gniblin Egu. Gniblin is famous for his power of Egu, the Ewe/Mina cognate of the Yoruba Ogun, and the Fon Gu, deities of iron, war, and technology. Gniblin Egu is credited with teaching iron technology to people. Although Gniblin Egu comes from the sea, Mami Wata adepts hold that he lives on the road and is associated with traffic accidents. He can travel anywhere and his fiery tail is seen as he flies through the air. If he is angry, he can burn a whole city, and he can use his tail to beat witches. A popular chromolithograph shows Hanuman responding to the challenge that he, in fact, does not have the capacity to carry Rama and Sita with him wherever he goes. In response, Hanuman tears open his chest and to the bewilderment of his onlookers, reveals Rama and Sita within. Likewise, Gniblin Egu responded to a similar challenge in response to the allegation that he did not, as he claimed, carry his deceased parents with him. He, too, tore open his chest to reveal his deceased parents and the truth of his claim. Given the importance of ancestral veneration in Vodun, Gniblin Egu becomes here both a Vodun spirit and an ancestral shrine.

Ganesh/Tohosu

To the right of Gniblin Egu is Tohosu Amlina (centre of fig. 4). Tohosu is the Fon Vodun of royalty, human deformations, lakes, and streams. The painting of Tohosu is based upon a chromolithograph of Ganesh, the elephant-headed, pot-bellied Hindu god of thresholds, beginnings, and wisdom, who removes obstacles.

The image of Ganesh visually encapsulates the Fon spirit of Tohosu: royal (surrounded by wealth, corpulent from luxurious dining) and super-human (a human with an elephant's head and four arms). Although Ganesh is not known to be associated with lakes or streams, Mamisi often recognise the blue background of many Ganesh images as representing the sea, his home in the Mami Wata pantheon. A Mamisi with the spirit of Tohosu Amlina may never kill rats, for this creature, often depicted with Ganesh, has become sacred to the spirit's devotees (seen at his foot). Not only do Hindu chromolithographs suggest and reify characteristics already inherent in local gods, but they also introduce, influence, and change already-established, albeit organic, religious practice.

Shiva/Mami Dan

To the right of Tohosu in Ahiator's mural is Shiva Mami Dan also called Akpan or Ako Ado, whose job it is to clear the path for Mami Wata. Shiva Mami Dan, was born with snakes draped around his neck and arms and almost always appears that way. He is known to be old as the sea and his job is to clear the path for Mami Wata.

This depiction of Shiva Mami Dan comes directly from one of the best-known illustrations of Shiva, called Shiva-Dakshina-Murti or Mahayogi (right side of fig. 4). The illustration shows Shiva as an ascetic in deep meditation atop the Himalayas. He is wearing a simple loincloth and is seated on a tiger skin, which Mamisi say is the panther who clears the path for Shiva Mami Dan, and in turn, Mami Wata. He is often depicted with a drum hanging from a trident next to him; he uses his drum to call other spirits to come to dance, pray, and celebrate with him.

The water springing from Shiva Mami Dan's head is critical. As an integral member of the Mami Wata pantheon, he is highly associated with the sea, and, in turn, India. He, however, cannot travel to India without having access to the sea, which he needs for his survival. Mami Wata thus blessed him with an eternal spring of seawater emerging from his head. The seawater circulating through Shiva Mami Dan is his life source without which he cannot emerge from the sea to travel. Accordingly, the only way Shiva can spend time in the Himalayas is because of this gift from Mami Wata merging, once again, Africa, India, and the sea.

Representations of Shiva Mami Dan are on the upsurge and he is now more commonly known simply as Shiva. The name Shiva is often pronounced and spelled Chiva. This pronunciation might have a complementary connotation, which links closely to Mami Wata sensibilities. Chiva sounds similar to "echi ne va," when spoken quickly, which means in Ewe/Mina

Much more than a single spirit, Mami Wata is an entire pantheon. For any new problem or situation that arises needing spiritual intervention or guidance, a new Mami Wata spirit arises from the sea.



Fig 5. Shiva (Rhada) bas-relief wall painting at entry of Gilbert Atissou's Mami Wata painting. Aného, Togo. February 2000.

“money will come.” In a recent WhatsApp correspondence (July 2019), I was told by a young lady currently going through initiation into Shiva Vodun that “Chiva is a Dan Vodun who is now found within all of the Vodun because he brings money.” Whether Shiva is recognized within all Vodun is unlikely, but these perspectives suggest that Shiva Mami Dan’s rising allure is perhaps linked to the implication that money will come, as perceived in the pronouncement of his name.

Shiva Mami Dan / Shiva Rhada / Lord Shiva in Aného, Togo

Aného, Togo, a coastal town known for its high concentration of Mami Wata devotees, boasts a strong and longstanding tradition of India

Spirits associated with Mami Wata. After a few unremarkable exploratory visits to Aného, I happened upon an extraordinary Vodun temple. Inside, bas-reliefs of Shiva and Lakshmi flank the doorway that allows entrance to the heart of Mami Wata Vodun priest Gilbert Atissou’s compound (d. 2009). He became a friend of mine and was delighted to answer any of my questions about the presence of “India” in his compound.

After many long conversations with Atissou, I learned that he was always drawn to Indian gods and their power to control the sea. He was especially passionate about Shiva. He would travel to Lomé, Togo to seek out anything he could find related to India and buy whatever he could afford —objects and images—mainly



Fig 6. Wall painting in Gilbert Atissou's Mami Wata temple.
Aného, Togo, February 2000.

in Indian owned stores. His first purchase was a wooden staff topped with what he called a Shiva trident, also known as *apia* in Vodun. Atissou said that during the 1960s, he began spending hours upon hours at the beach, where he would journey to India, and find himself surrounded by “beautiful things”. He would spend months at a time in India during these hours along the coastline of Aného. He reported these “voyages” to his Christian family, and as Atissou’s obsession with the sea and his curious behaviour grew, his family took him to a Christian Celeste church in order to exorcise these “demonic” spirits from his system. Celestial Christians, however, deemed his India Spirits so powerful that they advised him to nurture them rather than eliminate them. Thus he began incorporating Indian items into his

own Mami Wata veneration. Similarly, I was told throughout the years that India Spirits are the most powerful in the world – more powerful than Vodun, more powerful than Jesus, and that once you have them, you must take good care of them.

I inquired about the bas-relief mural of Shiva outside the main courtyard entrance (fig. 5). Atissou explained that “RHADA,” painted at the top of the wall composition, is one of the many names given to Shiva because, as with most Vodun spirits, there are times when it is inappropriate to state the spirit name outright. I then noticed that the background colour of the wall was light blue, and that there were fish and a turtle swimming within. “Is he underwater?” I asked. “Yes”, Atissou conformed, “he is in In-



Fig. 7 Shiva shrine in Gilbert Atissou's Mami Wata temple.
Aného, Togo, February 2000.

dia". We looked at various other wall paintings throughout his compound, mainly of Shiva and Lakshmi, while Atissou explained that Shiva is king of the underwater world and Lakshmi is a version of Mami Wata. Atissou then showed me his shrine dedicated to Shiva. What appeared to be a very typical Vodun shrine was, in fact, dedicated to Nana-Yo, another Vodun name for Shiva (fig. 6). In front of the shrine's door, there was, according to Atissou, a carved yoni receptacle representing the female principal and origin of Hindu creation, which was there to receive offerings.

From there, Atissou led me across the compound --whose walls were covered by paintings of Shiva interspersed with lily pads-- into a shrine room he called India with four ful-

ly decorated walls covered with India Spirit paintings and smaller Hindu statues and chromolithographs mounted on the walls next to the paintings. One wall (fig. 7) had depictions of Lord Shiva and Lakshmi on the right side with Mami Wata (called Houédo Wouéké) occupying the left side of the mural. He explained that the walls in this room were blue because, once again, we were in India. He then pointed out the fish and other aquatic animals on the bottom of the mural equating India with an underwater realm.

He next led me through a back door into a more ostentatious shrine room brimming with posters of Indian gods, perfumes, powders, alcohol, candles, statuettes, stuffed, plastic, and ceramic animals, and other spirit representations. To

Atissou, his India temple represented a considerable financial investment, but, in conjunction with prayers and ceremonies, his temple offered him access to powers unattainable by any other means. These items are spiritual status symbols, and most importantly, they made things happen and provided him the security he needed.

Since Atissou's death in 2009, his daughter, Gagnon ("money is good") whom he had trained, has been in charge of the temple. By 2014, the temple had fallen into disrepair. The last time I visited in 2016, she had refurbished a bit. The original paintings are still there, but they have been painted over with much brighter, louder colors than the originals, and the ambiance no longer captures the sense of beauty and tranquility that made this temple her father's India haven.

