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Dance of the *Deodhā*s: Divine Possession, Blood Sacrifice and the Grotesque Body in Assamese Goddess Worship

MIKEL BURLEY[1]

School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science

University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

m.m.burley@leeds.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: 'Possession' by a deity or spirit has been a prevalent phenomenon in many religious and cultural milieus, including those of South Asia. Yet it has frequently been neglected by Indologists and marginalized by elite religious authorities. Also underexplored have been forms of goddess worship in Northeast India, where Tantric Hinduism has been strongly influenced by non-Hindu indigenous traditions. Helping to fill these gaps, this article examines the Deodhanī festival (also known as Manasā Pūjā) at the Kāmākhyā temple in Assam, the centrepiece of which is a prolonged dance by 'shamanistic' *deodhā*s, whom devotees claim to be possessed by deities that include several ferocious goddesses. Utilizing the concept of the 'grotesque body' from theories of art and literature, and contextualizing the festival in relation to the broader background of the temple and to practices of possession elsewhere, the article illuminates the themes of divine possession, animal sacrifice and transgressive ritual.

KEYWORDS: Assam; Goddess; Hinduism; possession; sacrifice; Tantra

> [I]f anything is characteristic of popular religion in India it is possession. It would be possible to read the history of religion in South Asia in terms of possession of a person being entered by a deity which becomes reinterpreted at more 'refined' cultural levels. (Flood 2006: 87)

[1] Mikel Burley is Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the University of Leeds. He works across both philosophy of religion and religious studies, drawing especially upon literary and ethnographic sources.

The phenomenon that social and cultural anthropologists, among others, have called *possession* or *spirit possession* has been a prevalent feature of popular religion not only in South Asia but throughout many parts of the world. As several scholars have observed, possession is not 'a unitary phenomenon' (Ram 2013: 273), 'not just one thing' (Smith 2006: 10), but more like 'a complex series of patterns of thinking and behaviour' (Cohen 2008: 105). We should therefore be cautious before attempting any general description. What we may say, however, is that the complex patterns of thinking often involve talk of a person's 'being entered' (as Gavin Flood puts it) or 'taken over' by someone or something else[2]—by a demon or spirit or deity—and the complex patterns of behaviour often include exuberant, sometimes wild and chaotic, bodily movements. Indeed, energetic dancing to the accompaniment of loud and repetitive rhythmic percussion is a widespread feature of possession episodes, not least in South Asian contexts (Alter 2008; Basu 2008).

This article discusses aspects of possession in relation to a particular festival celebrated annually in Assam in Northeast India. The festival, which takes place over three days from the seventeenth to the nineteenth of August, is referred to by various names. One name for it is *Manasā pūjā* (or Assamese equivalents such as *Mārai pūjā*, *Māre barat*, etc.[3]), meaning the worship (*pūjā*) of Manasā, she being a goddess who is especially popular in parts of Northeast India, West Bengal and among the Hindus of Bangladesh.[4] Other common names for the festival, which emphasize a particular aspect of it, include *deodhanī nāc*, *deodhanī nṛtya*, *deodhanī utsav*, etc. The precise meaning of the term *deodhanī* is disputed, but one purported derivation is from the Sanskrit *devadhvani*, meaning 'sound or echo of the deity' (Smith 2006: 140–41).[5] *Nāc* (from Sanskrit *nāṭya*) means 'dance' in Assamese and certain other North Indian languages, and *nṛtya*, borrowed from Sanskrit, has the same meaning; *utsav* (from Sanskrit *utsava*) can be rendered simply as 'festival'. Those who do the dancing

[2] See, among many other examples, Alexander (2003: 313), Sumegi (2008: 77), Winzeler (2008: 202).

[3] 'The Manasā-pūjā is also known as *māre-pūjā*, *mārai-pūjā*, *māre-barat* or simply *māre*, and the goddess is associated with death, particularly with unnatural death' (Sarma 1992: 115). See also Sarma (1988: 49).

[4] For comprehensive discussion of the goddess Manasā, see Maity (1966; 1989: 71–81) and Haq (2015).

[5] 'The term Deodhani has been derived from Sanskrit word "Deva" meaning god or deity and "Dhani" [*sic*: in Sanskrit this should read *dhvani*] meaning sound i.e. echo' (Bordoloi, Sharma Thakur and Saikia 1987: 33). In Assamese script, the word is normally spelt □□□□□□, though at the Kāmākhyā temple the official spelling is দৱেধ□□□নী, which could be transliterated (somewhat awkwardly) as *dewadhbanī* or (more pronouncably) as *dewadhvanī*. Besides *deodhanī* (which I shall continue to use in this article), other variant transliterations include '*deodhāni*' (Mishra 2004), 'Debadhanī' (Dold 2013: 124), '*debaddhani*' (Smith 2006: 141) and 'Devadhani' (Goswami 2000: 67).

are called *deodhā*s, the meaning of which term is again commonly said to be 'echo of the deity' (Mahanta 1997: 311; 2008: 275) or 'echoes or voices of the gods' (Dold 2011: 53). Although dances referred to as *deodhanī nāc* in certain parts of Assam are performed by women (Sarma 1988: 44), the festival as it occurs at the major temple of Kāmākhyā to the northwest of the city of Guwahati is one in which the dancers are exclusively men. It is claimed of these dancers that they are possessed by deities, the majority of whom are goddesses, including among them the most notoriously ferocious female deities of the Hindu pantheon. The festival incorporates animal sacrifice, which is a regular occurrence at the Kāmākhyā temple, the principal sacrificial victims being pigeons and young male goats. At certain times during the festival the *deodhā*s, in keeping with the macabre personas of the deities they are said to embody, ritually drink the blood of these animals.

Compared with many other strands of South Asian—and in this case broadly Hindu—religion, the traditions and practices of India's most north-eastern states remain underexplored. Even the extant studies of divine possession and goddess worship in India, and of the Kāmākhyā temple complex in particular, have said relatively little specifically about the Deodhanī or Manasā festival.[6] The present article contributes towards filling that lacuna by drawing upon both textual research and first-hand observations of the festival that I made during a fieldwork trip to Assam in August 2017. The result is a contextualized analysis of the festival that focuses especially on the themes of blood, divine possession and the transgression of widely accepted norms of social and religious behaviour. My approach is primarily hermeneutical, deploying what the philosopher D. Z. Phillips termed a 'hermeneutics of contemplation' (Phillips 2001). Such an approach can be contrasted with both the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and the 'hermeneutics of recollection' that Paul Ricoeur famously outlined.[7] Unlike the hermeneutics of suspicion typified by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, a hermeneutics of contemplation does not aim to explain away the phenomena under investigation in reductive terms. But unlike the hermeneutics of recollection, which was favoured by Ricoeur himself, a hermeneutics of contemplation does not aim to vindicate religious faith either. That is, a contemplative hermeneutics does not strive to bring into view what Ricoeur calls 'the rational faith that runs through the purely intentional analysis of

