

# Encountering Kālī

*In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*

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For David  
April 25, 1939—April 25, 2000



## CHAPTER 9

## Why the Tāntrika Is a Hero

### *Kālī in the Psychoanalytic Tradition*

Jeffrey J. Kripal

*There is an insistence in Hinduism that the world as it appears to us is a show, that there remains hidden from our normal view an aspect of reality that is different, perhaps shockingly different, from our ego-centered way of apprehending it. . . . Why would one wish to identify with, to actually become (in the logic of Tantra), a goddess such as Kālī. . . . [whol] dramatically embodies marginal, polluting, or socially subversive qualities? . . . The answer . . . probably lies in certain Hindu tantric emphases. These goddesses “fit” the logic of certain aspects of Tantra, especially left-handed Tantra, in which a central aim is to stretch one’s consciousness beyond the conventional, to break away from approved social norms, roles, and expectations. . . . To take on such a perspective, to become one of these goddesses, might very well involve or imply a transformation of identity in which hardened categories are jettisoned and the emotions, mind, and spirit are stretched in exhilarating fashion.*

DAVID KINSLEY, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*

#### TOWARD A PSYCHOANALYTIC POETICS OF THE GODDESS

āka mystical practice, like psychoanalysis, is an exercise in excess, a ritualized confrontation with both universal and culturally constituted anxieties about death, sexuality, pollution, and the dissolution of the socialized self. In the famous *pañcāmākāra* ritual or the Five M’s, for example, the male Tāntrika secretly ingests substances or performs acts that are otherwise forbidden and considered highly polluting by his public Brāhmanical culture. He thus consumes meat, drinks wine, and engages in sexual intercourse with his Tantric consort precisely to transgress, ritually and emotionally, the orthodox categories of impurity, pollution, and taboo. It is as if his own culture deconstructs itself within this remarkable practice.

Without denying the very real and important differences between the two systems, I would like to suggest that psychoanalysis can poetically be described as a kind of Western Tantra, as a century-long meditation on the powers of sexuality, the body, life, death, and religion. Psychoanalysis, after all, gazes into zones of human experience that were previously off-limits, obscene, unthinkable. And it accesses altered states of consciousness—dreams, hypnosis, hysteria, trance states, fantasy, free association, and so on—to advance its claims about the nature of human being. Moreover, again not unlike the Tantra, psychoanalysis is something of a scandal to the larger culture, an embarrassment to many, a horror to more than a few. And why not? As Freud pointed out long ago, psychoanalysis is an offense to humanity’s self-assured arrogance (the “third blow,” as it were, after the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions), for it removes the ego from its pedestal and reveals it to be what it has been all along—a social construction always threatened by the instinctual forces of the id, an often overbearing superego, and the terrifying whirlpool of the unconscious. . . . by no means a permanent condition.<sup>1</sup> Psychoanalysis even possesses a similar esoteric ritual structure, with analysts and analysts trained in closed private sessions, accessing a kind of personal *gnosis* or *jñāna* reserved for the few who can understand. It is not for nothing that Sudhir Kakar once wrote, “[o]f the many Indian mystical-spiritual cults, tantra is perhaps the most congenial to a psychoanalyst.”<sup>2</sup>

I am certain that we can easily make too much of such analogies, but we also can too quickly ignore them and so miss an opportunity to think again about both psychoanalysis and Hindu mysticism. In what follows, then, I explore these Śakta-psychoanalytic correspondences through a kind of intellectual genealogy; in this case, a history of the twentieth-century psychoanalytic study of Kālī, the Tantric Goddess par excellence, in the hope that it might bring us a bit closer to what we might call a psychoanalytic poetics of the Goddess.

The literature of the psychoanalytic tradition is especially rich in meditations on this provocative being. It is also, however, quite diverse in its plural voices and passionate debates. Consequently, there is no way we can begin to understand it without a further focusing device. I have chosen to focus my own gaze through a seemingly simple question: Why is the male Tāntrika, who sexually engages Kālī either imaginarily in meditation or ritually through an actual female consort, consistently described in the Tantric texts as a *vīra*, or “hero”? Or put more psychologically, what is specifically “heroic” about heterosexual contact with the Goddess?<sup>3</sup>

Familiarity with this psychoanalytic Kālī, I suggest, is central to any adequate Western understanding of Kālī (this chapter does not attempt to represent South Asian understandings), since psychoanalytic thought is one of the few places in Western theory where Kālī has come to play a significant role. If handled properly, such a theoretical tradition has much to offer,

both positively and negatively, to scholars and believers alike who wish either to understand the Goddess in their South Asian cultural contexts or to reappropriate her in ways conducive to gender equality, social justice, and full embodiment in our modern and postmodern worlds.