Deep Dive: India Spirits in Time and Space

Both Joseph Ahiator and Gilybert Atissou, with their all-consuming dedication to India Spirits and the sea, were virtuosos at expanding and collapsing time and space in complete harmony within the world of Vodun. How could they condense weeks, months, and perhaps years and thousands upon thousands of kilometres, forward and backward, again and again, so effortlessly? How, in fact, could they spend months in India during an afternoon at the beach?

I had always appreciated their creativity of expression regarding their experiences, which I knew were not possible for me. I never doubted whether or not these travels

were real. I simply accepted them. However, I never understood them. For me, and for a large part of the Western world, space and time are linear and predictable. We tend to like predictability and we fall for its illusion. The world of Vodun defies predictability because Vodun is pure potential; non-quantifiable and infinite. Vodun has tools to help us understand the enormous potential of unpredictability. These tools guide us in accessing the past and future through which time and space are, by default, merged in the present moment. Images of Shiva, and other India Spirits, animate Vodun's superpower of accessing and allowing instant access to disparate and simultaneous experiences in time and space seamlessly, with no incongruence or disbelief. Shiva Mami Dan in conjunction with the sea is but one example. Afa divination is another. Trance possession is yet another. These powers are available to people, like Ahiator and Atissou, who can let go of the illusions of both predictability and linearity and fully and freely ride the infinite potential that surrounds them.

Ahiator and Atissou, even though their lives were, at times, precarious, did not live in fear or want. In their world of Vodun, where everything is possible, they did not think "what if?" or "then what?" Instead, they followed their paths as they unfolded. They lived in full faith and overwhelming spiritual abundance. Vodun offered this to them, they accepted, and their India Spirits delivered, serving as passports to space and time travel that few experience. •

¹ I picked up the term “India Spirits” from Ghanaian/Togolese artist Kossivi Ahiator (later mentioned in the essay). He was my first introduction to these spirits, and I spent a lot of time with him over the years. But, he spoke very broken English, so he referred to his images and his paintings as “India Spirits”. He was the first person who told me that he was “born with India Spirits”, so I just kept using that term without even thinking about it.

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POWER AND MEMORY AT KĀMĀKHYĀ

The aim of this article is to shed light on the intersection of memory and power at Kāmākhyā – the most eminent among the śakti-pīṭhas, because there the Goddess is worshipped in her non-anthropomorphic form of a *yoni*-stone. According to the Kaula-Tantra of mediaeval Assam, the *yoni* was an inestimable source of power, worshipped through extreme sexual rites. Today, instead, public worship of the *yoni* has been distorted and normalised. In fact, eroticism fell into the oblivion of religious amnesia, although traces of it are still implicitly present in ritual and festivals.

All photos belonging to this article are taken by the author.

Hinduism: A synthesis of memory and power

The history of the Indian subcontinent is far more complex than a Cartesian binary and parallel division between mainstream and marginal traditions. On the contrary, as a number of sociological studies have pointed out, mainstream and marginal cultures have intertwined and interacted throughout Indian history, thus originating what is commonly defined as Hinduism. Indeed, there was no one-way Brahmanic influence over the marginal traditions of South Asia, shaping it under the blows of Sanskrit-based culture (i.e. Hinduisation). The marginal cultures were not passive and did not renounce their socio-cultural identity completely, although they sometimes appropriated elements perceived as symbols of high status. On the other hand, what is called parochialisation played a fundamental role in the shaping of Hinduism throughout south Asia.

People at the margins, indeed, were able to transform what they appropriated and to reject whatever clashed with their former tradition. Hence, during the twentieth century, sociological, anthropological and historical studies evidenced the necessity to re-think South Asian religions through the lenses of trans- and cross-cultural processes. The idea of India as a battlefield where Sanskrit-based traditions and oral-based ones, pure and impure, orthodox and heterodox, etc., entered into conflict without any mutual influence was swept aside. The socio-cultural dynamics that stands at the origin of what is called Hinduism is far more

complex than an oversimplified image of two that became one.

This oversimplified position was often linked to the theory of *jāti* (caste) as a closed system. Instead, it was and still is an extremely fluid system, which depends on the flow of power. In the same way, the formation of Hinduism was influenced by politics and power relations. According to Michel Foucault's theory of power¹, power is *neither an agency nor a structure* but may be described as a *regime of truth* that pervades society. Power cannot be represented as a pyramid, its summit pervaded by the highest degree of power, while a constant decrease of power is found climbing down to its base. On the contrary, power circulates and is everywhere. This flow of power in the Indian sub-continent underlines the very important role of the marginal, non-orthodox and, even, tribal world in the definition of Hinduism as a religious phenomenon that includes a number of variegated traditions. Hinduism has consequently been shaped in different ways throughout its complex history, in order to systematise the trans- and cross-cultural dialectics that stands at its multifarious origins.

Hence, any idea of a dichotomisation of purity *versus* impurity in the Brahmanic context is an old-fashion colonial approach to the study of Hinduism. There is, indeed, no Hindu tradition based on purely Brahmanic theology. In fact, even the Vedic texts throughout their verses show a number of elements that are probably the result of cross-cultural interaction with non-Brahmanic people, with whom the

Kāmākhya was a new Hindu Goddess who incorporated the traits of a number of local goddesses, whose worship was centred on the fertilisation and the dead cult.



Fig. 1 Menstruating Goddess, Temple of Kāmākhyā (2016).

early Vedic groups entered in contact during their migrations in the Indian sub-continentⁱⁱ. In the *R̥gveda*, the origin of the caste system is associated with the myth of dismemberment of the *puruṣa* (cosmic man), while the primordial incest of the father (the Sky) with the daughter (Aurora) turns the wheel of creation as a sexual actⁱⁱⁱ. Both myths mark the inconsistency of any Vedic-Brahmanic cultural pattern of purity against impurity. Eroticism (incest too) and blood offerings were therefore not taboo *tout court*, and find justification within the Vedic past.

Since the disintegration of the Gupta Empire in the sixth century, Hinduism has flourished as a trans-cultural system, as the multiplication of regional and sectarian Puranic and Tantric literature testifies. On the one hand, such texts

sought legitimation from the *Vedas*, which were recognised as sacred traditions, while on the other hand, regional *purāṇas* and *tantras* were raised to the rank of canonical scripture, whose norms and values should be followed by devotees in order to reach religious goals, such as gnosis, *siddhis* (supernatural powers), and *mokṣa* (liberation). Since Hinduism manifested a profound capacity for an active and passive adaptation of and to otherness, it has adopted alien uses and customs in some regional contexts, while rejecting them in others. When Hinduism clashed with marginal religions, it either shaped them (i.e. through Hinduisation) or was shaped by them (i.e. tribalisation^{iv}, or deshification), indissolubly stratifying cross- and trans-cultural elements. This *shape-shifting* quality was the crucial element in the formation process of the Hinduised mediaeval states

of India^v. In fact, the Hindu *rājas* often raised non-Brahmanic deities to the rank of *iṣṭadevatā* (chosen deity), underpinning a relevant role of what were described fallaciously as minor south Asian traditions.

Since early mediaeval times therefore, Hinduism has emerged as a blend of traditions. It stratified old Vedic theology with marginal and, even, tribal beliefs, often creating newer regional theologies based on canonical Sanskrit scriptures. On the one hand, these newer scriptures traced their roots back to Vedic sacredness while, on the other, they showed great skill in blending ancient myths, rituals and symbols with uses and customs of marginal, and often oral, traditions. Hinduism has been extremely versatile in accepting, modifying and adapting what Brahmanism perceived as alien, influencing the further development of Hindu-Tantra. Tantra, indeed, in myths, rituals and festivals, usually reinterpreted, reversed and subverted Vedic theology in the light of marginal ideologies^{vi}.