[6] See, e.g., Smith (2006), who, admitting that possession in Assam 'has been almost entirely unresearched', relies heavily on 'one local chapbook' for his exposition of the Deodhanī festival (2006: 139–42). See also Urban (2010), who, despite providing a thoroughgoing study of goddess worship at Kāmākhyā more generally, devotes less than two pages (169–70) to the Manasā festival.
[7] See esp. Ricoeur (1970: 28–32; 1971: xiv).

religious symbolism' (1970: 28). Rather, without endorsement or condemnation of the phenomena—and hence without purporting to evaluate them in relation to some supposedly universal standard of rationality—a hermeneutics of contemplation endeavours to disclose 'possibilities of sense' that inhere within them.[8]

A contemplative approach does not, however, preclude drawing upon concepts from domains of discourse other than those deployed specifically by the participants in the activities being examined. In many instances, etic concepts may facilitate both illuminating description and comparative analysis.[9] In this article, I invoke in particular the notions of the *grotesque* and the *grotesque body*, which have been delineated by the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin in his well-known study of the writings and cultural milieu of the sixteenth-century French author François Rabelais (Bakhtin 1984). Distinguishing between, on the one hand, a medieval and Renaissance conception of the grotesque—typified by Rabelais—and, on the other hand, a conception of the grotesque that emerged in the European Romantic movement of the nineteenth century, Bakhtin characterizes the latter as displaying a sombreness that he considers to be absent from the more flamboyantly 'carnivalesque' atmosphere of the earlier period (e.g. Bakhtin 1984: 47). Setting aside the question of whether Bakhtin's model of transition from one conception of the grotesque to another would hold up in the face of robust historical scrutiny, it is my contention that the conceptual framework that informs the study of the grotesque, to which Bakhtin made a seminal contribution, can profitably be utilized in describing the kinds of ritualized performances of possession exhibited in the Deodhanī festival. Before turning, in subsequent sections, to the subject of spirit possession and then to that of the temple of Kāmākhyā and the dance of the *deodhā*s itself, I therefore begin by explicating some pertinent aspects of the notion of the grotesque.

THE GROTESQUE

The term 'grotesque' derives from the Italian *grottesche*, which itself means 'of or pertaining to underground caves [*grotta*]' (Harpham 2006: 31). It originated in late-fifteenth-century

[8] See esp. Phillips (2001: Ch. 1). For discussion of Phillips' 'contemplative conception of philosophy' more generally, see Burley (2015).

[9] Here I use the term 'etic concepts' to mean merely concepts that would not normally be used by participants in the practices under investigation (see, e.g., Chryssides 2014, esp. 70–74). I make no claims about the 'scientific' pretensions that are sometimes ascribed to approaches that deploy such concepts. Nor do I suppose the distinction between emic and etic vocabulary to be sharp or context invariant.

Italy, where excavations of first-century Roman ruins revealed cavern-like (or grotto-esque) rooms and corridors that had sunken deep into the ground. Upon the columns, walls and ceilings of these rooms and corridors were murals depicting creatures that combined human, animal and plant motifs. It was to these that the neologism *grottesche* was first applied (Remshardt 2004: 4–5). Aesthetic and philosophical reflection upon the concept of the grotesque has been pursued since the mid-eighteenth century.[10] Amid the multiple interpretations of the concept, a common way of understanding the grotesque has been as encapsulating what Dieter Meindl calls 'a tense combination of attractive and repulsive elements, of comic and tragic aspects, of ludicrous and horrifying features'; while, in any given context, either its lighter or its darker dimensions may be accentuated, 'a certain collision or complicity between playfulness and seriousness, fun and dread', is constitutive of the grotesque (Meindl 1996: 14).

Bakhtin (1895–1975) was therefore far from being the first thinker to ruminate upon the grotesque, but his study of Rabelais, first published in Russian in 1965, gave fresh impetus to discussions of the topic and has become an important reference point for subsequent investigations. The grotesque is, for Bakhtin, characteristic of certain forms of literary and artistic production but also of the wider culture out of which those forms emerge. Thus, for example, Bakhtin views the ancient satyric dramas and comedies of Attica as originating in the Dionysian festivals, and the medieval and Renaissance grotesque as being associated with 'the culture of folk humor', especially as it manifests in carnivals (1984: 46, 47). Bakhtin describes the carnival as a subversive countercultural arena in which normal rules of social etiquette and divisions of hierarchy are temporarily suspended. Rather than being a spectacular performance watched by a relatively passive audience, the carnival, as Bakhtin envisages it, is a celebration of equality in which everyone participates. Its spirit is one of jocularity and antiauthoritarianism and its targets of ridicule include symbols of both political and religious authority, notably the king and God. This spirit, Bakhtin maintains, was not restricted to specific historical occasions, but is an enduring principle that, despite its erosion in the post-Renaissance era, 'continues to fertilize various areas of life and culture' (1984: 33–34).

The grotesque could, then, be described as an aesthetic sensibility that, according to Bakhtin, originates in the atmosphere of the carnival. It is the sensibility that takes pleasure in portraying life and the world, and especially the human body, in ways that emphasize,

[10] See, e.g., Möser (1766), first published in German in 1761.

typically by means of exaggeration, their earthy, indelicate and sometimes downright obscene aspects. It is his attention to the grotesque *body* in particular that has occasionally been cited as Bakhtin's most distinctive contribution to discussions of the grotesque (see, e.g., Meindl 1996: 17; Czachesz 2012). Central to his account is the observation that depictions of the grotesque body accentuate its most conspicuous points of contact with its environment, especially its orifices and protrusions that facilitate the exchange of substances between the body and the rest of the world. Thus, 'the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose' are played up, along with the activities of 'copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation' (1984: 26). These are, on Bakhtin's reckoning, precisely the features and functions that most incontrovertibly disclose the body's condition as being both 'ever unfinished' and 'ever creating'—a constantly changing entity in porous and fluid intercourse with the world around it (p. 26). Of particular significance for a theme that will emerge in my discussion of the Deodhanī festival is Bakhtin's highlighting of the imagery of devouring in Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Having registered the pervasiveness of references to food and drink in this literary work, Bakhtin remarks that the grotesque body's mode of engagement with the world is 'most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating'; it is in this act that, by transgressing its own limits, the body, and hence the human being, 'triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself' (p. 281): 'The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed' (p. 283). Emblematic of this devouring body is the focality of the mouth in the grotesque face. Such a face 'is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss' (p. 317).

