

The Intimacy of the Sacred in Kali Worship and Sacrifice

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Abstract: This paper examines sacrifice in the cult of the goddess Kali, as it is appropriated and practiced both in her native Indian context and within a unique Western setting. I examine the key theme of intimacy and George Bataille's notion of the sacred as both a traumatic and transformative rupture in ordinary reality. Kali's mythos illuminates and animates the practice of blood offering, such as goat sacrifice to Kali in Bengal, as well as the psycho-archetypal, mystic, and mythical aspects of Kali devotion, revealing a persistent continuity between the two forms. Thus, by entering into vastly different sacred landscapes, the experiential aspects of sacrifice interplay between violence and healing, creating an immanent relationship with the sacred other.

In Search of Intimacy and Transformation

This exploration of Kali worship is illuminated by broader questions concerning ritual sacrifice as a universal form of religious expression. It is also an attempt to theoretically reconcile the persistent recurrence of ritual sacrifice across cultures in its wildly varied ritual content and social function. Interestingly, the intimacy and visceral emotions associated with notions of sacrifice seem to be embedded in its language. For example, the English term "sacrifice" carries tragic and heroic connotations, such as giving up something precious, also known as abnegation, and yet, these associative themes may be altered, hidden, displaced, or altogether different in other cultural and linguistic settings. Sacrifice, then, is bound up in complex and ever-evolving processes with historical, cultural, and sacred realities; it is even bound within the personal history and experiences of the person utilizing the term, and holds enough power to evoke memories, sensations, and dispositions.

Sacrifice continues to occur across profoundly different religious, geographical, and temporal contexts where concrete human realities are expressed through sacrificial rites. Nancy Jay

addresses this issue by examining gender dynamics, patterns of social ordering, and the relationship between these structures and sacrifice. Despite Jay's contribution to the subject, her analysis remains insufficient as it disregards the reality of the sacred for the devotee, and instead regards the meaning of sacrifice as contained entirely in notions of social ordering. To claim a sacred reality as fact, rather than understanding it only as a means toward social ordering, expands the notions of human need, motive, and desire. Therefore, to avoid compartmentalizing the notion of sacrifice, I apply a phenomenological informed approach to examine this idea of experiential sacrifice, and to locate it meaningfully within specific religious and cultural worlds, particularly within the many dimensions of Kali worship.

It is perhaps even more pressing in this post-modern world to be sensitive to the tensions between the local and the global, a particular context and the universal, as well as the familiar and the unfamiliar, or "other", as religious symbols and realities migrate along with entire populations and bodies of information, taking root in new soil and along strange frontiers. Sacrifice in the cult of the goddess Kali is a fertile ground for exploring these tensions, and for understanding sacrifice in ways that are sympathetic to cultural and religious contexts, as well as to the comprehension of outsiders. Kali has gradually become an international goddess with western devotees and histories, and this phenomenon alone generates a great deal of relevancy and fascination toward understanding sacrifice.

The paradoxical nature of Kali is an essential aspect of her power. From the perspective of a westerner, Kali may seem especially contradictory, though at times even her worship in native India is controversial. As Rachel McDermott once said, Kali can be many things to many people. She is fierce and terrible, and yet she is a merciful loving mother. She is worshipped with flowers and sweets, as well as with meat and blood, sometimes offered in skulls. She is the main divinity in Sakta Tantra as the Female Principle. She is said to dwell in cremation grounds and favour the company of ghosts and jackals, and yet, there are altars dedicated to Kali in homes, on street corners, and in great temples. She is said to dance with a frenzy that threatens the worlds, yet she conquers death and confers the greatest boons. She is approached by ascetic tantrikas, ecstatic bhakti devotees, and will command trances, pain, and possession while granting courage, wisdom, and

peacefulness. She is an independent goddess – Time Herself – yet she emerges as an aspect of other goddesses in their moments of crisis, anger, and great passion. Kali will halt then calm only after having stepped on the prone body of Siva. In fact, the only absolute thing that can be said of Kali is she touches the lives of devotees in a profound and intimate manner – in her many guises she always retains the power of transformation. It is precisely these key themes of intimacy and transformation which function as my framework to contextualize and anchor the multifarious practices and imaginings of Kali.