The *yoni* of Kāmākhya: Origin and development of a stratified Tantric symbol

The first step of Tantra within the Hindu context was the rise of the *śakti-pīthas* (seats of power) during early mediaeval times, as a Tantric network where the Goddess was worshipped in one or other of her multifarious forms through explicit (left-hand Tantra) or implicit (right-hand Tantra) blood sacrifices and sexual rites. The sacred geography of the Goddess, however, has been susceptible to change and her 'thrones' in the Sanskrit tradition vary from four to 110. Today, numbering the Goddess's cult centres is unrealistic, although those that base their tradition on the Puranic mythology of Satī's death are among the most eminent. Satī, Śiva's first wife, sacrificed her body by performing *tapas* (heat) to protest against

her and her husband's exclusion from the great sacrifice (*yajña*) arranged by her father Dakṣa. While in the very early *Matsyapurāṇa* (13.1–64) and in other relevant Puranic texts, such as the *Lingapurāṇa* (1.99–100), and the *Śivapurāṇa* (2.2.26–27), the suicide of the Goddess was not followed by the dismemberment of her corpse, this pivotal episode caused the rise of the Goddess's *pīthas*, each of which preserves a particular limb of Satī. The first text that narrates the dismemberment of Satī in detail is the *Kālikāpurāṇa*—a Sanskrit source compiled in north-eastern India, whose actual recension is no later than the eleventh century. It recounts that from the sacrifice of the Goddess, seven *pīthas* emerged^{vii}, in opposition to the often-supported theory that origināally the seats of the Goddess (*adī-pīthas*) were four (*catus-pīthas*)^{viii}. The *Kālikāpurāṇa* (62.75–76) attested Kāmākhya (Kāmarūpa)^{ix} as the most eminent of the *śakti-pīthas*^x, because it was there that Satī's *yoni* (vulva) fell and was preserved^{xi}, her most powerful body part^{xii}.

After the *yoni* of Satī fell there, indeed, Śiva accompanied her wife in the form of a *liṅga* (phallus) in every *pītha*. Kāmākhya is not only the *yoni-pītha*, but also the Goddess who presides over a hillock in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, renowned as the blue mountain (*nīlācala*) and the mountain of love-making (*kāmagiri*). This is therefore one of countless aspects that the Goddess has assumed in south Asia. Kāmākhya inhabits the *yoni*-stone, the main cultic object concealed inside the *garbhagrha* (i.e. sanctum) of her shrine on top of Nilachal. Nevertheless, although there is no *liṅga* idol inside her sanctum, the Puranic myth narrates that the mountain itself represents Śiva's sexual organ. The macrocosmic symbolism of Śiva-Śakti is thus enhanced at the shrine of Kāmākhya, permeated by the powerful as well as dangerous *śakti* (energy) of the *yoni*.

Among countless Hindu traditions, the Śāk-

ta-Tantra cult of the goddess Kāmākhya emerged in Assam during the early mediaeval period. The cult of a Goddess of Nilachal is attested in epigraphic records since the middle of the fourth century CE. Kāmākhya was a new Hindu Goddess, incorporating the traits of a number of local goddesses, whose worship centred on fertilisation and the cult of the dead. It is speculated that her cult became the official religion of the royal family around the middle of the ninth century when the Śālastambhas were reigning over Kāmarūpa. The Śālastambha dynasty was described in later inscriptions by the Pālas of Kāmarūpa as a *mleccha* dynasty – an adjective that traced their roots back to the peripheral world of forests and mountains.

The dismemberment of the lifeless body of Satī thus stands at the origin of the abode of

Kāmākhya. More specifically, her *yoni* became the central icon of worship at the shrine after it fell on Nilachal at the mythical time of Satī's death. This main Śākta myth reflects an 'apocalyptic act' within the Brahmanic universe; its narrative 'twists' and 'reverses' the original sacrifice of the *puruṣa*^{xiii}. Furthermore, this myth wove alien Śākta elements into the Brahmanic patriarchal view. Nilachal consequently maintained its ancient association with the funerary imaginary through its close link to the death of Satī, assuming status as one of her earthly tombs. Furthermore, the mountain became the symbol of the indissoluble Śiva-Śakti union, the most secret place where the gods made love.

Today, the shrine of Kāmākhya is part of a larger temple complex on top of Nilachal. As well as a substantial number of minor Hindu shrines,



Fig. 2 Heads of sacrificed goats Sacrificial hall, Temple of Kāmākhya (2016).

The *yoni* of Kāmākhya is linked deeply with the Kaula past and its living memory is thus implicitly mirrored in the daily *yonipūjā* (worship of the *yoni*). For the Kaulas, indeed, the *yoni* was the source and essence of their doctrine – the "mouth of the *yoginīs*".

it comprises the temples of the ten Mahāvidyās, a group of Tantric goddesses linked to death and sexual imaginary. Kāmākhya was included in the late mediaeval period as the leader of the Mahāvidyās, when this cluster of deities supplanted another group of terrifying goddesses, the *yoginīs* of the Kaula tradition^{xiv}. Among the Mahāvidyās, Kālī, Tārā, Bhuvaneśvarī, Chinnamastā, Bhairavī, Dhūmāvātī and Bagalāmukhī have their private shrines on the hill, whereas Kāmākhya is worshipped together Mātāṅgī and Kamalā inside the *garbhagrha* of the Kāmākhya temple. None of the Mahāvidyās is represented in anthropomorphic form inside her *garbhagrha* – an iconographic trait that also connects these deities to the marginal goddesses of India.

Another peculiarity of the shrine of Kāmākhya is the lack of any phallic Śaiva emblem in its *garbhagrha*, making the *yoni* the supreme cultic object covered permanently by a stream oozing from the rocks inside her subterranean sanctum. The goddess Kāmākhya resides inside the *yoni*^{xv}, and also pervades the water^{xvi}, the implicit symbol of her sexual fluids. Her *garbhagrha* is a subterranean chamber, reached after the devotees have climbed down a number of steps. It is extremely dark and claustrophobic and clearly symbolises the female womb. The sexual union, however, of male and female energies is implicitly symbolised by the mountain that supports the *yoni* placed at its top.

Hindu shrines usually house anthropomorphic *mūrtis* (images) of deities; Hindu-Tantric ones

however seldom shelter an anthropomorphic image of the presiding deity inside the *garbhagrha*. On the contrary, they house symbols, such as yantras (diagrams), or natural elements, such as stones. This has suggested the oversimplified idea that Tantra inherited this trait from its ancestral tribal roots, since the shrines of tribal, low-caste, popular and folk traditions (the marginal traditions of India) usually house non-anthropomorphic *mūrtis* within their *garbhagrhas*. There is, however, no general rule; indeed, it is possible to stumble upon both Brahmanic shrines with no central image of the deity and marginal shrines with an anthropomorphic or humanised *mūrti*. The style of representation of the central icons inside the temples, indeed, does not reflect any obvious cultural association, but a deep dialectic between mainstream and marginal traditions.

The main *mūrti* of Kāmākhya is the *yoni*-stone, indissolubly linked to the water that flows over it. This sacred aggregate palpably recalls the female and her erotic aspect. Devotees cannot see the divine *mūrti* because it is covered by water, but experience the *darśana* (seeing) by touching it.^{xvii} This ritual act traces back a link to the Middle Ages, when Nilachal was an early Yoginī Kaula centre. The Yoginī Kaula school was founded by Matsyedranātha in the ninth–tenth century in Kāmarūpa. Indeed, he was initiated there by a circle of *yoginīs* into Kaula gnosis^{xviii}. The Tantric sect centred on the cult of sixty-four *yoginīs*, which has its roots

‘outside the orthodox Brahmanic traditions’^{xx}. Its systematisation within the Kaula fold was also influenced by other traditions already accepted within Hinduism, such as the cult of the seven or eight *matṛs* (mothers)^{xx}.

The *yoni* of Kāmākhyā is linked deeply with the Kaula past and its living memory is thus implicitly mirrored in the daily *yonipūjā* (worship of the *yoni*). For the Kaulas, indeed, the *yoni* was the source and essence of their doctrine – the ‘mouth of the *yoginīs*’^{xxi}. Its worship and the consumption of its secretions was a fundamental Kaula ritual involving male and female practitioners – the latter homologated as *yoginīs*, becoming humanised goddesses and central elements in the ritual praxis^{xxii}. The sexual rite was very secret and powerful; it was reserved for initiates who, through the *yonipūjā*, aspired to obtain *siddhis* (accomplishments). The main *siddhis*, for example, include the power to control one’s own and others’ body and mind, or the power to paralyse – thus outlining a very narrow boundary between white and black magic^{xxiii}.

Today, the daily worship of the *yoni* is the most important ritual performed in the temple of Kāmākhyā, although animal sacrifices to honour the Goddess, performed in a sacrificial open hall attached to the main temple, also play a relevant part in the daily ritual praxis. Every day dozens of he-goats are slaughtered to empower Kāmākhyā through their blood, a substitute for human sacrifices that used to glorify the Goddess up to the 1950s. Today, worshippers of the goddess Kāmākhyā practise blood offerings and the *yonipūjā* to obtain supernatural powers. Most of the pilgrims arrive at the Kāmākhyā shrine to ask for boons from the Mother Goddess of Assam, such as health for their children, protection for a coming marriage, etc. Unfortunately, whether some Śākta devotees also look for black magic powers nowadays cannot so far be determined^{xxiv}. Never-

theless, the memory of the mediaeval Kaula ritual is still metaphorically alive at Kāmākhyā.