Bakhtin's periodization of formulations of the grotesque presents the Renaissance grotesque, epitomized in Rabelais's writings, as the paradigm in relation to which the Romantic and modernist formulations amount to a regression. While the euphoric spirit of the carnival had been integral to the Rabelaisian grotesque, Bakhtin contends that this spirit retains only a residual presence in later forms, with an air of 'gloom' having entered into the Romantic conception (1984: 47). Rather than revelling in victory over that which is 'dark and terrifying' by transforming it into something risible, the Romantic grotesque unites the comic with the terrible in an ambivalent hybrid image. Typifying this combination is Victor Hugo's description of the grotesque as creating both 'the formless and the horrible' on the one hand and 'the comic and the buffoon-like' on the other (Hugo n.d. [1827]: 10).[11] Similarly, John

[11] Hugo's remark is quoted in Bakhtin (1984: 43). Here I have slightly amended that translation.

Ruskin characterizes it as, 'in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful'; these elements, he adds, can hardly be separated, for 'there are few grotesques so utterly playful as to be overcast with no shade of fearfulness, and few so fearful as absolutely to exclude all ideas of jest' (Ruskin 1881: 126).

Since Ruskin presumes his characterization to apply as much to the Renaissance as to later versions of the grotesque, we ought not to take for granted Bakhtin's assertion that 'the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, filled with the spirit of carnival … takes away all fears and is therefore completely gay and bright' (1984: 47). But neither should we infer that Bakhtin has simply overlooked a sinister dimension that is really present in Renaissance works such as Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The issue is complicated by the fact that judgments about what is straightforwardly hilarious in contrast with what is darkly humorous may differ over time and between cultures. As Gregory de Rocher has observed, certain episodes involving mass death that Rabelais depicts in highly unrealistic terms will strike modern readers as laughable, whereas episodes that are less fancifully represented are liable to evoke more mixed responses, including feelings of dismay and alienation (Rocher 1979: 67, 63).

This is not the place to enter into detailed exposition of the examples that Rocher adduces from Rabelais's oeuvre.[12] An important reminder to take from his contention, however, is that in coming to comprehend a given episode, whether in a work of narrative fiction or in a religious ritual, there is inevitably an interplay between the phenomena constitutive of the episode on the one hand and the personal and cultural perspective of the observer on the other. It is in part for reasons such as this that, in the context of the study of religion, it is advisable to follow D. Z. Phillips in treating the hermeneuticist's role as one of elucidating *possibilities* of sense, the purpose being to prevent oneself and one's readers from prematurely foreclosing certain interpretive possibilities as a consequence of unwarranted assumptions or prejudices about what the object of interpretation 'must' consist in. This is a very different emphasis from that of a study which claims to be providing the one correct interpretation.

Having, then, at least begun to introduce some salient themes from the capacious conceptual field of the grotesque, including Bakhtin's foregrounding of the grotesque body, let us turn to the topic of spirit possession. In the next section, I consider in particular both

[12] For further discussion, see not only Rocher's own treatment but also that in Bergman (2003: 186–88).

how the ambivalence or equivocation between the horrific and the comedic manifests in cases of spirit possession and how, in such contexts, heavy rhythmic sound serves to create a conducive and potent ritual environment.

'HORRIFIC COMEDY' AND THE FORMATION OF A RITUAL SOUND-WORLD

Without explicitly invoking the concept of the grotesque, anthropologists sometimes describe episodes of spirit possession in terms that combine elements of comedy with something more serious or even terrifying. Michael Lambek, for example, remarks of possession that it is often 'a kind of serious parody of orthodox religion, social convention, or the accepted language of power relations' (1989: 54). In this respect, we might add, it exhibits features of both the grotesque and the carnivalesque as expounded by Bakhtin. Paul Stoller, meanwhile, coins the phrase 'horrific comedy' to capture something of the nature of spirit possession as it occurs among the Songhay of southern Niger (Stoller 1984; 1995: 7). Of several families of spirits or deities that are held to take temporary possession of people in this community, one is known as the Hauka—a term meaning 'craziness' or 'unruliness' in the Hausa language (Miles 1994: 335). A notable characteristic of Hauka possessions is that dancing and ostensibly aggressive movements and gestures are interspersed with burlesque mockery of European colonialists. Although the French granted independence to the Republic of Niger in 1960, the colonial influence and European presence remains a target of resistance, prompting continued ridicule and parodic derision (Stoller 1984: 184).

In an especially vivid description, Stoller recounts his 'first exposure' to the horrific comedy of the Hauka that occurred in 1969. Near the compound of a Songhay possession-cult priest, a crowd had gathered around a trio of musicians comprising two calabash drummers and a player of the *godji* (monochord violin). As the musicians played, a young man in the crowd suddenly 'vomited up a black liquid' and proceeded to roll on the ground throwing sand over himself and shoving it into his mouth. Upon standing up, he stared at the audience and spat sand at Stoller. With eyes bulging and saliva frothing from his mouth, he flailed around as though trying to lash out at onlookers. Subsequently, the young man participated in a terse verbal exchange with Stoller, during which he evoked scornful mirth from the audience by issuing lewd remarks about Stoller's parents (Stoller 1984: 166). In this incident as a whole we see the grotesque motifs of the contorted body and a mouth that ingurgitates dirt and also salivates, vomits, spits and spews obscenities.

The strange mixture of the horrific and the comedic is likely to be among the factors that have deterred close attention to the phenomenon of possession in much scholarship on South Asian religion in particular. As Frederick Smith has observed, neither Western academics nor educated orthodox Hindus have known what to make of this phenomenon, which is perceived as falling 'outside the realm of both reason and social accountability' (2006: 3). As a consequence, despite their ancient roots and historical continuities, practices of possession have tended to be marginalized in mainstream scholarly, religious and nationalist discourses (Ram 2013: 226). Nevertheless, in the everyday contexts of lived religion, 'possession is the most common and … most valued form of spiritual expression in India' (Smith 2006: xxv).

In discussing the Koṭai ('Offering') festival in the Nāñcil Nāṭu region of southernmost Tamil Nadu, Stuart Blackburn describes how each possessed dancer becomes a 'kinetic icon'—a fluidly moving embodiment of divinity that constitutes a site of adoration and a vehicle of communication between audience and deity (1988: 41). While verbal exchanges may take place between devotees and their objects of worship through the medium of the possessed body, it is the dance that establishes the credibility of the possessed individual as an authentic deific voice (p. 41). As the ethnomusicologist Andrew Alter has remarked, in the divine possession tradition of Garhwal in northern India, 'Gods possess humans if they are pleased, and this pleasure is usually expressed through dancing' (2008: 21). For this reason, the music that evokes the dance—often dominated by loud and prolonged rhythmic drumming—is itself the driving force of many possession performances, generating the 'charged' and 'exhilarating' atmosphere that 'summons the deities' to participate in the dance (pp. 133–34, 3).[13]

Garhwali musicians refer to their knowledge of the rhythmic performance as an 'ocean of drumming' (*ḍhol sāgar*) (Alter 2008: 9, 83), a phrase that could aptly be applied to the sound that results when a large number of drums are played in unison, as is the case at the Deodhanī festival in Assam. Over the three days of this festival, those who are present in and around the Kāmākhyā temple are immersed in an ocean of sound comprising the seemingly relentless pounding of drums and clashing of cymbals, at a volume that is not only raucously audible in the ears but also felt as a pulsating force that pummels and vibrates one's body. At times, the rhythm resembles an immense heartbeat, which might be imagined as the heartbeat of the goddess Kāmākhyā (Dold 2011: 55). At other times, it accelerates and intensifies, rising in a

[13] For examples from diverse South Asian contexts, see Caldwell (1996), Walter (2001) and Sax (2011). For an African example, see Spencer (1990: Ch. 6).

crescendo that elicits ‘shrieking, howling and jumping’ from the dancing *deodhā*s (Maity 1966: 297)—an enactment of horrific comedy.