In the context of this awesome and at times overwhelming goddess, I examine the nature of sacrifice as it constitutes a part of her cult. I also consider the way it is understood by the various voices of her worshippers, that is, the way it is being interpreted and appropriated within her native eastern context, as well as within the context of the west. When describing sacrifice, it is important to note that my primary focus is the literal ritual act of blood sacrifice, especially the offering of male goats as is customary in Bengal, as well as some other blood offerings in tribal village settings. In addition, I examine the psychological, mystic, and mythical senses of sacrifice experienced as spiritual self-sacrifice, or as the process of healing and working through trauma.¹ I will reveal the common currents of meaning between these two forms of sacrifice where the former heavily informs the latter, especially in certain western psychoanalytic appropriations of Kali, most notably the

¹ I do not include discussions of vegetarian or flower offerings as examples of sacrifice as there is some ambivalence regarding the equivalency between animal and vegetable offerings in Kali worship. Although, in both cases the “food” becomes *prasada* and is eventually consumed, goats have very specific symbolisms making them suitable victims for sacrifice, while vegetarian substitutes or flowers do not. Flowers, sweets, and other objects are lovingly offered for blessing, while the ceremony of killing goats is an elaborate affair, depending on the victim’s willingness and even joyful submission, which I later elaborate in further detail.

archetypal model belonging to the Jungian school.² I treat these psychoanalytic approaches as an alternative access point to a profound reality, which, even though may differentiate from the devotional path in form, does not differentiate in essence.

It is important to note that these literal and metaphorical notions of sacrifice compliment Georges Bataille's concepts of the intimate and the sacred, especially as non-discursive communication that is as traumatic as it is transformative³. The twin themes of intimacy and transformation found in the Kali cultus strongly resonate with Bataille's own writings on the subject, creating a unifying interpretive framework to examine sacrifice in both the eastern and western contexts. By juxtaposing two notions of sacrifice that are very different, and yet strikingly analogous, I seek to negotiate the emic/etic tensions and offer an alternative understanding of human-divine relationships.

Georges Bataille's Intimacy of the Sacred and Kali's Terrifying Dance

The writing of Georges Bataille offers a unique quality that resonates profoundly with Kali's characteristics and mythos. Similar to Kali, whose worship suspends the rules of purity, gender, and even cosmological order, Bataille's work resembles

² In my work, I do not discuss the Freudian model, nor do I examine Jeffery Kripal's analysis of Kali worship, as both focus on themes of mysticism, sexuality, and western appropriations of eastern symbols and narrative. Despite the breadth of these subjects, they lack a direct focus on sacrifice. Interestingly, it is Kripal's statement that psychoanalysis is "our Western Tantra. It transgresses in order to transcend", which, in my opinion, highlights the continuity between Kali worship and the psychoanalytic tradition as *ritual* directed toward goals of transformation (Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2000. "A garland of talking heads for the goddess: Some autobiographical and psychoanalytic reflections on the western Kali" in *Is the goddess a feminist?* New York: New York University Press, 250).

³ I would like to stress this is not a full and informed discussion of Bataille's work as such an endeavour is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, some of his ideas and concepts are used as inspiration – a "third" perspective of the subject matter that is neither devotional nor psychoanalytic for the purposes of examining commonalities in the underlying experience of sacrifice in both contexts.

her mad and frenzied dance that shatters worlds: “Encounters with horror, violent disgust, that miraculously transform into experiences of laughter, intoxication, ecstasy, constitute, for Bataille, inner experiences that overwhelm any sense of the distinction between interiority and exteriority”⁴. Kali, who dwells in cremation grounds and is intoxicated with the blood of slain demons, is an equally transformative force believed to “devour one’s karma” and grant liberation in this last and darkest age, the Kali Yuga⁵. Kali’s domain is not far from Bataille’s interest in extreme human realities, particularly if one corresponds the notion of ‘interiority’ to the ‘true self’ or ‘cosmic self’ in the Hindu worldview, and the notion of ‘exteriority’ to the all-pervasive illusory nature of the world or *maya*. David Kinsley writes: “[Kali] represents... something that has been pushed to its ultimate limits, something that has been apprehended as unspeakably terrifying, something totally and irrevocably ‘other’”⁶. It is from this outbreak of “otherness” deriving from a part of the self where intimate communication occurs.