KĀLĪ IN THE PSYCHOANALYTIC TRADITION (1923–1999)

This chapter in no way pretends to be exhaustive. Instead, I shall proceed chronologically, beginning with Freud's correspondence with Romain Rolland (1923–36) and ending with the recent publication of Sarah Caldwell's *Oh Terrifying Mother* (1999), stopping in between at a few of the most significant "markers" or "signposts" along the seventy-five-year path. As we shall see, the differences between such a beginning and such an end are quite striking.

*Sigmund Freud and Romain Rolland:*

*Analyzing the Maternal Ocean (1923–1936)*

Although Freud himself never actually wrote about Kālī, he definitely knew more than a little about her through the work of C. D. Daly (discussed below) and what he playfully called the "twin-headed three-volume work"<sup>4</sup> of his dear friend and thirteen-year correspondent, the French novelist, playwright, and social activist Romain Rolland. Rolland admired Freud for his firm stand against the illusions of religion in his controversial, and, for many, deeply offensive, book *The Future of an Illusion*<sup>5</sup> (like Freud, Rolland believed in neither the immortality of the soul<sup>6</sup> nor the existence of a monotheistic God).<sup>7</sup> However, he also sought to convince Freud that there was another way of being religious, a mystical way that could dispense with the common man's immature projections and rest content with the innate beauty and pleasure of what he liked to call "an oceanic feeling" (*un sentiment océanique*), which he linked with the biographies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda that he was at that time (1927) writing: "I myself am familiar with this sensation," Rolland wrote to Freud. "All through my life, it has never failed me. . . . In that sense, I can say that I am profoundly 'religious'—without this constant state (like a sheet of water which I feel flushing under the bark) affecting in any way my critical faculties and my freedom to exercise them—even if that goes against the immediacy of the interior experience."<sup>8</sup> In a private letter to Rolland, Freud admitted, "I am not an out-and-out skeptic. Of one thing I am absolutely positive: there are certain things we cannot know now."<sup>9</sup> In another context, an exchange with the Swiss poet Bruno Goetz, Freud compared the mystic to a kind of "intuitive psychologist" or proto-analyst who dives into the terrifying whirlpool of the unconscious to return with genuine psychological, artistic, or therapeutic

insight.<sup>10</sup> In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud went so far as to suggest that psychoanalysis and "certain mystical practices" share a common approach: to gaze into and appropriate the psyche's hidden depths by "upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind."<sup>11</sup>

This dialogue had been going on for some time when, early in 1930, Rolland sent Freud his newly published biographies of the Hindu saints Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, his *Essai sur la mystique et l'action de l'Inde vivante: I. La Vie de Ramakrishna* (1929) and *II. La Vie de Vivekananda et l'évangile universel* (1930). What did Freud read about Kālī when he picked up Rolland's work? The first Ramakrishna volume, where Kālī appears, is as much about Rolland as it is about Ramakrishna, for Rolland's unique brand of perennialism, originating in his own mystical experiences and nurtured by political developments in a post-World War I Europe,<sup>12</sup> shines through almost every chapter and heavily colors the manner in which he reads both Ramakrishna's life and its significance for the world. So too with Rolland's oceanic feeling, which rolls and thunders behind his impassioned prose and occasional references to his own beliefs. When interpreting Ramakrishna's experience of Kālī as an Ocean of Light (happily, the metaphor was central to the Bengali texts and the tradition), for example, Rolland returns to his "oceanic" experiences and reads them—perhaps not inaccurately—into those of Ramakrishna. As for Kālī herself, Rolland begins with the usual romantic suggestions that she represents "the Nature Mother"<sup>13</sup> but quickly moves on from there to invoke the emergent psychology of mysticism—primarily in its American forms (Starbuck and James)—to read Ramakrishna's visions of Kālī as a contentless feeling state akin to dream consciousness.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after Rolland's biographies appeared, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* was published. It is doubtful whether anything in it refers to Rolland's discussion of Kālī (his book was already in press by the time he received Rolland's), but Rolland's "oceanic feeling" runs through much of it as a central subtext. Indeed, Freud begins with an analysis of Rolland's "oceanic" experiences, which he interprets as psychic regressions to the infant's primary narcissistic/unitive state.<sup>15</sup> In classical psychoanalytic fashion, he isolates the central content of such feelings, the idea of unity, and then traces it back to developmental patterns in the human maturation cycle: "An infant at the breast does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him." "[O]riginally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself."<sup>16</sup> And then the central thesis:

Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive—indeed, an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it. If we may assume that there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has

persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a counterpart to it. In that case, the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of fimitness and of a bond with the universe—the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the "oceanic feeling."<sup>17</sup>

Later in the text, Freud suggests that further study might reveal "connections here with a number of obscure modifications of mental life, such as trances and ecstasies."<sup>18</sup> Here psychoanalytic studies of both mysticism and, indirectly, Kālī definitively begin. That "further study" of which Freud wrote in 1930 would proceed impressively over the years and is still progressing today.

*C. D. Daly: Hindu Mythology and the Castration Complex (1927)*

In 1927, C. D. Daly, an English psychoanalyst practicing in colonial India,<sup>19</sup> published a long essay dedicated largely to the mythology and iconography of Kālī, "Hindu-Mythologie und Kastrationskomplex."<sup>20</sup> Although much of his theorizing (most of it revolving around castration anxiety, penis envy, oedipal conflict, and the menstruation complex) must strike the modern reader as heavy-handed and rather primitive, not to mention colonizing,<sup>21</sup> the piece is important for a number of historical and hermeneutical reasons, foremost among them the facts that this is the first major psychoanalytic essay dedicated almost exclusively to Kālī, and, even more interesting, that in it Daly discusses Freud's own reading of an earlier draft of the same essay, clear proof that Freud was more than familiar with Kālī's mythology and iconography (Daly, p. 177).

Also of significant methodological interest is the manner in which Daly used European materials in order to throw psychoanalytic light on Indian materials. In one place, for example, in order to decode the cut-off-arm motif (in both contexts) as a symbol of castration anxiety, he moves from Kālī's skirt of arms to an exegesis of a European's dream of a sculptor who had hung a collection of modeled arms (to complete a Venus statue) by a rope. A remarkably similar "free associative" method, I should add, would later be used with exquisite effect by Ganamath Obeyesekere, who in July 1973 used his own free associations between the inexplicable anxiety he felt looking at a Sinhalese female ascetic's snake-like, matted hair and Freud's essay "Medusa's Head" (where Freud links the terror inspired by Medusa to the fear of castration) in order to trigger a chain of thoughts that would eventually produce his now classic *Medusa's Hair*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Daly himself discusses the Medusa myth in relationship to Kālī (Daly, p. 167) and later interprets hair- and snake-symbolism as related to castration anxieties through analysis of another European man's dream.<sup>23</sup> The latter dreamt that he was

holding his phallus in his hand while it let loose a stream of liquid, as he watched, the end or tip of it became a threatening snake head, whose mouth seemed to emit streams of fire before he awoke and thought immediately of a "certain woman" (no doubt a reference to Medusa) whose hair consisted of snakes (pp. 172-73).