These themes of the horrific and comedic grotesquery of the ritualized performance and the salience of drumming will recur in the descriptions of the Deodhanī festival that come shortly, after we have examined some background information about the festival venue: the temple of the goddess Kāmākhyā (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Kāmākhyā temple, Assam, during the Deodhanī festival. Photograph by the author, 19 August 2017.

KĀMĀKHYĀ, DESIRE AND THE WOMB OF THE GODDESS

The Kāmākhyā temple has been described as ‘the most celebrated Shakti *pitha* in the *tantrik* world’ (Jha 1991: 32). A *pīṭha* is, literally, a firm seat or bench, and *śakti* (‘power’, ‘energy’) is a term for the Goddess (Brown 1998: 239; Fuller 2004: 44). A Śakti *pīṭha* (or, more strictly, *śākta pīṭha*) is thus a ‘seat of the Goddess’—a place where her power is centred. ‘Tantric’ (*tāntrika*) is harder to define concisely, since its semantic range is extensive. The meaning that is most relevant to the present context, as well as to the main themes I am

covering in this article as a whole, is that which emphasizes the role of desire in spiritual practice. As a much-cited definition puts it, Tantra, or Tantrism, seeks 'to place *kāma*, desire, in every meaning of the word, in the service of liberation' (Biardeau 1981, quoted in Padoux 1987: 273). Rather than being suppressed, desire is harnessed for the achievement of 'worldly and supernatural enjoyments' as well as special 'powers' and ultimately for 'liberation in this life', evincing 'a particular attitude on the part of the Tantric adept toward the cosmos, whereby he feels integrated within an all-embracing system of micro-macrocosmic correlations' (Padoux 1987: 273). The theme of desire is present in the very name of the goddess Kāmākhyā. Although the etymology of the name has been disputed,[14] it is commonly understood to denote the 'Goddess of Desire' (Biernacki 2007). The *Kālikā Purāṇa* (*c*. tenth century CE) elucidates the name by attributing to the god Śiva the declaration that the goddess is called Kāmākhyā because she is 'the giver or fulfiller of desire, desiring, desirable, beautiful' (*Kālikā Purāṇa* 62.2, quoted in Avalon 1964: 132), who 'has come to the great mountain Nīlakūṭa to have sexual enjoyment with me' (62.1, trans. Shastri).

This Nīlakūṭa ('blue peak') or Nīlācala ('blue hill'), on which the temple of Kāmākhyā stands, is located on the south bank of the Brahmaputra River, to the northwest of Assam's capital city, Guwahati. The temple is revered not merely as a seat of the Goddess but as the site where, in the myth of the goddess Satī, her vulva (*yoni*) fell to earth (Rosati 2016, esp. 281–88). According to the myth, Satī immolated herself in protest at her father Dakṣa's refusal to invite Śiva, her husband, to a sacrificial ceremony. In the version of the story recounted in the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, Śiva's subsequent grief erupts in a 'torrential rain of tears' that threatens to 'burn the entire world' as he roams 'like a madman', carrying Satī's body over his shoulder (*Kālikā Purāṇa* 18.11–37, trans. Shastri). Apparently in an effort to ameliorate Śiva's anguish by removing its immediate object, the gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śanaiścara[15] 'entered the corpse of Satī in order to tear it to pieces so that holy places could

[14] Kakati (1948: 38) suspects that *Kāmā* in *Kāmākhyā* is not of Sanskrit derivation, but corresponds 'to Austric formations' such as '*Kanoi*, Demon; *Kamoit*, Devil; *Komin*, Grave; *Kamet*, Corpse (Khasi); *Kamru*, a god of the Santals'. Cf. Kakati (1941: 53–54), Sircar (1973: 15 fn. 1) and, most recently, Rosati (2016: 279 fn. 3).

[15] Śanaiścara (lit. 'He who moves slowly'), also known as Śani, is a name for the planet Saturn and of the deity personifying that planet; see, e.g., Mevissen (2000), Pieris and Raven (2011: 269–70). According to Vedic mythology, he is the son of Sūrya (the Sun) and Chāyā (lit. 'Shade', 'Shadow'), Chāyā being a substitute wife who was left behind when Sūrya's real wife, Saṃjñā ('Awakening', 'Consciousness'), fled from Sūrya's overwhelming radiance (Sivapriyananda 1990: 64, 73). In Shastri's translation of the *Kalikā Purāṇa* (2008), Śanaiścara's name is consistently mistransliterated as 'Śanaiśvara'.

come up wherever these pieces fall' (18.40, quoted in Mishra 2004: 27). The feet, thighs, breasts, arms, neck and head were scattered in various directions; the *yoni* fell on Kāmagiri ('hill of desire') in the land of Kāmarūpa ('embodiment/form of desire'), and the navel fell on ground nearby (18.41–43).

Two inscriptions on the walls of its *antarāla* (antechamber) record that the Kāmākhyā temple was rebuilt upon existing foundations in 1565 CE (Das 2007: 41). However, its sanctum sanctorum, known as the *garbhagṛha* ('womb chamber'; see Rosati 2016: 280; Ramos 2017: 4) or *manobhava guhā* ('cave of desire'[16]) has been estimated 'to date back to around the seventh century' (Goswami 2015: 61). Entering this 'womb' of the Goddess, one descends a short flight of stone steps into a scarcely lit reverberant cavern, a grotto. There, in a sunken portion of the cavern below the level of the main floor, is a large black rock, kept smooth and moist by the trickling water of an underground spring. The rock, with a groove running along its centre, is venerated as the *yoni* of the Goddess.[17] After making an offering, and bowing to touch the rock and scoop a handful of spring water to his or her mouth, the devotee receives from the officiating priest a smear of vermilion paste across the forehead, resembling a bloody wound.[18]

To the west of the part of the temple containing the *garbhagṛha* are three further chambers, the westernmost of which is the 'dancing hall' (*nāṭamandira*), which was constructed in the mid-eighteenth century (Mishra 2004: 165). This, in turn, is connected by a short roofed walkway to the 'sacrifice house' (*balighar*), in which animals are ritually beheaded. The majority of the victims are pigeons and young uncastrated male goats (fig. 2), but others include water buffaloes, sheep, ducks and fish. Certain vegetables are also offered, principally ash gourds (*komora* or 'winter melon') and sugarcane stalks; these are typically chopped in half with the same type of sword as that which is used to decapitate goats and the other smaller animals.[19] Unlike the worship of other goddesses, which centres on the sacred

[16] *Manobhava*, which literally means 'mind-born' or 'existing in the mind', is an epithet of Kāma, the god of desire. The epithet derives from the view that desire depends on the memory of previous experiences and hence 'is rooted in the mind' (Benton 2006: 43–44).