Throughout his work Bataille remarks a great deal on intimacy, though some of his more thought-provoking comments on the subject connect to laughter, which he describes as a rupture in ordinary reality – a knowledge – a form of communication “through death, with our beyond (essentially in sacrifice) – not with nothingness, still less with a supernatural being, but with an indefinite reality... the impossible, that is: what can’t be grasped... what we can’t reach without dissolving ourselves”⁷. This describes a conversation or communication which transcends the self. In fact, this dissolution of the self is also equated with the Indian concept of *moksha*. Bataille is somewhat ambivalent to the idea of communicating with a supernatural being. In his view, if we believe in a transcendent

⁴ Botting, Fred and Scott Wilson, ed. 1998. *The Bataille Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2.

⁵ It is important to note *Kālī* the goddess should not be confused with Kali the demon-personification of this last age. This confusion happens often enough, especially in the west, where “Kali” is often written without diacritics.

⁶ Kinsley, David. 1975. Freedom from death in the worship of *Kālī*. *Numen* 22 (3) (12): 183-207,184.

⁷ *Bataille Reader*, 59.

reality we can choose to define it as the sacred, otherwise, it can remain undefined “in ordinary laughter, infinite laughter, or ecstasy in which the divine form melts like sugar in water”⁸. The rupture of laughter relates to communication and knowledge, and sacrifice is but one type of rupture. In his writings on sacrifice Bataille reasserts: “intimacy cannot be expressed discursively”⁹. Therefore, intimacy is a communication experienced outside of language, even if language is our only tool to describe or discuss it. Although states of possession within the worship of Kali are beyond the scope of this paper, they remain extremely vivid representations (dreams or visions) of Kali where the experiences of heat, fever, and even illness are forms of intimacy¹⁰.

Sacrifice, for Bataille, is associated with the power of death (a physical, tangible rupture); however, this death only destroys the “thing-ness” of the victim. “Sacrifice destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility”¹¹. Thus, the act of sacrifice will transform the victim as the victim is placed outside the system of ordinary things. This is especially true with regard to Suchitra Samanta’s notion of the “self-animal”, which I will address within the following section on goat sacrifice in Bengal. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the self-animal who is sacrificed, devoured, and digested by the goddess elevates both the self and the sacrificial animal to a better order of rebirth, thus perfecting one’s cosmic self. Sacrifice restores a lost intimacy with one’s real (cosmic) self, or with the divine, and sometimes with both, as the two can be analogous. Restoration of intimacy is also a restoration of immanence: “immanence between man and the

⁸ *Ibid*, 59

⁹ *Ibid*, 213

¹⁰ Kali possession and the significance of heat and fever in these instances merit an entirely separate discussion. I only mention them in passing, though some of the more interesting accounts of fevers and visions of Kali can be found in Sarah Caldwell’s, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, where Caldwell describes her first-hand experience of it, as well as Roxanne Gupta’s semi-biographical chapter on “Kali Mayi” in *Encountering Kali*.

¹¹ *Bataille Reader*, 210

world, between the subject and object.”¹² This calls to mind the Tantric teachings on Kali, the hero’s conquest and liberation, as well as the devotional bhakti tradition and the ecstatic union with Kali as the all-loving Mother. Incidentally, the world of things, or objects, is only meaningful in the frame of durational time; therefore, death seems unreal in the real world of things. Yet, death is the “wonder-struck cry of life” paradoxically affirming individual existence and revealing “the invisible brilliance of life that is *not* a thing”¹³ (emphasis original). It is important to note the ecstatic quality of this rupture, that is, the transformation of anguish and trembling with holy wonder and joy, aptly named by Bataille as “the Festival”, is parallel to the terrifying yet transformative aspects of Kali. According to Bataille, the divine world is dangerous and contagious and one can hardly resist imagining Kali’s frenetic dance of destruction, even if she is eventually calmed by the prone body of Siva at her feet: “the festival is tolerated to the extent that it reserves the necessities of the profane world”¹⁴. In this dialectic, laughter is the other side of terror, functioning as a rupture in the same manner as sacrifice. The two experiences appear paradoxical, however, both share the reality of a “moment of violent contact, when life slips from one person to another”¹⁵ or from devotee to goddess, and even from goddess to devotee.