Memory and power in the Tantric tradition of Kāmākhyā

Among the Hindu religions, Tantra emerged as a multifarious phenomenon that preserves, in distinct stages, a hidden past with a distorted memory, from a deep and centuries-long trans- and cross-cultural dialectic. At Kāmākhyā-*pīṭha*, memory of the mediaeval Yoginī Kaula tradition of the *yonipūjā* as the fundamental initiation rite to obtain both *siddhis* and religious gnosis is preserved in a distorted public ritual open to devotees of different sectarian strands. Thus, the mediaeval erotic ritual was ‘sweetened’ and ‘exotericized’ over the centuries^{xxv}, and is nowadays a desexualised ritual act; notwithstanding this, it preserves a distorted memory of its left-hand Tantra roots.

Memory of the cult’s eroticism has been distorted through centuries of cultural dialectic involving both the religious and the secular communities. Why has the *yonipūjā* been affected by distortion? It is suggested that it depends on socio-cultural changes between the mediaeval and the colonial period, when left-hand Tantra was first ostracised. Indeed, when socio-cultural frameworks change or vanish, oblivion prevails over memory, and a distorted memory is transmitted as tradition^{xxvi}. Eroticism fell into a religious amnesia, although traces of a *doctrine of desire* can be traced, albeit only in ritual and festivals, where eroticism is still implicitly present.

In the Middle Ages, the sexual element was believed to be an inestimable though dangerous source of power, which only Tantric kings or their appointed Tantric specialists could harness and use to strengthen their kingship. Indeed, most of the magic powers released through worship of the *yoni* were needed by kings to defeat and subjugate their external

enemies and domestic opponents. In the history of Assam, the resurgence of Vaiṣṇavism in the sixteenth century and British colonial dominion in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries marked two periods when left-hand Tantra was subject to ritual sanitisation and exoterisation. The end of the mediaeval Indian states and the change in the political context over the

last five hundred years has thus deeply influenced the local collective memory. The community of Kāmākhyā has been unable to preserve the eroticism of the cult, although their shared memory does not forget the Puranic myth of Satī's death and mutilation, daily repeated both in the public he-goat sacrifices and the exoterised worship of the *yoni*. •

ⁱ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 3–31; Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 92–98.

ⁱⁱ I partially investigated the non-Brahmanic traits within the episode of the conflict between Dakṣa and Śiva, tracing their history back to the Vedic texts in Rosati, “The Yoni Cult”, 281–83.

ⁱⁱⁱ *R̥gveda* 10.90; 10.61.1–9.

^{iv} See Rosati, “The Goddess Kāmākhyā”, 140.

^v Kulke, “Tribal Deities”, 56–78.

^{vi} Marginal cultures too during their history have incorporated Brahmanic deities and praxis within their own pantheon and rituals. This process has been insufficiently studied, and should be interpreted while considering south Asian vernacular religious literature.

^{vii} The *dakṣayajña* as the episode that stands at the origin of the *śakti-pīṭha* network has been analysed in detail in Sircar, *The Śakti-Pīṭhas*. In my article, “The Yoni Cult”, I focused on the origin of this mythology, which since the Vedic mythologem has shown deep cross-cultural dialectic.

^{viii} The *catuspīṭhas*' theory is founded, indeed, on an esoteric early-mediaeval Buddhist text, the *Hevajratantra* (1.7).

^{ix} The kingdom of Kāmarūpa, at its largest extent, covered approximately the actual states of Assam, Meghalaya, parts of Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Bhutan.

^x See also the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* (8.20).

^{xi} According to the *Kālikāpurāṇa* (18.41–43), Satī's navel also fell on Kāmagiri (the abode of the goddess Kāmākhyā), while Eastern Kāmarūpa preserves the head of the Goddess. Her feet are

preserved at Devikūṭa (Bengal), her arms along with her neck fell on Pūrṇagiri (supposed to be in Karnataka), while her breasts are preserved in Jālandhara (Himachal Pradesh).

^{xii} The *Kālikāpurāṇa* influenced the later north-eastern purāṇas, which are the only ones to narrate the dismemberment of the Goddess, a topic that other regional Puranic traditions skipped.

^{xiii} Urban, “The Path of Power”, 788

^{xiv} See Shin, “Yoni, Yoginīs and Mahāvidyās”.

^{xv} See *Kālikāpurāṇa* 62.75; *Kāmākhyātantra* 1.4.

^{xvi} *Yoginītantra* 1.11.37a.

^{xvii} See Lussana, “Fluid Mother Goddess,” 77–78.

^{xviii} *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* 16.21–22; 18.22b; see also White, “Kiss of the Yoginīs”, 106.

^{xix} Dehejia, *Yoginī Cult and Temples*, 1–2, 68.

^{xx} On the evolution of the *māṭr*s (mothers) through the Sanskrit Epic to the Puranic and Tantric tradition, see Shin, “From *Māṭr*gaṇas to *Saptamāṭrkās*”.

^{xxi} *Tantrāloka* 29.122a–26a; 127b–28b.

^{xxii} The women's role in this ritual has been debated deeply through the lens of gender studies, to understand if the woman was a mere ritual object or a deity; see Biernacki, *The Renowned Goddess*.

^{xxiii} I thoroughly debated this topic in a recent presentation at the annual conference of the *British Association for South Asian Studies*, entitled, “Woman and Magic in the Yoginī Kaula: The Yoni as Source of Power” (the University of Durham, UK, 3 April 2019).

^{xxiv} On the relationship between Tantra and black magic in Assam, see Majo-Garigliano “Narratives about Assam”, 75n26.

^{xxv} See Urban, *Power of Tantra*, 167–72.

^{xxvi} Halbwachs, *Mémoire*, 279.

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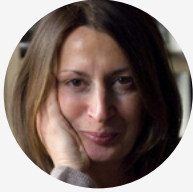
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ARÁ AND AXÉ: RITUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE BODY IN BRAZILIAN CANDOMBLÉ

Prof. Stefania Capone analyses the centrality of the body in Candomblé rituals. In this Afro-Brazilian religion, the body – called *ará* – must be sacralised during initiation and associated with the forces inhabiting the universe and with the multiple realisations of *axé*, the divine power. A central moment of *axé* transmission is when the initiates are possessed by their deities and the god's sacred power is distributed, through the motions of dance, to the environment and among the faithful present. A longer version of this essay was published in Italian.

Candomblé is an Afro-Brazilian religion with a characteristic belief system in deities called *orixás*. It is associated with the phenomenon of possession or mystical trance, considered as the embodiment of the deity within the initiate, who has been ritually prepared to receive her. The main origin of ritual practices in Candomblé is the Yoruba religion, widespread from western Nigeria to Benin and Togo. The religion and customs of the populations from this African region provided a unifying model for all other ethnic groups found in Brazil at the time of slavery. Slaves came from all parts of western Africa, and even some eastern regions, such as Mozambique. During the 300 years of the slave-trade, the African enslaved brought to Brazil came from Angola and Congo, from the Costa da Mina and the Gulf of Benin.

A religion of immanence, the body is central to all Candomblé rituals. The body – called *ará* in Nagô, the ritual language of Candomblé – must be sacralised and associated with the forces inhabiting the universe, and with the multiple manifestations of *axé*, the divine power present in everything that exists. In the past few years, anthropologists have greatly insisted on the notion of embodiment, as a way of “being in the world”. Indeed, human beings experience the world through their body, the mediator *par excellence*, the means through which we relate to our environment. We “know” through our body: our awareness is “embodied” knowledge.

But, to make this possible, the body must be culturally disciplined. Tattoos, piercings, paint are all practices aimed at building the social side of the human being. Furthermore, in the case of a religion of possession like Candomblé, the paradigm of *embodiment* proposed by Thomas Csordas (1990) becomes even more central. Csordas states that the body is not merely a subject of study, but the necessary condition of experience: to draw on his formula, the body is the terrain on which culture is built (*ibid.*: 5). The body is our perceptual opening on the world.

Body and Possession: *terreiro* and *axé*

The paradigm of *embodiment* tends to nullify the duality of mind and body, subject and object. The body is the central *locus* of this “embodied understanding”. The experience of possession involves very special attention to the ritual construction of the body, how it is modelled, subjected to a certain routine, made malleable and disciplined by ritual action. The typical trajectory of initiates of Candomblé, generally drawn to this religion due to some sickness, whether physical or psychological, or other kinds of problem, demonstrates the centrality of initiation rites as the principal means of resolving individual problems. Through initiation, the novice learns to manage the relationship with his/her divine protector and with other accompanying deities, equally important in constituting the mystical web defining the new initiate’s intimate essence.