[17] Is the goddess in question Satī or Kāmākhyā? Their identities become fused in the aniconic emblem of the *yoni*.

[18] After queuing for approximately three hours, I went into the *garbhagṛha* at Kāmākhyā temple on 15 August 2017. For other descriptions of it, see Shastri (1989: 123), Goswami (1998: 14) and Ramos (2017: 45–46).

[19] During my visit to Kāmākhyā in August 2017, I witnessed the sacrifice of pigeons, goats, a water buffalo, a gourd, a stem of sugarcane and what looked like a catfish. The sacrifice of a sheep and a duck at Kāmākhyā is reported in Choudhury (2002) and Dold (2004: 117). The sacrifice of numerous

yoni itself, the worship of Manasā is restricted to the dancing hall and treats an earthen 'auspicious pot' (*maṅgala ghaṭa*) as Manasā's symbolic embodiment, the pot being an object that itself has traditional associations with the womb.[20] These factors have led some scholars to speculate that the worship of this snake goddess was originally incorporated only 'grudgingly' into the temple's regular religious calendar (Mishra 2004: 54). Moreover, the dance of the *deodhā*s that constitutes the centrepiece of Manasā Pūjā as it is celebrated at the Kāmākhyā temple, is thought to be strongly influenced by 'shamanistic dances' that have long been performed by indigenous inhabitants of the surrounding region, especially the Bodo-Kachari people (Sarma 1988: 52; Goswami 1960: 57). It is to a closer examination of the *deodhā*s' dance that we now turn.

Figure 2. Goats tethered behind the sacrifice house (*balighar*) at Kāmākhyā temple. Photograph by the author, August 2017.

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other species of animals, and also human beings, is enjoined in traditional texts such as the *Kālikā Purāṇa* (55.3–6; 67.3–19), *Yoginī Tantra* (2.9.158, 2.7.170) and others; see Urban (2010: 210 n. 49).

[20] 'The words, *ghata*, *kumbha*, or *garaga* are synonymous with the meanings of both "pot" and "womb." In other words, the pot represents the womb of the goddess holding life in its seed form' (Padma 2013: 85).

*DEODHĀ*S AND DEITIES

A myth of origin of the Deodhanī festival declares that there was once a *mahārāja* ('great king') who yearned to have a son. Praying to the goddess Bhairavī, the king promised to give her his own head as an oblation if a son were to be granted to him. Approving of this pledge, Bhairavī fulfilled the king's request. But in his delight, the king forgot to discharge his side of the bargain until the goddess reminded him of it in a vision. In response, the king decapitated himself with a golden knife, offering the head to Bhairavī. By this act, the king attained a divine status and subsequently 'possessed a local male devotee, thus beginning the *debaddhani* [= *deodhanī*] tradition' (Smith 2006: 141). No explicit mention is made of Manasā in this story. Bhairavī is traditionally regarded as one of the ten Mahāvidyās ('great wisdom [goddesses]'), all of whom have a strong association with the Kāmākhyā temple complex (Dold 2004). In common with many other Indian goddesses, Bhairavī is considered to have both destructive and beneficent aspects. In the form of Kāmeśvarī, she is a goddess of desire and of its fulfilment, much like Kāmākhyā (Kinsley 1997: 172); as such, both Kāmeśvarī and Kāmākhyā are commonly prayed to as embodiments of fertility and givers of offspring.

Manasā, too, is a goddess of fertility, though her association with snakes is symbolic of violence and destruction as well as regeneration (Dimock 1962: 317). She is the bringer of life, reproduction and relief from illness on the one hand and 'of death, decay and misfortune' on the other (Sen 1953: xxix). Exactly how her own festival of Manasā Pūjā became entwined with the Deodhanī dance at Kāmākhyā remains unclear, but the same ambivalences that characterize the imagery and mythology that surround her are vividly present within the activities of the *deodhā*s. In practice, neither the direct participants in the dance nor the devotees who come to observe it, nor indeed the priests who officiate over the proceedings, appear to distinguish sharply between the multiple goddesses—or forms or embodiments of the one Goddess—that are being propitiated. The goddesses are all, ultimately, 'Mother' (*Mā* or *Māta*)

These conflations are consistent with the *deodhā*s' self-presentation as 'temporary seats of the divine power' (Sarma 1988: 50), for although it is claimed of the *deodhā*s that they become 'vehicles' for the deities they incarnate (Mahanta 2008: 275), the respective personae of these deities are hard to differentiate on the basis of the *deodhā*s' appearance and

behaviour. Ranging in number from sixteen to twenty-one,[21] all of the *deodhā*s wear simple cotton dhotis and receive garlands of flowers around their necks from devoted spectators. All but one of them is besmeared with red vermilion paste, the exception being the *deodhā* who embodies Kubera[22]—the king of the *yakṣa*s (roughly, 'nature spirits')—whose dhoti is dyed indigo and whose body is smeared with indigo paste. They all wield weapons of some sort over the course of the proceedings: in most cases these are slender batons but they also include tridents and swords, especially the large curved sword of the type used for decapitating water buffaloes.[23] The majority of the *deodhā*s engage, at intervals, in wild and exuberant dancing, making triumphal gestures with their arms and hopping around on one leg with the opposite knee bent out sideways. Pulling exaggerated—grotesque—facial expressions, they roll their eyes, project their tongues and bear their teeth ghoulishly (fig. 3).

[21] 'Out of twenty-one *deodhā*s representing various gods and goddesses, six are from the temple complex itself and the rest are from different parts of lower Assam' (Mishra 2004: 55).

[22] On the etymology of the name Kubera—probably from the verbal root *kub* or *kumb* ('to cover over')—see Hopkins (1913: 56–57). Cf. Varadachari (1982: 346): 'Kubera is said to conceal his wealth and keep it away from one and all.'

[23] This sword is referred to in Assam as a *dākhar* (Sarma 1988: 52). Elsewhere, including Nepal, it is known as a *rām dao* (see, e.g., Cowper 1906: 148).

Figure 3. A *deodhā* during the Deodhanī festival at Kāmākhyā. Photograph by Pinku Haloi, 19 August 2017.