In terms of actual theorizing, Daly reads Kālī as "ein Weihnachtsbaum mit phallischen Symbolen bedeckt" (Daly, p. 174), that is, "a Christmas tree bedecked with phallic symbols"—surely one of the most remarkable, if not to say weirdest, lines in the literature. The garland of heads, the skirt of arms, the extended tongue—all of these features of Kālī's iconography take on phallic meanings for Daly. Hence Kālī is the "castrating mother" who dominates the father and produces anxiety in the son, even as she delays the son's anxiety about his own feared castration by directing her rage to the father. Hindu mythology is thus read as a product of elaborate processes of psychological "splitting" (*Spaltung*) in which the different features and attributes of the son's early object-libido are projected onto the screen of religious belief (p. 147). In terms of the goddesses, this splitting occurs between two contradictory types of mother figures: those of a gentle nature, such as Umā, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī, and those of a severe or dark nature, such as Durgā, Kālī, and Cāmūṇḍā.<sup>24</sup> Here also we find early psychoanalytic readings of Gaṇeśa and his decapitation (p. 155), the worship of Śakti as a veneration of libidinal energies (p. 165), symbolic analogues between milk, semen, and urine (p. 175), the extended tongue as a sexual symbol, and an interpretation of red hibiscus flowers (traditionally associated with Kālī) as symbols of menstruation and sexual fertility (p. 177): all motifs that would be picked up by later Indological writers, if often in a nonpsychoanalytic key.<sup>25</sup>

*The Schielderup Brothers: Typing the Religious Personality (1932)*

David Wulff has pointed out that the mother-goddess of Freud's rare speculations on the subject is not the mother who enfolds, nourishes, or protects but "the mother in the context of the Oedipal crisis, whose son-lover dies an early death and whose priests are castrated for her protection, presumably at the instance of the father."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Freud focused on the developmentally late oedipal stage and seldom ventured further back along the developmental arc. The British psychologist Ian Sutie states that Freud found the Great Mother cults "a mystery as repellent as they are insoluble," and this despite the fact that, according to Sutie, they are "perhaps the greatest problem for the archaeology of culture and the psychology of religion."<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, other thinkers developed Freud's ideas in precisely these directions and cast considerable light on the remarkable tendency of these

cults to emphasize maternal merger, blood sacrifice, and decapitation/castration. Such approaches usually fall under the rubric of object-relations theory, developed especially by the British theorists Ian Suttie, Ronald Fairbairn, Harry Guntrip, and D. W. Winnicott, or the self psychology of the American Heinz Kohut, particularly in reference to his model of narcissism. As Wulff points out, however, the groundwork for all of these approaches was laid long before in the work of the Norwegian psychologist Harald Schjelderup and his brother Kristian, a theologian and psychotherapist.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the Schjelderup brothers' early German study *Über drei Haupttypen der religiösen Erlebensformen* (1932)<sup>29</sup> drew on eighteen case studies of glossolalia to categorize the religious personality into three basic types (*Grundtypen*) along a tripartite developmental perspective—the oedipal, the pre-oedipal, and the narcissistic. Wulff summarizes the brothers' elegant model:

In the first of these types [the oedipal], the preeminent feelings are those of guilt and fear, occurring in conjunction with longing for submission and atonement and occasionally with the experience of conversion. For this type, the relation to the father lies in the foreground. The second type [the pre-oedipal] is characterized by deep yearning for the divine, for closeness to or even union with God, for peace and rest in God. For this type the individual's relation to the mother is decisive. The third type [the narcissistic] is marked by fantasies of being oneself divine, an outcome of narcissistic withdrawal of libido from external objects and corresponding infantile self-grandiosity. The three types—father religion, mother religion, and self religion—thus correspond to three different stages of childhood development.<sup>30</sup>

Years later, Erik Erikson would describe the same three "objects" of the psyche in more poetic terms. As his invocation of specifically mystical idioms to communicate the beauty and power of such object-states will become significant for us below, it is worth quoting him at length here:

One may say that man, when looking through a glass darkly, finds himself in an inner cosmos in which the outlines of three objects awaken dim nostalgias. One of these is the simple and fervent wish for a hallucinatory sense of unity with a maternal matrix; it is symbolized by the affirmative face of charity, graciously inclined, reassuring the faithful of the unconditional acceptance of those who will return to the bosom. . . . In the center of the second nostalgic paradise of childhood and provides a sanction for energetic action. It also warns of the inevitability of guilty entanglement, and threatens with the lightning of wrath. . . . Finally, the glass shows the pure self itself, the unborn core of creation, the—as it were, preparental—center where God is pure nothing: *ein lauter Nichts*, in the words of Angelus Silesius. God is so designated in many ways in Eastern mysticism. This pure self is the self no longer sick with a conflict between right and wrong, not dependent on providers, and not dependent on guides to reason and reality.<sup>31</sup>