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Candomblé is a religion of possession, whose central moment is the god's manifestation in the body of the initiate, the moment at which the transmission of *axé* takes place. In Yorubá, *axé* designates the invisible power ensuring dynamic existence, the principle that makes the vital process possible. This force can be transmitted, at both a material and a symbolic level, to inanimate objects and human beings. One central moment of *axé* transmission is when the initiates are possessed by their deities when, through the motions of dance, the god's sacred power is distributed to the environment and among the faithful present. The *terreiro* (the house of worship), with all its material content and its initiates, must receive *axé*, foster it, accumulate it and develop it. The space of the *terreiro* must be consecrated by the blood

of animals sacrificed to the deities, which is the principal vehicle of *axé*, and by the burying, in the centre of the ceremonial space and under the threshold of the *terreiro's* door, of symbolic elements (bones, leaves, stones, etc.) associated with the ritual sacrifices, and deemed the propagators of this power.

Axé is also transmitted to ritual objects, made thus active by its power. This power creates and strengthens ties and communication between the spiritual and terrestrial worlds. The scope of every ceremony is to accumulate and increase *axé* through the direct relationship between the deity and the initiate. This notion of "power" is found not only in Candomblé, but in all Afro-Brazilian religions and, more generally speaking, Afro-American religions as a whole.

The first aim of initiation is consequently to



A Candomblé initiate possessed by the *orixá* Yansan, goddess of winds and storms.

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make the deity live in the body of its “child”, through the central moment of every Candomblé ritual: possession. During initiation, no esoteric secrets are revealed. It all happens beyond the conscious participation of the individual. Only over the years, with much patience and humility, is any real knowledge of the ritual's “foundations” acquired.

Initiation as a “ritual construction”

The basic aspect of initiation focuses in the initiate the identity and mythical behaviour of his/her *orixá*, creating a “second personality” that belongs to the divine essence. The initiate's identification with the deity's character model is very frequent and strengthens after the initiation period, when the bond between them has been confirmed and sanctioned by the community. Initiation is also a period in which some rules of the religion are learned, the behaviour prescribed, as also one's own place in the world. While the novice has to learn how to behave correctly, the god also has to adapt to the “material”, meaning the body of his “horse” and its limitations. During initiation, the music and dances of the *orixás* have to be memorised, as also the situations when possession is usually expected. Relations with the *orixás* are not however just a matter of behavioural rules to be learned. Awareness of the body and of sounds, odours and objects associated with the spiritual entities are also essential for the creation of a durable bond between the initiate and his/her protecting deities.

In actual fact, in Candomblé, every human being has a protecting deity, called “*dono da cabeça*”, the master of the head. The initiate is then said to be the “child” of this deity. To this first deity, “mythical parent of the person”, is added a second *orixá* called *adjuntó*, who occupies a secondary, but no-less-important position in protecting the initiate. These two main deities are usually accompanied by a third *orixá* that, together with the others, forms the basic spiritual configuration of the individual.

These deities are not unique, but are themselves multiple, since every *orixá* is divided into a varying number of “qualities”, distinct actualisations of its sacred power, each connected with the field of activity of another deity. The “qualities” of the *orixás* trigger various forms of *axé*, of divine power, linked to their different characteristics.

The deity fixed by initiation in the initiate's head is an individual and unique manifestation, with the special quality of the general *orixá*. When an initiate dies, his/her personal *orixá* returns to join the general matrix of everything, to which the human being belongs. Returning to his/her origin, he/she will add to the vital force that we, as human beings, have the duty of accumulating in order to maintain our relations of spiritual balance with the world.

In Candomblé, the initiate is possessed by the “master of the head”, his/her main god, and – in some cases – also by the *adjuntó*. In actual

fact, the deity who takes possession of the initiate's body is not the generic *orixá* – Oxalá, Ogun or Yansan – but a subtle combination of her power (*axé*) expressed by her “quality”, and the personality of its “horse”, i.e. the initiate. Indeed, the notion of person in Candomblé never separates the soul from the body, but is the sum of all the parts of the body in which the sacred powers lie, the *axé* without which it cannot exist. All the bodily senses (hearing, sight, taste and touch) are deemed centres of power to be rebalanced during the initiation period. In Candomblé the body is thus conceived of as a living altar, in constant communication with the natural and spiritual world.

The importance of the head in initiation rites

In Candomblé, the head is considered the most important part of the human body, animated

by the *emi*, the vital breath that will return to its origin at the moment of death. Throughout his/her life, the initiate must submit to various rituals called *obrigações*, a term that means “duties” in Portuguese, feeding his *orixás* and his head, the main element that facilitates communication with the gods.

The main ceremony devoted to the head is *bori*. During this ceremony, various foods prepared for the *orixás* are arranged beside the mat on which the initiate is stretched. The person participating in this ritual must eat a little of the ritual foods offered to the *orixás* to receive their power, the divine *axé*. All initiates present share this sacred food. Most of the offerings are “white”, such as flowers and clothes, because white is the colour of Oxalá, the god who created human beings, and who is a symbol of peace and harmony.

To the head are offered various animals – a



Ritual greetings during a Candomblé public ceremony.

Guinea fowl, a duck, a chicken, a white dove and an *igbin*, a giant snail about twenty centimetres long, whose transparent liquid is deemed to be the “blood of Oxalá”. The blood of the sacrificed animals runs over the initiate’s head and on the material representation of the *orí* – the *igbá-orí*. Onto the head, the celebrant also spits the remains of a cola nut he has chewed, imbued with his *axé*; feathers of the sacrificed birds will be stuck to the still-warm

blood that runs down the head, then covered by an immaculate turban (*ojá*) which stays on for three days, after which the initiate can finally wash. The body “absorbs” the *axé* and is nourished by the animal sacrifices, just as the *orixás* do through their material representations.

Candomblé initiation last 21 days on the average, although the time-span is often reduced. Of these 21 days, 14 largely correspond to the



Ingredients for a Candomblé individual shrine (*assentamento*).

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liminal period, in which the novice is most of the time in a semi-conscious state. During this period, the novice is "*recolhido*", or in reclusion, and becomes "invisible", hidden by a white sheet in public. He/she may not communicate with others present – except his/her initiators and members of the same "*barco*" ("boat", the initiatic group) - and spends entire days shut up in the *ronkó*, the chamber of initiation, a kind of gestating uterus of the *terreiro*. During this reclusion, the novice no longer has a name, and is known either by the generic term *iyawó* (which in Yorubá designates the youngest bride in a polygamous marriage), or by a term defining his/her position in the initiatic group (*dofono*, *dofonotinho*, *fomo*, *fomotinho*, etc.) . At this point, his/her previous individuality is cancelled in order to give life to a new being, profoundly marked by being rejoined with his/her divine origin.

Possession by the deity is not, however, the only state of consciousness experienced by the initiate. The multiplicity of elements constituting the personality is matched by a multiplicity of states of consciousness, appearing at distinct moments in the liturgical continuum of Candomblé: the "normal" state, called "*cara limpa*" (i.e. "clean face", *not* in a state of trance), the *santo* state and that of *erê*.

"*Cara limpa*" is the ordinary state of consciousness, when the initiate is conscious of his/her actions, a state that contrasts with the "*estado de santo*", when the initiate is possessed by the deity. The state of *erê* on the other hand is a

sort of less violent trance, an intermediate state between the other two. During the initiation period, the novice spends most of his/her time in this state, which is equated to possession by infantile spirits. In the state of *erê*, speech and basic bodily functions, usually suspended during the *santo* state, are regained. This keeps the subject in a state of preparation for divine possession, without subjecting him/her to the excessive stress of a continuous state of trance. In this state, the subject needs practically no sleep and the receptivity of the mind is greatly developed.

In Candomblé, the human being and his protecting deity belong to the same reality: one would not exist without the other. The close interaction of the adept with his *orixá* is reciprocal. The *orixá* takes possession of the initiate, just as the initiate, metaphorically, possesses his/her god: the incarnated god is referred to as being the Oxalá *of* Maria or the Oxóssi *of* João, at the same time as the initiate is identified as Maria *of* Oxalá or João *of* Oxóssi. Possession functions more as a multiplier of identity than a simple loss of consciousness in favour of an external possessing agent. In the accounts given by Candomblé initiates, we find a plurality of voices, in which identity is defined by multiplicity.

We may therefore state that the possession trance in Candomblé is not a fusion, but a distinction. All the rituals accompanying the trance thus aim at transforming the novice into a new being, completely differentiated – at a

mystical level – from all the other initiates. The final purpose of initiation is the inscription in the body of the new initiate’s specificity, his/her network of spiritual protection, his/her “mystic capital”.

shaken by vibrations marking the arrival of the *orixá*. Among Candomblé initiates, this passing from ordinary consciousness to possession by the deity - the *santo* state – is experienced like a blow at the nape of the neck, causing the head

In Candomblé, the human being and his protecting deity belong to the same reality: one would not exist without the other. The *orixá* takes possession of the initiate, just as the initiate, metaphorically, possesses his/her god.