Visually identifying which *deodhā* is possessed by which deity is far from straightforward, and lists of the deities in question tend to be incomplete and mutually inconsistent. Nevertheless, there are several names that recur across otherwise partially divergent lists. Of these, the male deities comprise Mahādeva (Śiva), Mahārāja (the divinized king who donated his head to Bhairavī), Gaṇeśa, Nārāyaṇa, Kubera (or Dhanakubera) and Jalakubera. The female deities by whom *deodhā*s are said to be possessed are greater in number, comprising Bagalā, Bhairavī, Cāmuṇḍā, Chinnamastā, Kālī, Śmaśānakālī ('Kālī of the cremation ground'), Tārā, Ugratārā ('Fierce Tārā'),[24] Bhuvanesvarī, Calantā, Kāmākhyā (or Burhī Kāmākhyā, lit. 'Old Kāmākhyā'), Manasā and Śītalā.[25] Of these thirteen female deities, the iconography and mythology associated with the first eight normally depicts them as truculent and dangerous; and of the remaining five, Manasā (the snake goddess) and Śītalā (the goddess of smallpox) are ambivalent inasmuch as they are typically characterized as both the instigators and the removers of affliction.[26] This abundance of pugnacity and ambivalence in the characters of the deities contributes to the general air of volatility that pervades the Deodhanī festival. While there is rarely a sense that spectators are in real danger of physical harm,[27] the *deodhā*s' movements tread an uneasy line between mock ferocity and actual aggression, enacting a form of 'horrific comedy' that, I want to suggest, may illuminatingly be described in terms of the exhibition of grotesque bodies.

[24] 'Ugratārā is a Hindu adaptation of the Buddhist Tantric Mahācīna(krama)tārā or Ugratārā, who was most likely originally a tribal goddess of the Himalayan region' (Bühnemann 2000: 97).

[25] The sources from which I have synthesized the foregoing lists of male and female deities are Sarma (1988: 50), Mishra (2004: 56–57), Goswami (2006: 137), Filippi (2008: 14 n. 13) and Dold (2011: 55–57).

[26] On the ambivalence of deities such as Manasā and Śītalā, see Kinsley (1986: 208–11). On Śītalā in particular, see Mukhopadhyay (1994).

[27] Over the three days of the festival in August 2017, I witnessed only one physical injury to a member of the crowd. Ironically, it was a police sergeant who had been trying to keep spectators out of the way of the *deodhā*s who received a firm (and inadvertent) blow to the back of his head from a *deodhā*'s elbow as the *deodhā* ran between the sacrifice house and the dancing hall. The injury was not serious, but, needless to say, the sergeant was less amused by the incident than were several members of the crowd who saw it.

RITUALIZED TRANSGRESSION AND THE PERFORMANCE OF DIVINE POSSESSION

In bringing out the grotesque dimensions of the Deodhanī festival, I shall focus primarily upon two major and interrelated themes, namely the ritualized transgression of traditional religious norms and the performance of divine possession. The term 'performance' here has the dual sense of, on the one hand, the mere carrying out of an activity (performing a task) and, on the other hand, the playing of a role for the purpose of entertaining or stimulating an audience.

Assam has been described as 'the tantric country par excellence' (Eliade 1969: 305), and, as we have seen, a salient motif of at least some Tantric traditions is the exploitation of desire to achieve both worldly and spiritual power. This emphasis on desire is integral to a more encompassing orientation, which seeks to overcome dualistic categories by deliberately subverting or inverting orthodox Brahmanical religious and social norms. Thus, in contrast with a conception of desire as needing to be strictly regulated and, ultimately, suppressed or subordinated to soteriological aspirations, certain Tantric movements have reconceptualized desire as itself a means of spiritual empowerment. The motif of inversion is also vividly present in Tantric rituals that contravene Brahmanical conventions concerning purity and impurity. Tantric animal sacrifice, for example, is not only at variance with widespread Hindu opposition to the slaughter of animals in general, but normally utilizes a method of killing, namely decapitation, that emphatically violates the ancient Vedic requirement to suffocate sacrificial animals to avoid the shedding of blood (Oldenberg 1988: 202), blood being considered an inherently dangerous and impure substance.[28] Moreover, the selection of animals for sacrifice in Tantric rituals again flouts Vedic purity norms, according to which the buffalo is classified among those that are 'unfit for sacrifice' (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.5.2.37).[29] Indeed, the choice of water buffaloes in particular is probably an inheritance from non-Brahmanical indigenous traditions (Urban 2010: 64).

Also exemplifying the principle of transgression is the practice among some Tantric groups of incorporating into ritual acts the production and oral consumption of substances deemed to be paradigms of impurity by orthodox Brahmanical standards. For example, the

[28] 'In general, animal blood is considered inauspicious in a [Vedic] ritual setting, even impure and dangerous' (McClymond 2008: 180 n. 50). On the occasions when Vedic ritual does utilize blood, it is the *rakṣa*s ('demons') to whom it is offered, 'not … the primary Vedic gods' (p. 181 n. 50).

[29] Cf. Urban (2010: 63): 'In Assam, Bangla, and parts of South India, the preferred victim is the buffalo—an animal that … is explicitly identified as wild, impure, and unfit by the *brāhmaṇic* texts.'

Kaulajñāna Nirṇaya, a Tantric text estimated to have originated in eleventh-century Assam, is among those that enjoin the preparation by ritual participants of various concoctions, including a blend of menstrual blood, semen, alcohol and clarified butter (*Kaulajñāna Nirṇaya* 18.7–9). The drinking of liquor and eating of flesh is prescribed and so too, by implication, is the ingestion of the mixture comprising further bodily substances (18.19–23): 'Using all ritual accessories, and with due preparation, one becomes fit to attain the special powers (*siddhi*s) by this method' (18.23).[30] As a rationale for consuming substances such as these, the esteemed exponent of Kashmir Śaivism, Abhinavagupta (*c*. 975–1025 CE[31]), declares that 'they dissolve the impurity that is plurality'; in other words, by freeing oneself from the contracted state of mind that feels 'doubt' or 'inhibition' (*śaṅkā*) in the face of such activities, 'one throws off the contamination imposed by the restrictions of the bound' (*Parātriṃśikā Vivaraṇa*, quoted in Sanderson 2013: 15–16).[32] Although the Deodhanī festival does not include sexual practices or the consumption of sexual fluids, the swallowing of the raw flesh and blood of animals by the *deodhā*s constitutes a cynosure of the ritual activities; in these performances, the grotesque image of the devouring mouth becomes prominent. Two events within the festival are especially pertinent in this connection, each of which takes place initially on the second day of the festival and is repeated on the third. I shall describe each in turn.