Sacrifice in Bengal: Goats and Blood for Ma Kali

Tantric principles, Puranic writings (including Devi-Mahatmya), bhakti devotion, and folk traditions all inform Bengali Kali worship; however, goat sacrifice is also a daily habitual practice within Kali’s sacred landscape. In writing about the specificities of sacrifice within this context, Suchitra Samanta calls Kali a “ubiquitous presence” in contemporary Bengali life and religious landscapes. Most notably, the common perception of Kali as Mother, and the cultivation of such a relationship with her, is due

¹² *Ibid*, 210

¹³ *Ibid*, 212

¹⁴ *Bataille Reader*, 215

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 61

to the immense influence of the life and works of two Bengali saints and Kali devotees, Ramaprasada and Ramakrsna. This tradition emphasizes the loving and compassionate aspects of Kali, with the devotee in the role of her adoring and trusting child. At the same time, the iconic four-armed avatar Daksina (or south-facing Kali) and the ten-armed Mahakali (or Great Kali) both portray Kali as a wild, frenzied, and terrifying presence. In popular iconography Kali is dark, naked, adorned with freshly cut heads and arms, covered in blood, facing south in the direction of Death. In facing this direction, Kali asserts her mastery over death. She is also stepping on the prone body of Siva (sometimes representing the universe) with her right foot; it is believed Siva has thrown himself at her feet to stop her mad and destructive dance. In her four arms she holds a bloodied sword and a freshly decapitated head, the other two arms gesture a sign of no fear and of one who confers boons. Kali's devotees believe she grants everything from prayers and wishes, to reincarnation in heaven and total liberation.

With this visual image in mind, Samanta writes: "Her name appears on the name-board of Calcutta restaurants, grocery stores, and pharmacies... [her image] on the dashboards of almost every taxicab and bus in the city. Worshipped both at domestic altars as well as at the numerous Kali temples... [she] occupies a powerful emotional place in the Bengali heart as the ideal and protective Mother"¹⁶. This emphasis of her role as mother reveals a great intimacy and different authority structure in the divine-human relationship. It also produces a certain amount of ambivalence towards blood sacrifice as there is "reluctance to offer a loving Mother-goddess the blood of one of her own creations"¹⁷.

Sacrificial Kali worship is termed bali, or gift, including vegetable and animal offerings "textually prescribed and mandatory", as well as vow-related offerings, occurring when Kali grants the sacrificer a request, such as healing, employment, or resolving a conflict. These offerings are mostly offered at temples because Brahman priests must perform chanting and purification rites; however, they are also offered domestically on

¹⁶ Samanta, Suchitra. 1994. "The 'self-animal' and divine digestion: Goat sacrifice to the goddess Kali in Bengal." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (3) (Aug.): 779-803, 780

¹⁷ Samanta 1994, 783

Kalipuja day. Meat from daily temple sacrifice is cooked and presented to the goddess as part of her regular food offering; later, it is sold as prasad (food infused with divine grace), while meat from a privately sponsored sacrifice is returned to the sacrificer to be taken home as the “greatest form of prasad”.

Samanta’s description of certain social and cultural elements of bali and the intimate experiences associated with it is particularly compelling. For example, Samanta writes that in times of crisis many of her informants found it efficient to secretly offer vow-related bali. One informant mentioned less common forms of bali, such as an enemy-offering, which is a kind of dough figure immolated with a sword on Kalipuja. The informant also described a self-offering, expressed as a blood offering from one’s own chest, as well as offering goat heads to jackals since jackals are associated with Kali. In every one of these cases, sacrifice marks a critical and agonizing point in the life of the sacrificer, while remaining a very important point of transformation.

Within the emerging scheme, blood is a substance that acts as a conduit, and drinking the blood of the immolated goat is said to grant immortality. At the Kalighat Temple, the blood of the immolated animal is used for auspicious anointing and is specially treated and bottled for the sacrificer to take home. This ritual is outside the normal order of things as both blood and meat are extremely polluting in the Hindu context. Bataille would argue this particular event is the stage of the “Festival”. Thus, the pain and anguish of the slain animal, as well as the emotions deriving from the personal crisis precipitating the sacrifice, are the rupture by which the sacrificer (as well as the victim) communicates with the goddess.