***Xirê* or the activation of *axé* in the ritual space**

The principal moment of distributing *axé* in the sacred space is represented by the *xirê*, a public ceremony that invokes the *orixás* by dancing in a circle and the beating of sacred drums. *Xirê* is a bodily performance that restores vital energy. This ritual expands and spreads *axé*, the divine power, in the sacred space, restoring and transforming the physical, mental and spiritual energy of the rite’s participants. The interaction of various elements – song, dance, sound, word – thus makes possible the circulation of *axé*.

In public ceremonies, communication between the spiritual and terrestrial worlds is effected through the power of the deity transmitted to the initiate’s body during possession and redistributed by the body through dance movements. During the possession dance, the ordinary state of consciousness is deconstructed. Usually, a subject in trance emits a set of signs characteristic of this condition: tremor, gasping, abundant sweating.

Initially, this experience is marked by immobility, as though the subject is suffering from shock, and is experiencing something internally that causes intense suffering. The mouth contracts, the features harden. The body is rapidly

to fall forward. This is determined by the fulminating ingress of the deity’s power into the initiate’s head, from where it takes control of the body. Possession properly so-called, however, is marked by the behaviour identifying the deity. The face changes expression and the initiate’s motor behaviour is modified by the characteristics of the incarnate god. The deity’s dance thus appears to have a double function: on the one hand, it facilitates transmission of the god’s power from the spiritual to the terrestrial world, redistributing it among the religious community, while on the other, it brings about the passing from a state of ordinary consciousness to one of altered consciousness, through the expression of the deity’s mythical characteristics.

The most intense moment during the *xirê* is the embrace granted by the embodied deity to her chosen ones, as a sign of protection. For Candomblé members, the *axé* of the *orixá* is “a power that is transmitted”, which can therefore give rise to other possessions, multiplying and propagating its action in the sacred space. However, although we can speak of an “emotional trance”, evoked by a gesture or a particular song, we should also mention an “aesthetic trance”, since it is often the beauty of the scene – the dancing bodies, the songs invoking the

gods – that draws forth an emotion that opens the way to possession.

Possession by the *orixás*, during public festivals, is essentially a danced possession. Through the motions of the dance, each deity expresses her essence and the bonds that unite him/her to other deities. In Candomblé, indeed, the word is inscribed in the body and can be remem-

bered, reactivated and given new meaning in the ritual action. Knowledge is given through the divine “word” that emanates from the body, intimately linked to the movement and propagation of the sacred powers. The final aim of each and every Candomblé ritual is to keep alive and transmit the *axé* within the religious community. •

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LEARNING POSSESSION: NARRATIVE OF PERCEPTION AND EMBODIMENT OF DEITIES IN SOUTH INDIA

Prof. Elisabeth Schömbucher studies the meaning of possession not only as a culturally determined phenomenon with bodily and psychological implications, but also as a complex process implying learning strategies and techniques related to specific contexts. The first part of the essay was published in a collective volume in German; the second part was written for FIND's Forum 2018 "Altered States of Consciousness and their Relationship with Religious Experience".



Medium of the goddess Kotta Rajulu, listening to the divine words spoken through her and recorded by the author.

Missionaries, Indologists and anthropologists have all tried to understand the different forms of possession and the role played by the possessed person while in a state of trance. Possession is a very complex process, and different aspects have been emphasized at different times. An overview of the literature on the topic shows that the possessed person, often a woman, is the paradigmatic ‘exotic other’ and is usually at the focus of investigation. Another feature of possession treated with considerable attention is the state of trance. As an ‘altered state of consciousness’, trance has been interpreted in many different ways. This pa-

per will start with an overview of the different forms of possession in India and the various interpretive approaches. How has possession in India been interpreted in the course of time? It is argued that the religious paradigm of the early descriptions by European Christian missionaries has been replaced by a medical paradigm, which also has its roots in European discourse. Recently, two developments have further influenced the interpretation of possession, the so-called linguistic or performative turn in anthropology and a different understanding of trance states in esoteric and spiritual movements. We could say that the interpretation of

trance has moved from a “state of dissociation” to a “culturally induced experience”¹.

Forms of possession

In speaking of possession in South Asia, two forms are usually distinguished: first, unwanted and uncontrolled possession by harmful spirits (spirit possession) and, second, ritually induced and controlled states of possession by deities and the deified dead (spirit mediumship). Two more forms should be added to this classical distinction: possession by a deity as the result of *bhakti* (during fire walking ceremonies or during annual village festivals) and possession of impersonators during ritual performances.

In the case of spirit possession, a person, very often a young woman, suddenly gets possessed by a harmful spirit or demon. The person loses control over her behaviour, she is no longer in a normal state of consciousness; she acts violently and has to be protected from harming herself. Verbal utterances in this state can be obscene and vulgar; very often their meaning is hard to understand. Spirit attacks may also be enacted, as can be observed in various shrines.

which are known as powerful healing centres or by individual exorcists consulted by the victim and her family.²

The term ‘spirit mediumship’ denotes a kind of oracular or divinatory possession. The possessing entities may be divine beings or the deified dead. They are invoked into the body of a medium and speak through her or his body. People consult mediums to ask a deity for advice in the case of ill health, family problems or any other crisis. The invocation of the deity has to be performed by a ritual specialist and may be invoked by the words of the priest (*dāsuḍu*), accompanied by music or drums. The entrance of the possessing entity into the body of the medium is marked by the medium’s entering into a state of trance.³ In contrast to spirit possession, mediums do not lose control while in trance. Not only is their behaviour highly controlled, but they also have to act and speak in a highly ritualized manner. Although mediums suffer from amnesia after the possession séance is over, they are well aware of the audience and their specific problems while in a state of trance. Another form of controlled state of possession is the possession of impersonators by their deities during ritual dramas.

What missionaries have described in terms of devil-worship, superstition, paganism, and sometimes fraud, is interpreted by early anthropologists in terms of psychic problems, stress, mental disease and indigenous healing rituals.

Spirit possession may be accompanied by somatic symptoms such as insomnia, nausea, and headache. As a consequence, the person has to be ‘healed’; the spirit has to be exorcised or put under control in some way or other. Rituals of exorcism can be performed at special shrines

A well-known example is Teyyāṭṭam (‘dancing the gods’) in Kerala. In this ritual performance the Teyyam dancer (‘god-dancer’) becomes possessed by looking into a mirror. At this moment, when the impersonator has put on make-up and the costume, the deity enters his



Bhulekamma, medium of the goddess Nukamma, in her house shrine, just after the possession.

body. In the night-long ritual performance that follows, divine myths are recited and complex rituals are performed. From an indigenous perspective, it is not the impersonator who symbolically acts as the deity, but the deity who acts through the impersonator.

The last form of possession that I wish to mention here is possession by a deity during annual festivals. The deity (often a village goddess) is 'present' or 'in an aroused state' during the festival. Several devotees are filled with (or seized by) the presence of the deity. They are considered to be vessels of the deity, and by the grace of the deity, they experience the divine presence in their body (*bhāva*). Basically, any devotee can experience the divine presence characterized by the devotee's entering into a state of trance. The devotee's receptiveness to the divine presence depends on individual conditions and the necessary preparations, such as extreme devotion and fasting prior to the annual festival. This kind of regular controlled

possession in a ritual setting also avoids uncontrolled and unwanted possession by spirits.⁴

Early descriptions by missionaries

The first rather detailed descriptions of states of possession are provided by Christian missionaries. Early descriptions by missionaries do not clearly differentiate between different forms of possession. In their world view, only possession by demons or devils is possible. In 1711, Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, the first Protestant missionary in southern India, mentioned possession by 'devils' in his *Malabarisches Heidentum*.⁵ He and other missionaries still imagined that personified evil powers, such as devils and demons, could enter into human beings, as proven by many examples during their times. Although missionaries were thus familiar with the experience of possession, they couldn't acknowledge possession by deities because they could not acknowledge Hindu deities as gods. Village goddesses were called 'queens over

Young women are especially likely to become possessed by evil spirits because they are oppressed in a dominant male society.

the devils' at best. Therefore, they called the 'god-dances' (*cāmiyāṭi*) observed in Tamil Nadu 'devil-dances' ⁶.