The *first* of the events in question begins with the *deodhā*s bringing into the temple courtyard two long sacrificial swords of the sort used for decapitating water buffaloes. As several *deodhā*s gather round, two of them hold the swords horizontally alongside each other with the sharp edge of the blades turned upwards. In anticipation of what is to happen next, a section of the watching crowd closes in around the *deodhā*s and those spectators on the stone steps beside the courtyard rise to their feet. After a few minutes of growing expectancy on the part of the audience, another of the *deodhā*s comes running enthusiastically into the courtyard with a fist in the air like a celebrating athlete and the knot of spectators separates sufficiently to let him through. He bows down momentarily before a group of six or seven prepubescent girls, who represent the power of the Goddess in the form of virginal 'princesses' (*kumārī*s).

[30] I have amended Magee's translation. For discussion of this passage from the *Kaulajñāna Nirṇaya*, see Urban (2015: 74).

[31] Estimates of Abhinavagupta's dates vary. For an estimate of 950–1020 CE, see Rastogi (1979: 157); for 'fl. c. 975–1025', see Sanderson (1987: 8); and for 975–1050, see Sanderson (1985: 567).

[32] Or, in Jaideva Singh's translation: 'When that doubt is instantly dissolved, then the stain of the trouble of the psycho-physical limitations of the aspirant is cast out' (*Parātriṃśikā Vivaraṇa*, 1989: 222). Singh renders *śaṅkā* as 'doubt' whereas Sanderson renders it as 'inhibition'.

Having received the Goddess's blessing from these girls, the *deodhā* then stands upon the blades of the swords, normally steadying himself with a hand on top of the head of one of the two *deodhā*s who are holding them, and raising his other arm aloft in an exultant posture. Published non-academic accounts frequently describe the standing—or 'dancing'—upon the swords as one of several 'miraculous physical feats' accomplished by the *deodhā*s, other such feats including licking the sacrificial blade and dancing with it 'placed on the nape' (Goswami 1960: 53, quoted in Maity 1966: 297).[33]

As the drums continue to pound and the cymbals clash, the crowd whoop and cheer. Many of the women ululate: issuing a shrill cry while moving the tongue rapidly from side to side.[34] Live pigeons are raised in the air by some of the spectators and handed to the *deodhā* mounted on the swords (fig. 4). Seizing a pigeon in his hand, or in some instances taking its head directly into his mouth, the *deodhā* clamps his teeth down on the bird's neck and tugs its body away from him, thereby snapping its head off. Some of the *deodhā*s do this to two, three or four pigeons in quick succession, each time throwing the headless body into the crowd, often with its wings still flapping reflexively. Making an emphatic display of crunching up the head in his mouth, the *deodhā*'s eyes widen into a maniacal glare. He chews and swallows bone, flesh and feathers in hyperbolic motions, spitting out the residue.

[33] See also Devsharma (2014: 57), Smith (2006: 142).

[34] Cf. Dold (2013: 141 fn. 78): '[T]hey ululate, with that piercing, reverberating cry that women achieve by rapidly striking the sides of their open lips with their tongue. The cry expresses intense emotion, sometimes joy, sometimes grief, often exultation.'

Figure 4. A *deodhā* standing on sword blades amid a crowd of onlookers as a temple assistant holds two live pigeons in front of him. Still frame from a video by the author, 18 August 2017.

Bakhtin writes of the medieval carnival that it lacks any distinction between audience and actors: it 'is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people' (1984: 7). Although, in the case of the Deodhanī dance, a demarcation between spectators and performers is retained, there is undoubtedly a high degree of audience participation, whereby this boundary becomes less pronounced. It is the incessant throbbing of the percussive instruments that instigates the highly charged atmosphere both within and around the temple. But the anticipatory eagerness of the onlookers thickens this atmosphere, reaching a peak of intensity with the thronging and vocalization surrounding the pigeon-biting incident. Moreover, throughout the festival it is members of the public who donate animals for sacrifice and drape garlands of flowers over the necks of the *deodhā*s before bowing down to touch their feet in acts of homage. Such acts, while maintaining the distinction between devotees and objects of devotion, are nevertheless constitutive of the overall event.

A *second* instance of ritualized transgression occurs during one of the few intervals when the drumming temporarily pauses. At approximately 6:30 p.m. on the evenings of the second and third days of the festival, the *deodhā*s, about sixteen in number, congregate on the ground next to the sacrifice house. Sitting in a roughly circular formation, they are handed the severed heads of freshly sacrificed goats from which to suck the blood and bite off pieces of flesh. On the second day, only a few of the *deodhā*s drink from the heads. On the third day, a dozen goats are consecutively sacrificed and each of the *deodhā*s is invited to drink in turn. As the lifeless head of one goat is being handled by a *deodhā*, another goat bleats frantically in the sacrifice house. Its front legs are wrested behind its back by one of the sacrificer's assistants, who then holds the goat in the air by its now dislocated forelegs with one hand while, with his other hand, grabbing its hind legs, which had previously been kicking furiously. The goat, with legs now immobilized, screams out in pain and terror, extending its neck forwards—'Waah! Waa-aa-aah!' The sound is eerily similar to the distressed cry of a human infant. Swinging the goat into position above the U-shaped block, the assistant jams the goat's neck down into the slot and pulls back on the legs, thereby forcing the base of the goat's skull against the block and maximally elongating the neck, at which point the goat is no longer able to make a sound. In some instances a second assistant holds the goat's head in

place as the sacrificer (*balikaṭā*[35]) brings the sword down and slices through its neck, but often the head is left to fall onto the floor before being picked up and passed to the *deodhā*s.

Having dispatched the goats, the sacrificer comes out into the courtyard to sit among the *deodhā*s. Kneeling with a sword's hilt resting in his lap and the blade turned upwards, he cuts the heads off numerous pigeons, which have been readily donated by onlookers. In some instances, parents will first hand a pair of pigeons to their child, who in turn gives them to the sacrificer. Once decollated, the pigeons' heads and bodies are distributed to the *deodhā*s, again for them to drink the blood. Though not generating the same level of excitement as the episode in which pigeons' heads are actively bitten off, this macabre meal nonetheless constitutes an ostentatious display of ritualized transgression in which audience members participate through the donation of the animals whose blood is to be ingested.

Reflecting both upon the ritual in which pigeons' heads are bitten off and upon the meaning of animal sacrifice at Kāmākhyā more generally, Patricia Dold considers whether these are manifestations of 'bloodlust'. She observes that when an animal is sacrificed, 'people watch it with serious solemnity and the moment of the animal's death is sacred and so priests do not allow it to be photographed' (Dold 2011: 55). If this was the case when Dold witnessed the festival in 2009, it seems that audience responses have changed somewhat in the interim. Solemnity is indeed sometimes observed, but this is intermingled with other emotions. These include both a sense of elation and glee as the heads of the pigeons are being bitten off and their headless bodies thrown into the crowd, and a curious mix of nonchalance and morbid fascination as the goats are being slaughtered and the *deodhā*s are drinking their blood. Photography, while certainly forbidden within the temple building, is freely permitted in the surrounding courtyard. If any nominal prohibition exists, the priests make no effort to enforce it. So in these days of the smartphone, not only are photographs and videos of animal beheadings taken without sanction, but some of the resulting material is subsequently uploaded to social media and video sharing websites.