In her work, Samanta proposes a unique view of sacrifice where the meaning and central logic of sacrifice are based in an understanding of the self as deeply rooted in the Hindu worldview. According to Samanta, central to understanding bali is knowing the difference between the Judeo-Christian understanding of the relationship between self and divinity and the Hindu conception of Sakti as the divine personification of the creative power sakti present in every living being: “Where in the Western tradition God and man are perceived as two separate entities, the distinction between sacrificer and Sakti are...

ambiguous”¹⁸. In presenting an alimentary theme that is particularly meaningful and relevant in the Hindu context, Samanta proposes a “homology between the ‘self’ (jiva) of the sacrificer and the sacrificial animal (pasu), and the ‘consumption’ of the ‘self-animal’ by the goddess over many lifetimes until it achieves unity and liberation (moksa)”¹⁹. Thus, the ritual act of sacrifice is the very act of transformation of the self-animal. The personal energy contained within each individual, that is, his or her sakti (akin to life-force), is not entirely separate from the divine as Sakti (in this case figured by Kali the Mother, the feminine principle, or the ultimate reality), making this ultimate reality at once a reality of the sacred and a reality of the self. Samanta writes about the characteristics of the sacrificer:

“animal-like in his lack of perception [and] desires enlightenment as realization and divine beneficence... Bali enacts the transformation of the sacrificer from raw flesh and blood to that of burnt offering... The “knowledgeable” goddess is invoked in the rite to devour the flesh and “drink” the blood of the deluded and bound self-animal, and thus assist in its enlightenment”²⁰.

This view is supported by both traditional and mythic elements where Kali often emerges as a personification of the anger and fury of another goddess, such as Durga, Parvati, or Sita, in the course of a divine battle between gods and demons. These demons are sometimes compared to “animals” that are “sacrificed” on the battlefield, and here too, there is the persistence of a crisis theme as a point of transformation, both for the goddesses that give rise to Kali, and for the situation at large. Kali becomes a “devourer of demons”, representing lust, ambition, calamity, and ignorance. Interestingly, goats represent these very same qualities, especially of uncontrolled sexuality; therefore, they are an ideal offering for Kali (symbolically

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 782

¹⁹ Samanta 1994, 782

²⁰ Samanta 1994, 790

congruent with demons)²¹ as they represent the same qualities the sacrificer wishes to expel from the self.

Recalling Bataille, we can argue that the portion of the victim identified with the self is imbued with “thingness”, thus, uncontrolled sexuality, lust, or excessive ambition is imagined as the nature of the self. Perhaps they are not self-referential qualities, but those that seek out the world and the “order of things”. Bataille’s own understanding of sacrifice as a separation restoring wholeness and dissolving the individual parallels to Samanta’s statement that “severing the animal enacts the complementarity between self and divinity, part and whole – where the whole is reaffirmed by its separation into parts”²². According to Samanta, the most important part of sacrifice is the intent: a clear and stated purpose for the desire to surrender or give up demonic parts of oneself on the way to realizing one’s divine potential. Parallel to her claim that the Hindu sense of self is informed by the worldview of multiple rebirths and the goal of liberation, a “motif of alimentation” dictates the divine condition as being “totally cooked” or “digested”, a function performed by Kali. Within this context, Kali is understood as Time herself (“Kali” as the feminine form of kala, or time); thus, over time, with persistence and intention, an individual can fully realize their cosmic self and become liberated.

This view, however, seems insufficient, particularly when one considers the unique devotional relationship that exists between Kali and her devotees, as well as the testimonies mentioned earlier from Samanta’s own informants. It would seem the profound experience of sacrifice is not limited to intent alone. The act itself is also a moment imbued with special meaning. For example, many of Samanta’s informants consider vegetarian substitutions for animal sacrifice less efficacious. The complex set of rituals observed during sacrifice, while certainly stressing intent, also fuse the symbolic with the corporeal and incorporate socially normative practices, such as the

²¹ It would be interesting to explore this cross-cultural association of goats with lust and other “demonic” qualities, including such European representations as satyrs, which are known for sexual prowess, as well as Pan, god of field and fertility, also associated with sexual promiscuity or fecundity. Christian imaginings of the Devil, especially as medieval distortions of Greek deities, also picture Pan as goat-horned and goat-footed.