Such a mystical reading of the three objects, however, was implicit in psychoanalytic discourse from the beginning. Hence, when the Schjelderups wanted to demonstrate each type of religion—mother religion, father religion and self religion—they turned to two famous Asian mystics and a Western reformer: the Hindu saint Ramakrishna, the Protestant founder Martin Luther, and the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma. Even in their choice of examples, the Schjelderup brothers were quite prescient, because the first two case-studies, those of Ramakrishna and Martin Luther, later became central reference points for the psychoanalytic study of religion. With reference to Kālī, they turned to Ramakrishna and the Goddess as powerful examples of a "mother-religion" free from guilt and sin. Unlike the father religions, which worked through the emotions of guilt, atonement, and sin so prominent in a later oedipal stage of conflict, the mother religions emphasize the bliss of physical intimacy, contentment, and union. Such emotional states in turn produce a specifically mystical type of religiosity, that is, one that emphasizes maternal merger: "Very often there appears here the fantasy of a return to the mother's womb as an expression of the wish to flee the world and make an innermost contact with the object. Where religious expression takes its form according to the mother complex, we find a type of religious experience with a tendency toward mystical unity with the divinity."<sup>32</sup>

Coming as it did before the Indological advances of the twentieth century, the Schjelderup brothers' study of Ramakrishna and Kālī was naturally superficial and brief (only eight pages, to be exact). It also failed to struggle with the "terrible" aspects of Kālī, emphasizing instead the warmth and security of the maternal object (which, to be fair, are also major components of the Kālī traditions). Still, even with these limitations, they laid the groundwork for what would follow, insisting on the developmental nature of human religiosity and its diverse grounding in the primordial experiences of childhood and human maturation.

*Gananaath Obeyesekere: Mother Goddess and Social Structure (1981–1990)*

The early work of such figures as Freud, C. D. Daly, and the Schjelderups was developed further in the middle of the century by G. M. Carstairs and Philip Spratt before it came to a decisive consummation in the works of Sudhir Kakar and Gananaath Obeyesekere, who took this half-century Indological tradition and bestowed on it a new sophistication, theoretical substance, and literary presentation (unlike that of most of their predecessors, their prose is often quite beautiful). Kakar's first major book on the subject was his now classic *The Inner World* (1978), which functioned as a true watershed in the discourse and was followed quickly by a second major monograph on India's healing traditions, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors* (1982). Both books have much to say about Kālī and the Tantric traditions.<sup>33</sup> But

since I have summarized Kakar's approach to Kālī in *The Inner World* elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> and since Obeyesekere tells us that the manuscript of his *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, which advances a remarkably similar hermeneutic, was completed in 1978—making 1978 an especially auspicious year for psychoanalytic Indology—I shall privilege Obeyesekere here, focusing primarily on two of his *Pattini* chapter-essays, "Mother Goddess and Social Structure" and "Virgin, Wife, and Mother."<sup>35</sup>

Obeyesekere approaches the question of mother goddesses anthropologically through a comparative study of multiple cultures across space and time (with Hindu India and Buddhist Sri Lanka as his primary points of reference, supplemented by an occasional insightful reference to Mediterranean Catholicism). What such comparison reveals is that mother goddesses, although quite common, are by no means universal and always display specific themes and patterns idiosyncratic to the cultures in question. One sensible conclusion to such an observation is that mother-goddess cults, like all religious traditions, are "projective systems," that is, "culturally constituted representations that permit the expression and channeling of nuclear infantile experiences," thus "giving the individual the psychological security to cope with his inner (unconscious) anxieties by projecting them outward into a preexisting cultural belief system."<sup>36</sup> But Obeyesekere's is not a simple reduction of cultural or religious forms to psychological processes. The notion of a projective system may help us explain why family relationships are almost universally projected onto the cosmos, but it cannot help us explain the equally consistent phenomena of philosophical, metaphysical, and mystical systems woven into these psychological projections. Religions are always more than projective systems (Obeyesekere, p. 428); a projective system is but a *partial* explanation. Moreover, Obeyesekere sees culture and psyche as mutually constitutive forces that interact across time to produce both individually unique psyches and publicly shared religious traditions. This interaction between personal unconscious fantasy and the creation of culture is the leitmotif of much of his remarkable psychoanalytic trilogy, *Medusa's Hair* (1981), *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (1984), and *The Work of Culture* (1990).<sup>37</sup>