Dold concludes that animal sacrifice (*bali*) 'is not a celebration of death or of the power to kill. Perhaps then, the crowd at Debaddhanī celebrates the living presence of goddesses as the Deodhas accept animal offerings' (2011: 55). But there is no reason to assume that these attitudes are mutually exclusive. When, for example, a *deodhā* who is standing on the swords receives a pigeon's head directly into his open maw and holds it there while the pigeon flaps in a desperate attempt to free itself, only to then be decapitated by the *deodhā*'s crunching

[35] Literally, the one by whom the offering (*bali*) is cut (*kaṭa*).

teeth, why should we not describe this as a celebration *both* of death and the power to kill, on the one hand, and of the living presence of goddesses on the other? The goddesses that are being celebrated include those who are associated precisely with the power to kill as well as the power to heal and to grant new life. The pigeon with its head in the mouth of the *deodhā* vividly represents the precarious contingency of life and death. There is a figurative sense in which we all have our heads in the mouth of powers that are beyond our control.

In the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*c*. first century CE), upon seeing Lord Kṛṣṇa's true and terrifying form in a theophanic vision, Arjuna declares of his fellow warriors on the battlefield that 'They quickly enter Your fearful mouths, | Which gape with many tusks; | Some are seen with crushed heads, | Clinging between Your teeth' (11.27). Here, as Bakhtin says of the grotesque face, the most salient characteristic is 'the gaping mouth', which 'dominates all else', the other features becoming merely the 'frame encasing this wide-open abyss' (1984: 317). Comparable images of voracious mouths populate the mythology and iconography of the aggressive female deities in the Hindu traditions. The mouth, with its 'long fangs' and 'lolling tongue', is the focal point of the 'horrific' goddess 'who lurks in battlefields and cremation grounds consuming human flesh'—'an ambivalent fusion of death and sensuality, of terrifying violence and erotic power' (Urban 2003: 172).

The dance of the *deodhā*s is not erotic, but it is sensual in the broadest sense: in the sense, that is, that it is emphatically bodily and earthy, assaulting the sensory organs of both performers and spectators. The drumbeat resonates in the ears and chest. The dancing bodies, smeared both with vermilion paste and with animal blood, stamp the ground, running and leaping; they sweat and dribble and breathe and yell. It is an energetic performative portrayal of divine possession.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When Gavin Flood observes that 'the history of religion in South Asia' might be read 'in terms of possession of a person being entered by a deity which becomes reinterpreted at more "refined" cultural levels', he is alluding to the fact that the raw physicality of the possession phenomenon, as exhibited in events such as the Deodhanī festival, has often been downplayed in favour of a psychologized or internalized conception of possession: a conception that emphasizes the practitioner's role in, for example, visualizing an image of one or more deities and thereby, as it were, manifesting the deity within the practitioner's mind. As described by Sthaneshwar Timalsina, Tantric visualization involves 'recollecting

the deity image or her *maṇḍala*'—a *maṇḍala* being a sacred diagram that constitutes an abstract form of, or a space inhabited by, the deity.[36] Having imaginatively constructed it, one establishes 'a dialogue with the deity image by considering her to be alive and giving various mental offerings' (Timalsina 2015: 17). This evocation of the deity in the practitioner's imagination locates the possession phenomenon within a relatively private sphere: there need be no discernible presence of the deity to anyone observing the practitioner. It thus differs dramatically from the very public display of possession enacted through the dance of the *deodhā*s and through comparable possession rituals in certain other parts of the South Asian region.

What we have seen in this article is a glimpse of one festival at one particular site in contemporary India. However, by my contextualizing of this festival both geographically, in relation to some of the history and mythology surrounding the Kāmākhyā temple, and conceptually, by noting connections with aspects of spirit possession more generally, a deeper understanding of the Deodhanī festival has been enabled than that which might have been achieved by a more thematically restricted treatment. Also providing conceptual enrichment has been the motif of the grotesque body, which I have drawn from the work of Bakhtin and other commentators on literary and visual artistic forms. While there are many conceptual lenses through which a phenomenon such as the dance of the *deodhā*s could be viewed, that of the grotesque offers especially fertile discursive resources with which to articulate the deep ambivalences of imagery and atmosphere that pervade this cultural and religious event. Moreover, by exemplifying how the concept of the grotesque may be applied to this specific festival, opportunities are opened up for applications to other religious happenings of this and related concepts—for example, concepts such as those of 'dark comedy' (Styan 1968), the 'theatre of cruelty' (Bermel 1997) and the 'aesthetics of discomfort' (Aldama and Lindenberger 2016).

In notes written in response to reading James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein refers to the 'deep and sinister' nature of sacrificial—and of mock sacrificial—rituals (1979: 16e). Following Wittgenstein, others have expressed similar ideas in terms of a sense of 'awe at the terrible' (Phillips 2007: 205) or of wonder at that which is both terrible and evil: treating it 'as a sacrament' precisely because of its disturbing character and not merely because one hopes that, by registering their destructive power, one might

[36] Cf. Bühnemann (2003: 13): 'In Tantric traditions, the term maṇḍala often refers to a space with a special structure that is enclosed and delimited by a circumferential line and into which a deity or deities are invited by means of mantras.'

'*ward off*' the terrible things one fears (Rhees 1994: 578).[37] Intimations such as these are important insofar as they remind us of meaningful possibilities that can all too easily be submerged when we fixate on imagined instrumental motivations that people might have for propitiating deities. We should not, however, be too quick to dismiss instrumental motivations entirely. What we see in many ritual phenomena is a tangled mesh—perhaps an indeterminately complicated picture—of possible meanings and motivations.

My purpose in this article has not been to pinpoint a single meaning or motivation underlying performances of divine possession or blood sacrifice. Still less has it been to construct an exoticized caricature of Hindu religiosity by showcasing an 'extreme' example. On the contrary, I have sought to offer a sober contribution towards an enhanced understanding of a relatively underexplored feature of goddess worship in contemporary Assam without either sensationalizing or treating as simply mundane or ordinary the particularities of the festival concerned. A hermeneutics of contemplation facilitates this project by encouraging the discernment of possibilities of sense without rushing to fit them into an overarching explanation or theory. Through examining a case such as that of the dance of the *deodhā*s, we encounter forms of South Asian lived religion that, as several scholars have noted, have often been marginalized both in scholarly studies and in the self-representations of orthodox religious authorities. Notwithstanding this marginalization, a comprehension of these forms is vital for getting to grips with the complex interplay of myth, ritual, sound, performance, emotion and other phenomena in multiple South Asian contexts.

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[37] For an extended meditation on the 'deep and sinister' facets of religion in the light of Wittgenstein's remarks, see Churchill (1992).

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