Later, in the 19th century, missionary descriptions of possession were not only misinterpretations but became increasingly derogatory. Abbé Dubois describes possession by the village deity Tipamma during the annual festival as a "disgusting spectacle" in which the impersonator of the possessing goddess speaks with "all the obscene and filthy expressions to be found in the Hindu language".⁷ Caldwell describes a performance of spirit mediumship as an "orgy" in which the performer wears "party-colored dress and grotesque ornaments". He calls the musical instruments "instruments of noise." From such a perspective, ritual preparations, ritual speech, and altered state of consciousness could not be taken seriously by the missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Anthropological interpretations

What missionaries described in terms of devil-worship, superstition, paganism, and sometimes fraud, is interpreted by early anthropologists in terms of psychic problems, stress, mental disease and indigenous healing rituals. Many early anthropological studies can be subsumed under the heading "rationalistic reduction", in the sense that they are reducing a phenomenon to a single aspect⁸. Starting from a rational world view with the premise that nobody can 'really' be possessed by spiritual entities, since spiritual entities do not 'really' exist, possession is interpreted in medical terms, as a psychic problem in the case of spirit possession and as a healing ritual in the case

of possession mediumship. Often-quoted publications on spirit possession by Ruth and Stanley Freed, Sudhir Kakar, and I.M. Lewis⁹ argue that young women are especially likely to become possessed by evil spirits because they are oppressed in a dominant male society. In situations of stress, such as marrying into a new family or the break-up of a marriage, women take refuge to possession. This is seen as an 'oblique strategy of attack' to fight against oppression¹⁰ – or as the manifestation of mental disturbances due to severe stress.¹¹ These early examples display anthropology's scepticism about indigenous explanations. The scepticism of the anthropological approach is influenced by the medical classification of possession as psychic disorder. 'Trance and Possession Disorder' is included in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems.¹² In this worldwide medical classification system 'trance and possession disorders' is cited under the general rubric of 'Mental and behavioural disorders' (F00 – F99), block F40-48 'Dissociative disorders', subsection F44.3 'Trance and Possession Disorders':

"Possession trance is characterized by a transient alteration in identity whereby one's normal identity is temporarily replaced (possessed) by a spirit, ghost, deity, or other person. The experience of being "possessed" by another entity, such as a person, god, demon, animal, or inanimate object, holds different meanings in different cultures and therefore the diagnosis for this disorder may be culturally bound. While possession is a common experience in many cultures, in Western industrialized cultures, such experiences are not the norm."¹³

In the ICD-10 (10th Revision, Version for 2010) the following is added to the diagnosis ‘Trance and possession disorders’:

“Disorders in which there is a temporary loss of the sense of personal identity and full awareness of the surroundings. Include here only trance states that are involuntary or unwanted, occurring outside religious or culturally accepted situations.”¹⁴

In Western medicine, possession trance is classified as a mental or behavioural disorder. It is acknowledged that, whereas it is not the norm in Western industrialized cultures, it may have various meanings in other cultures. Without being clearly mentioned, this distinction obviously refers to unwanted spirit possession and controlled possession in ritual contexts. The rather vague differentiation means that trance or any other form of ecstatic behaviour has been interpreted as a deviant state of consciousness, as exceptional, or as out of the norm. Two developments have changed the

interpretative approaches to possession and trance states. One is the performative turn in anthropology; the other is a new access to the phenomenon of trance in esoteric and spiritual movements. In esoteric and spiritual circles it is understood that trance is a globally available technique and fairly easy to learn. The first to demonstrate this was the anthropologist Felicitas Goodman. By comparing trance postures and invocatory rhythms across different cultures, she developed techniques through which anybody can easily enter into a state of trance. Such techniques, which she taught in courses around the world, are applied for individual trance journeys in spiritual movements.¹⁵ Furthermore, in the last few years, trance healing has increasingly been advertised as one of the several alternative healing systems. One example is Guru Kedar Baral, originally a traditional Nepali shaman (*jhāñkri*), who founded a healing centre in Kathmandu called Ashram Nepal and treated his urban patients for imbalances and problems that could not be solved by doctors.¹⁶



Priest (dasudu), invoking the deity into the body of the medium.

He is not only a healer who treats patients with the help of spirits who enter his body, but a few years ago he began teaching others to reach a state of trance and “to be possessed by spirits so that they may heal the sick.”¹⁷

By ‘reinventing’ or ‘rediscovering’ trance states, the esoteric movement has shown that such states are not confined to non-Western and non-industrialized societies. Although rightly observed by the ICD-10 that they are ‘not the norm’ in Western societies, they are now being introduced as desired and controlled trance states in culturally accepted situations. Parallel to the increase of spiritualism and consequent reinterpretation of possession trance, the performative turn in anthropology has provided a new methodological approach to the study of

persons usually are not perceived to behave ‘as if’ they were possessed. A different concept of person provides a different experience of the world. Deities and demons are not perceived as “disembodied symbols” but are considered to be “divine persons”.²⁰ Accordingly, essential aspects or elements of human and divine persons “can disaggregate, transmute and relocate back and forth among various kinds of animate and inanimate embodiments”.²¹ The interconnect-edness of divine and human spheres is an important precondition for the manifestation of gods and spirits in human persons. Without this concept the various forms of possession and manifestations of the divine or demonic that we find in South Asia would not be possible.²² Another aspect of the explorative eth-

Divine or demonic presence is created verbally, based on the assumption that gods or demons exist as persons (not merely as symbols). Words spoken in a performance are not only referential but also construct meaning.

possession rituals. According to this approach, each performance is a highly structured event in which time and space are specified, the sequence of events is fixed and performers and audience exercise specific roles. With its agent-centered view on performances this approach emphasizes the role of the creative potentiality of both actors and audience¹⁸. As early as 1984, the American anthropologist Peter Claus, who carried out research on possession in south India, insisted on applying the explorative method of anthropology and looking at the phenomenon of possession from an indigenous perspective instead of using a more problem-oriented method.¹⁹ The studies that followed recognized different cultural concepts of personhood. In India, possessed

nographies is a different attitude towards the state of trance. As with the esoteric movement, anthropologists could show that trance states need not be pathological and do not necessarily come over a person all of a sudden and uncontrolled. Neurophysiological changes inducing trance states can be evoked with certain stimuli, such as music, rhythm, drums, or verbal invocations. In many non-Western societies, so called ‘normal’ people easily enter trance states. Numerous examples of spontaneous trance states during rituals or religious processions show that this is not exceptional behaviour.²³ In his comprehensive study *The Self Possessed*, Frederick M. Smith shows that all forms of possession have a long tradition in India. Descrip-

tions are found already in Vedic texts. With his diachronic study of possession, Smith shows that positive, controlled possession is the most common form of spiritual expression in India. It exists side by side with negative, disease-producing possession. For Smith, possession, in the widest sense, is a “state of mind characterized by intensity, emotional excitement, and desire”.²⁴

Learning possession

Existing approaches in possession studies have recently been broadened by focusing on the process of “learning possession”.²⁵ Halloy and Naumescu suggest that if we perceive learning possession as a social process it will shed light on “the ways in which people acquire religious concepts, values, emotions, skills and practices in specific socio-cultural contexts.”²⁶ Learning possession encompasses various levels:

1. Trance: The specific experience of religious trance has to be mastered. The medium-to-be has to develop skills of entering into a state of trance and develop control over emotions during an altered state of consciousness. It is a precarious and dangerous phase in his/her life. Its success is not guaranteed but depends on the support of the medium's family and the audience. Without their support, mediumship would not be possible.

2. Embodiment: This means coping with the sensation of divine presence in the body. Coping with fasting, exhaustion, heaviness of head. Learning how to transmit divine words to an audience. If we consider altered states of consciousness as a general psychological ability cultivated in specific religious traditions, the concept of person is an important presupposition. In South Asian culture, the human body is considered permeable to divine and demonic entities, resulting in a temporary modification of personality.

3. Religious concepts: The medium has to learn shared religious concepts and beliefs, such as the pantheon of all related deities; the power of deities, their features, such as physical characteristics, divine personality traits; whether they are benevolent or demanding, and of what kind are their demands: worship, pilgrimage, animal sacrifice? How would they explain personal misfortune, illness, sorrow, bad luck? How does ‘one's deity’ speak? How does the deity react, make demands, suggest solutions?