Because of this same psyche-culture dialectic, neonatal experiences are necessary but not sufficient causes of projective systems. For such experiences to become mythology and religion, two conditions must be met: (1) the culture must encourage the expression/projection of ideas and emotions in religious terms; and (2) the nature of the psychological problem or dilemma that lies at the base of the projection must be intense and pronounced enough to warrant the creation and preservation of a symbolically salient system. For Obeyesekere, both conditions are more than met in South Asia, where "the child's attachment to the mother is extremely intense, and the religious projective system is both a cultural statement and

an expression of these intense feelings" (Obeyesekere, p. 428). This is why India is "the locus classicus of the mother goddess" (p. 429).

But what creates this special intensity? Probably not the infant, since neonatal attitudes are biologically determined and can be treated as cultural constants. Obeyesekere thus turns to the mother and her culturally constructed female role in the Indian patrilocal family. Briefly, "we may say that in Indian society a woman's husband and in-laws are aloof; she cannot fulfill her need for love through them; she therefore fulfills it through her child" (Obeyesekere, p. 429). "[T]he Brahmanic scale of values" implies ideals for the Indian mother and particularly for the *pattinā* (literally, "the vow to or for the husband"), which encompasses such virtues as absolute loyalty, humility, submissiveness, and religious devotion. And this cultural ideal of "virginity in brides, chastity in wives, and continence in widows,"<sup>38</sup> like all ideals, has psychological consequences:

Since the Hindu female role ideal of *pattinā* pertains to sex and aggression control, implementing the ideal in the socialization process entails the radical proscription of sexual and aggressive activity, which on the personality level demands the radical and continued repression of sex and aggression drives. . . . In Hindu society this control as it applies to female role learning is carried to an extreme, and certain psychological problems pertaining to the adult handling of sex and aggression must flow from it. On the personality level certain consequences are expectable: sexual frigidity, somatization of conflicts, propensity to hysteria, and masochistic tendencies owing to the internalization of aggression. (Obeyesekere, p. 431; italics in original)

Because of this same Brāhmanical concern with the virginity of the woman (but not the man), the girl is protected and given considerable attention from her family, such that her own emotional needs are usually met in her natal home. The mother disciplines and instills in her the proper values, whereas the father can take a purely loving and benevolent attitude. This generally happy situation, however, changes dramatically when the girl or woman must leave her natal home to move into the often-distant patrilocal home of her new husband, where her new in-laws, and especially her mother-in-law, can be quite critical. Numerous factors—the "institutionalized hostility" between a woman and her husband's sisters, the aloofness of the other males of the household (with the important exception of the husband's younger brothers), the lack of physical privacy in an extended family, the injunction against public shows of affection between husband and wife, the continued presence of the husband's mother as the husband's primary female relationship, and the evaluation of sex as polluting and physically harmful—create a situation for the young bride that is more than ready for an emotional outlet.

Fortunately, this situation is altered radically with the birth of the first child, especially if it is a son, a necessary event in Brāhmanic ideology, since

it is believed that only a male heir can perform the postmortem rituals that ensure a man's salvation. The young wife's moral status now rises considerably, and she finally has an outlet for her frustrated emotional needs: "*With the birth of the child the female's starved affective needs are realized through her infant, so that she develops an intense symbiotic attachment to her child*" (Obeyesekere, p. 437; italics in original). Such an attachment possesses clear erotic dimensions for Obeyesekere (pp. 439–41), but there is more to express than sexuality. There is also repressed aggression in the form of rage, born from the young woman's subservient role in the joint family and the larger culture. Brāhmanic values, however, prohibit her expressing anger toward the objects who have engendered it. It is thus "likely that some of this rage will be expressed toward the child, whenever he frustrates the mother, since that is the only object in the sociological landscape toward whom this rage can be directed with impunity"; in addition, as G. M. Garstairs observed, there are times when the mother, by virtue of her menses, is regarded as "polluted" and unapproachable, and although other members of the joint family may fill in for her during these times, "it is likely that the image of the untouchable, menstruating (bloody) mother conditions the child's maternal image" (Obeyesekere, p. 439).