²² Samanta 1994, 798.

requirements of Brahman priests and other dominant patriarchal characteristics of sacrifice. Some elements of sacrifice and ritual evoke deeply felt culturally specific topographies that associate the body with a special orientation and sacred reality. For example, the sacrifice is performed while facing north, an auspicious direction as it faces the goddess (who faces south); the sacrificer stands in the south (the quarter associated with death), making the sacrifice both a death and transformation of death (congruent to Bataille's description of sacrifice).

Earlier I mentioned that a crisis theme is vital for maintaining the transformative qualities of a sacrifice. The sacrifice sponsored by an individual is usually occasioned by a great crisis, like the forbidden or polluting substances used in Kali worship and sacrifice, which break the surface of the order of things. David Kinsley writes of the Tantric path involving Kali worship: "by partaking of the forbidden, by indulging himself in it ritually, he [the Tantric hero] triumphs over it" and "the forbidden loses its power to pollute, to degrade, to bind"²³. This demonstrates that the communication of the reality of things (e.g.: the arbitrariness of their forbidden nature) is a form of intimate communication occurring in the rupture or sacrifice. Therefore, it is not acting for the sake of acting (a spectacle); rather, it is living and experiencing a moment of intimacy. Understanding sacrifice in this manner fulfils Samanta's eloquent description of the transformation of the self-animal, and allows one to consider sacrifice from a phenomenological-comparativist perspective.

Sacrifice As Inner Experience: Kali the Archetype

Western appropriations of Kali and sacrifice are unique because they are understood as inner experience. Although sacrifice within this context is comprehended as metaphorical, the recurrence of certain themes, such as trauma, crisis, intimate communication, and transformation make sacrifice as inner experience comparable to sacrifice as ritual killing. It is important to note that I perceive continuity between religious life and psychoanalysis in terms of the experiential and ritual dimensions. For example, in so far as one lives a conscious life

²³ Kinsley 1975, 199.

and undergoes analysis consciously, any sacrifice performed or experienced as part of this process becomes a distinct and ritualized practice.

The Jungian analyst, Ashok Bedi, imagines Kali as an archetype activated in times of crisis “[amputating] the darkness of our soul and [making] room for the light... [destroying] the darkness of personality and [making] room for new consciousness to emerge”. Rather than mediate a relationship between self and others, she mediates “our relationship with the transpersonal Self”²⁴. This is a similar description of the Kali in Bengali worship that “devours our demons and liberates our cosmic self”. Bedi is also convinced Kali appears as a “paradox within our psyche”, transforming through destruction and embodying the “union of opposites in our personality”²⁵. Her Tantric qualities of granting liberation from opposites (the dialectical flux of materiality) are emphasized and understood as the Shadow archetype in Jungian analysis. Bedi fuses the Indian framework situating Kali within a sacred universe to a more analytical framework, which includes alchemical symbolism for the stages of perfecting the soul (adopted by Jung for analysis). Interestingly, this results in a surprisingly coherent semi-mysticism:

“Kali’s three eyes represent the past, present, and future. Her white teeth symbolize the albedo (whiteness), or purity of the soul, her red tongue the rubedo (redness), or passion for life... she holds a severed head, symbolizing the sacrifice of our shadow... she is changeless, limitless, primordial power acting in the great drama, awakening the Shiva (unconscious masculine principle) beneath her feet”²⁶.

Thus, the process of analysis appears to have internalized almost verbatim the function of the Bengali sacrificial act. Samanta’s insistence of the fluidity between divine and human power is also satisfied as the sacred is internalized. It is important to note

²⁴ Bedi, Ashok. 2003. “Kali – The Dark Goddess.” In *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine*. Berwick: Nicolas-Hays, 157.

²⁵ Bedi 2003, 158

²⁶ *Ibid*, 160

that Bedi promotes Kali as a guide for working through traumatic experiences. In the moment of a crisis event, an individual is “possessed” by the Kali archetype and must confront the “dark side” and “relinquish association” with the darkness in order to resume the “responsibility of consciousness”. This is another example of Kali splitting off into two parts: a so-called demonic Kali and a liberating boon granting Kali. This example bears a striking resemblance to the “good Mother, bad Mother” of Ramaprasada’s devotional Kali poetry.