Possession as verbal event

Apart from the fact that trance is a very important precondition, possession is also a performative event in which divine or demonic presence is created verbally. As a speech event, it has to be seen as a cultural practice in which contexts of human lives are constructed and performed with linguistic means. According to speech act theory, language not only represents or refers to reality; it also creates it.²⁷ Divine or demonic presence is created verbally, based on the assumption that gods or demons exist as persons (not merely as symbols). Words spoken in a performance are not only referential but also construct meaning. According to Foley, the power of words is derived from the performance as an enabling event and a certain tradition as an enabling referent.²⁸ Foley has created the term “performance arena” as “the locus where an event or performance takes place, where words are invested with their special power”.²⁹ Words spoken by a possessed person do not convey meaning on their own. One important factor in the performance arena is the audience, which gives words their illocutionary power. What is spoken during states of possession trance is interpreted through listening. Besides speaking, listening also has to be considered as a cultural practice influenced by cultural concepts.³⁰ What do listeners hear when demons or deities speak through a possessed person? In the case of demonic or spirit



Rajamma (left), a ‘professional listener’, who is able to explain and interpret the divine words to the audience, with Nukamma, medium of the goddess Kotta Rajulu (right), and Nukamma’s daughter (centre) who is learning “informally” while helping with the preparations and observing the performances of her mother. However, it depends on the goddess whether she will ‘select’ her as her medium. Rajamma and Nukamma are both listening to the divine words which had just been spoken by the goddess.

possession, verbal utterances are hard to understand. To an outsider, they seem meaningless, out of control and even vulgar or obscene. To indigenous listeners like family members and exorcists, the words of spirits and demons are part of a whole set of behavioural and specific circumstances allowing listeners to understand their meaning. In the case of spirit mediumship, the meaning of verbal utterances is also hard to grasp. It can only be understood with the aid of listeners who have a certain expertise in the interpretation of divine words. It is usually understood that the deity enters the human body with the onset of trance. However, a closer look at the divine words shows that the divine presence does not happen all of a sudden but has to be created verbally.

Can the words spoken by the medium/goddess be true? Can they be effective? Again, the divine words are not true or effective by themselves, but only through the listeners. Possession requires expertise not only on the side of the possessed person but also from the audience. On the basis of the words spoken by the medium, the audience decides whether the performance is really a divine performance. The performative approach to possession rituals with its focus on the words spoken in trance allows us to look at possession not as an event in which the possessed person acts ‘as if’ possessed, but as a performance in which a certain reality is created by the performer as well as the audience. William Sax and Aditya Malik have added still another dimension to performativity.³¹ Accord-

ing to their observations of possession cults in the Himalayas, it is not only the words or the songs that cause possession. Both Sax and Malik perceive the appearance of the god as a matter of embodiment rather than of language: The god dances (*nācnā*) or is made to dance (*nacānā*) by the exorcist in the body of the oracle. Therefore, Sax concludes, an interpretation of possession would need a hermeneutics of the body rather than a hermeneutics of the text.³²

Conclusion

Trance and possession in South Asia are no longer considered to be states of dissociation. Every human being has the potential to enter altered states of consciousness. As a result, abilities such as spiritual healing, channeling, mediumship, and contact with supernatural

powers are basically possible for every person and can be developed in spiritual training as long as a person is sensitized accordingly. With Foley's concept of 'performance arena' in mind, we can answer that, from the point of view of indigenous agents, possession is really possible, because it is created by the performers and their audience in a specific context and at a specific time. As long as all preconditions are fulfilled, divine presence can be created and divine words are invested with power. Embodiment of deities and transmitting divine words can be learned. However, the psychological capacity to enter a state of trance has to be matched with shared cultural and religious values. The possessed medium has to develop his/her expertise to transmit cultural values adequately. •

¹ Halloy and Naumescu 2012: 164. (Halloy, Arnaud & Vlad Naumescu. 2012. Learning Spirit Possession: An Introduction. *Ethnos. Journal of Anthropology*. 77 (2): 155-176).

² cf. Kapferer 1991 (Kapferer, Bruce. 1991 [1983]. *A Celebration of Demons. Exorcism and the Aesthetics of Healing in Sri Lanka*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press) Cf. Basu 2009. (Basu, Helene. 2009. *Drugs and Prayers. Indian Psychiatry in the Realm of Saints*. A film production of the Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics". Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster).

³ cf. Schömbucher 2006. (Schömbucher, Elisabeth. 2006. *Wo Götter durch Menschen sprechen. Besessenheit in Indien*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.)

⁴ cf. Sontheimer 1976 (Sontheimer, Günther Dietz. 1976. *Biroba, Mhaskoba und Khandoba. Ursprung, Geschichte und Umwelt von pastoralen*

Gottheiten in Maharashtra. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Ziegenbalg, Bartholomaeus. 1926 [1711]); cf. Harman 2011 (Harman, William. 2011. *Possession as protection and affliction: the goddess Mariyamman's fierce grace*. In Fabrizio M. Ferrari, ed., *Health and Religious Rituals in South Asia. Disease, possession and healing*. London and New York: Routledge).

⁵ Ziegenbalg 1926 (Ziegenbalg's *Malabarisches Heidentum*. Edited and published by W. Caland. Amsterdam: Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam).

⁶ Germann 1869:162-163 (Germann, W., Hg. 1869. *Genealogy of the South-Indian Gods. A Manual of the Mythology and Religion of the People of Southern India*. By Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg. First Protestant Missionary in India. Madras: Higginbotham and Co.).

⁷ Dubois 1985: 595 (Dubois, Abbé. 1985 [1906].

- Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services).
- ⁸ Oesterreich 1921: 296 (Oesterreich, Traugott Konstantin. 1921. *Die Besessenheit*. Langensalza: Wendt und Klauwell).
- ⁹ Freed and Freed 1964 (Freed, S.A. and R.S. Freed. 1964. Spirit Possession as Illness in a North Indian Village. *Ethnology* 3: 152-171); cf. Freed 1990 (Freed. 1990. Ghost illness in a North Indian village. *Social Science and Medicine* 30(5): 617-623); cf. Kakar 1983 (Kakar, Sudhir. 1983. *Shamans, Mystics and Healers. A psychological enquiry into India and its healing traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press); cf. Lewis 1989 (Lewis, I. M. 1989. *Ecstatic Religion. A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. 2. Aufl. New York and London: Routledge).
- ¹⁰ Lewis 1989:105.
- ¹¹ Kakar 1983.
- ¹² ICD 10; WHO version 2013.
- ¹³ http://www.psychnet-uk.com/x_new_site/DSM_IV/trance_possession_disorder.html <http://www.icd10data.com/ICD10CM/Codes/F01-F99/F40-F48/F44-F44.89>
- ¹⁴ <http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en#/F44.3> Italics: E.S.
- ¹⁵ cf. Goodman 1990 (Goodman, Felicitas. 1990. *Where the Spirits ride the Wind*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press.). Cf. Goodman 1988. (Goodman, Felicitas. 1988. *How about demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press.).
- ¹⁶ Shimkhada and Pave 2011: 109 (Shimkhada, Deepak and Adam D. Pave. 2011. *Shamanic healing: a jhankri in the city*. In Fabrizio M. Ferrari, ed., *Health and Religious Rituals in South Asia. Disease, possession and healing*. London and New York: Routledge).
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 110.
- ¹⁸ cf. Brückner and Schömbucher 2003 (Brückner, Heidrun and Elisabeth Schömbucher. 2003. *Performances*. In Veena Das, ed., *The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. S. 598-624); cf. Brückner, Schömbucher and Zarrilli 2007 (Brückner, Heidrun, Elisabeth Schömbucher and Phillip B. Zarrilli, eds., 2007. *The Power of Performance. Actors, Audiences and Observers of Cultural Performances in India*. Delhi: Manohar).
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- ²¹ Freeman 1999: 151 (Freeman, Richard. 1999. *Dynamics of the Person in the Worship and Sorcery of Malabar*. In J. Assayag and G. Tarabout, eds., *Possession in South Asia. Speech, Body, Territory*. Purusartha, 21: 149-182).
- ²² For more details cf. Schömbucher 2006: 45-52; Schömbucher 2016 (Schömbucher, Elisabeth. 2016. *Possession*. In Geoffrey Oddie, Greg Bailey, Aditya Malik, Will Sweetman, eds., *Handbook of Hinduism in Asia*. New Delhi and London: Sage Publications).
- ²³ cf. Harman 2011.
- ²⁴ Smith 2006: 590 (Smith, Frederick M. 2006. *The Self Possessed. Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press).
- ²⁵ Halloy and Naumescu 2012.
- ²⁶ Halloy and Naumescu 2012:156.
- ²⁷ Austin 1962 (Austin, John L. 1962. *How to do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- ²⁸ Foley 1995: 208 (Foley, John Miles. 1995. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. Freed, R.S. and S.A.).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*: 209.
- ³⁰ Burghart 1996 (Burghart, Richard. 1996. *The Conditions of Listening. Essays on Religion, History and Politics in South Asia*. ed. by C.J. Fuller and J. Spencer. Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press).
- ³¹ Sax 2009 (Sax, William S. 2009. *God of Justice. Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 18); cf. Malik 2009 (Malik, Aditya. 2009. *Dancing the Body of God: Rituals of Embodiment from the Central Himalayas*. *Sites: New Series* 6 (1): 80-96).
- ³² Sax 2009: 47.

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