Lest readers jump to unnecessary conclusions about the overly negative picture painted above, Obeyesekere himself points out that "it would be ridiculous to say that all Indian children, even those affected by Brahmanic values, experience the mother in the same manner" (Obeyesekere, p. 440). For some, maternal rage will be dominant; for others, the nurturing, loving mother; for still others, some combination of the two. "Yet these experiences of the mother would occur with sufficient frequency for them to be represented in various ways in the religious projective system."<sup>39</sup> Such broad yet consistent diversity among childhood experiences results in a tripartite model of the Hindu goddesses, consisting of three archetypal images: (1) the sacred cow, or the nurturant, totally good, undemanding, loving mother; (2) the Pārvaī image, the benevolent mother and model wife of the father; and (3) the Kālī image, "the cruel, unpredictable, smothering, or castrating aspect of the mother, based primarily on the unpredictable (hysterical) nature of maternal rage as perceived by the infant" (p. 44). In true structuralist style, the Pārvaī image mediates between the two polar extremes of the sacred cow and the Kālī image, which are in actuality two sides of the same maternal imago: "the totally loving and nurturant mother will smother her child, which then creates for the child the terrifying image of the mother" (p. 440).<sup>40</sup>

Obeyesekere develops this hermeneutic further, and in a direction that will become especially relevant for our own questions, in his chapter, "Virgin, Wife, and Mother," where he treats the theme of the virgin and the harlot in Hindu Indian and Buddhist Sinhalese culture. Freud had explored

the phenomenon of his own European culture in which a man could only love a harlot-type figure, noting that psychic impotence is often experienced only with certain types of women, who unconsciously remind the man of his mother. Framed in these oedipal terms, sexual impotence is thus a psycho-physiological response to a symbolically incestuous dilemma. One resolution to such a psychosexual dilemma is the "splitting" of the woman into two radically different models, the pure mother and the sexually degraded whore or harlot. This then allows the man to create a disjunction between his affection (still tied to his mother or a mother-figure) and his sexuality (now freed for the harlot figure), which in turn allows him to surmount his impotence with a now sexually degraded woman who is obviously *not* his mother.

Ontogenetically, affection is prior to sexuality for Freud, as a child's first object-choices are always family members, and usually the mother. As the child matures, erotic components are added to these affective relationships until puberty, when biological changes and social taboos demand that sexuality attach itself to other objects. In the normal outcome, the male is able to attach himself to other women, and the affection he held and still holds for his family members is carried over into these sexual relationships. Affection and sexuality are united once again. However, this does not always happen, either because the male chooses (or has chosen for him) object choices that are not suitable to his desires, or, more important for our purposes, because the attachment to the original object-choice is simply too strong to relinquish. Because such an object-choice is incestuous, it cannot be expressed publicly and so remains unconscious: "In this way it may so happen that the whole current of sensual feeling in the young man may remain attached in the unconscious to incestuous objects, or, to put it in another way, may be fixated to incestuous fantasies."<sup>41</sup> Impotence is the result. If the fixation is less severe, however, the male may split his experience of women into two clearly demarcated patterns: a mother-image, with whom he cannot possibly have sex, and a harlot-figure, with whom he can.

Obeyesekere, pointing out that "erotic fixation on the mother" is a "widespread psychological problem" in Sri Lanka (as well as India), predicts the following sociological consequences: (1) incestuous feelings for the mother will result in castration fear as punishment for these wishes; (2) this fear will in turn result in a widespread fear of impotence among males; and (3) the erotic fixation on the mother will produce a splitting of woman into mother and harlot (Obeyesekere, pp. 453–55). All three observations, I should add, are directly relevant to Tantric culture and its handling of Kālī, the decastrating/castrating, sexually degraded woman par excellence. Indeed, it is remarkable how closely the psychoanalytic model fits the patterns of Tantric ritual, where the prostitute or low-caste woman is the ideal ritual consort (symbolically linked, through the Goddess, to the mother) and the

drinking of menstrual blood or sexual fluids (*vajrapāna*) becomes a kind of antimimian sacrament. Tantric ritual is thus a religious response to a set of psychosexual dilemmas produced by quite specific cultural child-rearing practices. On the psychological plane, at least, it is an attempt to resolve a modal oedipal crisis defined by an especially intense attraction to the (divine) mother.