As expressed within Bedi’s case studies²⁷, themes of beheading strongly connected to Kali’s classic iconography are important representations of her archetype and of drawing from her archetype: “[w]hen the patriarchal order becomes rigid, dehumanizing, inauthentic... the great Kali archetype decapitates and dissolves the existing dysfunction”²⁸. Perhaps, then, it is not a coincidence Kali’s garland is dressed with freshly chopped heads, and one of her left hands is made of male heads²⁹. More broadly, she “decapitated the existing thinking function, making room for new logic”³⁰. This, in a sense, is a transformation that can be quite profound.

The most evocative discussion involving Kali and sacrifice is contextualized in terms of alchemical transformation. Kali, ever the paradoxical figure, is associated with the first and last stages of alchemy – the lowest and highest stages of transmutation. In terms of personality development, the alchemical process is understood as the process of arriving at the self’s highest potential, not unlike the goal of realizing the cosmic or divine self. The first stage, *negrado*, represents the crisis stage where a substance is broken down into its original

²⁷ Although “devouring” and “beheading” are operative in the Kali mythos and iconography, the former is more relevant as a key interpretive concept in the Indian context, and the latter is prevalent in western imaginings of Kali, though this is a topic reserved for another discussion.

²⁸ Bedi 2003, 167

²⁹ The gender issue is touched upon briefly in this paper with regard to Jeffrey Kripal’s Freudian analytic perspective. Unfortunately, at this time I cannot develop this theme in more depth even if it is a very important aspect of the entire underlying premise of Kali worship and its social realities.

³⁰ Bedi 2003, 168

undifferentiated form so that it might be transformed. Characterized by the colour black, it is the stage of rotting (putreficatio) and death (mortificatio). The “prima materia is without definite boundaries, limits, or form... It may evoke the terror of dissolution of our consciousness or the awe of experience of unconscious eternity. The Kali encounter is both”³¹. This resonates with Bataille’s commentary on the transformative character of terror and anguish, and the violence of the rupture. Within this context, Kali once again represents a communication beyond language. The second (final) stage, marked by the colour red (rubedo) and emblematic of blood, passion, and sacrifice, “leads to re-animation of life”³², which is only possible with the successful resolution of the tensions present in the negro stage. Sacrifice is essential in this reanimation. Bedi compares it to the realization of one’s “Christ potential”, though within the context of Kali it is more in conjunction with Bataille’s description of the individual as a whole not experiencing death. Instead, it is the victimized part that dies and represents the “thingness”, or objective reality, preventing the individual from becoming a subject.

It is no surprise that dreams are a main foundation of psychoanalysis. However, within the Indian context of Kali dreams are also pivotal, as encounters with Kali often occur in dreams. In Bedi’s account, the themes of terror, rage, chaos, beheading, and eventual victory coalesce with the description of a transformative and pivotal dream experienced by a psychoanalysis patient named Rose. Rose is first assaulted in her dream. Rose then sees herself holding the man’s head in her hands, which she brandishes as a victory sign. She proceeds to climb a bell tower and lets out a shrill scream. From Rose’s description, Bedi presumes the bell tower is actually a church (which Bedi interprets as Kali incarnate because of the association of Mother Kali and Mother Church), and the scream is Kali’s battle cry. Thus, in her dream, Rose achieves the sacrificer’s goal of liberating oneself from the confines of the object-self and realizing one’s divine potential. In addition, as a non-discursive experience, dreams can be a kind of intimate communication, lived through images, emotions, and moments

³¹ Bedi 2003, 170

³² *Ibid*, 171

of violence. Sacrifice, according to Bedi, is “a symbolic relinquishment of a certain aspect of one’s psychic life”³³. Using Samanta’s expression, both Bedi’s and Bataille’s understandings of sacrifice and transformation are homologous to the function of sacrifice in Kali’s cultus.

Final Thoughts

The common thread weaving through both types of sacrifice explored in connection with the worship of the goddess Kali is one of extreme situations. Kinsley may call her an “extreme goddess”, but only because Kali is a necessity and must be called upon in moments of crisis, trauma, and transformation. These moments, according to Bataille, are moments of extreme emotion – experiences of anguish, terror, or laughter. They are key transformative experiences making it possible to communicate with a greater reality. These are moments of intimacy, violent in their rupture of the “real order of things”. For Bataille, the unreality of the divine (within the order of things or objects) is the very proof of its ultimate existential reality; essentially, an inversion of order occurs similar to Kali’s inversion of the order of purity, karma, and peaceful existence. Paradoxically, such an inversion helps to maintain this very order while offering an escape from it, thus negotiating the dialectic of object-subject within a sacred landscape.

Sacrifice in Kali worship illustrates this intimate experiential dimension. Although Samanta offers a view of the bali as a unique reflection of a Hindu worldview and final goal of liberation, elements of the act of sacrifice, namely the experiential, bodily, and intimate elements (among them the most dramatic being an actual killing of a victim), can be similarly observed within certain western structures. This is illustrated within a Jungian text about Kali; though, it is possible other archetypes dealing with traumatic experiences follow a similar pattern.

Themes of achieving greater consciousness through the sacrifice of the self-animal, the Tantric conquest of the

³³ Bedi 2003, 178

‘forbidden’, as well as psychoanalysis as a form of healing are often encountered in the many contexts of Kali. Bataille argues this increased consciousness is a communication “through death, with our beyond... with an indefinite reality”; it is an immanence, “immanence between man and the world, between the subject and object”, and can be understood both as the experience of ecstatic union with the divine and self-realization as divine (in Hindu tradition these are often glossed). The fluidity of an individual’s personal power, or life force (sakti), and the goddess as the incarnation of this power (Sakti), also supports the possibility of such transformative intimacy.

At the same time, the practice of Kali worship varies greatly in different contexts. Throughout this essay, I was concerned with delivering an experiential and phenomenological understanding of sacrifice that allows for an emic culture-specific perspective, however, it is worth noting sacrifice is not the only central element in Kali worship. Throughout my research, a recurring question arose: why do different real-life expressions of sacrifice exist? How are practices so distinct, and yet strikingly similar, when observed between eastern and western traditions, and within Kali’s native context where animal sacrifice is one of a myriad of devotions. Perhaps the difference is a conglomeration of normative cultural expressions. Also, a greater abstraction of the self as an active agent, and a greater reliance on what Samanta would call the “personality” of the divine (be it God, Goddess, or goddess) leads to a greater internalization of the elements of sacrifice. This is not to say one is somehow more advanced than the other; they simply operate in somewhat different sacred landscapes, influenced by a combination of historical, social, and environmental factors. The tribal black magician, for example, lives in an almost entirely immanent universe where his or her actions reflect immediately on the physical environment. Perhaps in a more extreme interpretation, the coexistence of life and death are in close proximity to the figure of Kali as a real and everyday part of one’s reality. The mystic devotee seeking a child-like union with the Mother inhabits a different space, and his or her perception of the Kali principles may be more internalized. He or she may even experience reticence at offering live animals (to a loving, protective Mother), and may practice a vegetarian puja in honour of Ma Kali, instead. These distinctions are of extreme importance to those who practice them (as well as to scholars of

religion), and form a complex and multidimensional sacred landscape. Moreover, any one individual may incorporate more than one approach to the sacred, fluidly moving between elements that are more immanent and mystical.

Finally, my goal was to examine the experiential elements of sacrifice. It is possible that my conclusions only apply to sacrifice in the context of Kali worship where it is associated with a moment of rupture and transformation in so far as Kali herself is a transforming goddess. Yet the intimacy involved in violence and in laughter, both responses to conditions of objectivity and subjectivity, seem to acknowledge a basic human element. Moments of crisis are moments of transformation, even if the particular content of such a synthesis may differ dramatically. Crisis requires equally disturbing, unexpected, and transgressive modes of coping and interpretation, and while Kali is a deity whose very ethos is transgressive, sacrifice as an act or a metaphor is not any less so. In reflecting upon Bataille's words, the notion of sacrifice combines voluntary (ritual, magic, analysis) elements and involuntary (dreams, mysticism, possession) elements, and it appears that it may function as a coping mechanism at both the individual and social level. Similarly, Kali's gory garments of decapitated heads and amputated arms, followed by her mad and destructive dance, are reminders of the infinite instances of sacrifice – sacrifices made of violent and anguished moments – moments transformed into ecstatic experiences of the sacred where a crisis can break the surface of the world of things into the realm of the divine.

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