*Sarah Caldwell: Male Experiences, Female Frustrations (1999)*

Sarah Caldwell's recent study of Kerala ritual theater, *Oh Terrifying Mother*,<sup>12</sup> both brings the twentieth-century psychoanalytic discourse on Kāli to something of a dramatic close and signals, in its unique academic and autobiographical styles, new theoretical directions and rhetorical possibilities. Breaking with a century of anthropological and analytic prose, in which the author seldom if ever interjects his or her own life-voice into the text, Caldwell adopts a postmodern reflexivity and intersperses her symbolic, psychoanalytic, feminist, and performative interpretations of Kerala ritual theater with disarmingly honest and dramatic journal entries from the field, revealing, in the process, her own mystical, sexual, and familial engagement with this remarkable Hindu art form of suffering, sexuality, and violence.

*Mutiyēlu* is a Kerala annual ritual art form in which a high-caste male dons a huge head-dress to become possessed by Bhagavati and act out the myth of her slaying of the male demon Dārka (also played by a male) in an all-night ritual drama. As the myth goes, Dārka is playing havoc in the three worlds to revenge Viṣṇu's slaying of his ancestors. Hearing of this, Śiva becomes enraged and creates Bhadrakālī out of his fiery third eye. Bhadrakālī then enlists the help of a female ghost named Vēṭālam, who helps slay the demon by extending her huge tongue to lap up his drops of seed-blood, each of which will spring up into another demon if allowed to touch the ground. With the help of Vēṭālam, Kālī decapitates the demon and returns to Śiva's abode, still enraged. In order to stop her advance, Śiva appears before her naked; she, after all, is his daughter, and since daughters are forbidden to see their fathers naked, she must finally turn back (Caldwell, pp. 19–21). What Caldwell sets out to explain in chapter 4 on "Male Experiences" is why the *Mutiyēlu* theatrical reliving of this myth is an almost exclusively male domain. The Goddess, after all, is *never* played by a woman but rather by a cross-dressed man.

Caldwell begins, like most psychoanalytic thinkers, with a discussion of Kerala child-rearing practices, particularly the mother's display of love through beating and feeding, the practice of prolonged breast-feeding (to between ages four and eight), and the intense pre-oedipal ties to the mother that lead to "a fixation on the feminine body as both irresistible and murderous" (Caldwell, p. 189). She then effectively applies such psychoanalytic

insights to the ritual drama: "The 'heat' of real beatings is reenacted in the Kālī actor's rage towards Dārka. Kālī's gestures—left hand upraised to strike, accusatory right index finger pointing, popping eyes, and rolled back tongue—are easily recognized by Keralites as the gestures of an angry mother punishing her children" (p. 161). More important to Caldwell, however, are the frustrated sexual desires in the myths of the Goddess and their relationship to her rage. Perfectly aware that such readings go against the conscious explanations of the ritual actors (which psychoanalytic theory would, of course, predict), Caldwell turns to the theme of the *yakṣi* or dangerous demonic virgin. Virgin girls, she points out, are considered to be overheated due to their lack of sexual access and so are thought to pose a real danger to males. Such fears manifest in folk conceptions of the *yakṣis*, "unhappy, seductive and bloodthirsty female tree spirits out to entice and destroy virtuous men" (p. 163), essentially a kind of female vampire. As one of Caldwell's male informants put it, "in the olden days people believed that when they slept . . . these [virgins] would come in dreams and have [sex] with us . . . [producing] nocturnal emissions. . . . These kinds of people enter our body, and cause us to ooze [fluid]. They drain us and drink it. That's the belief" (*ibid.*). Such conceptions of a frustrated virgin out to drain the powers of unsuspecting men are particularly relevant to contemporary Kerala, where, according to Caldwell, 30–40 percent of adult males leave the country to work in the Persian Gulf for long periods of time. Significantly, Bhadrakālī is also imagined as "an unmarried, virgin girl—beautiful, hot, and dangerous," and the drops of blood that her alter-ego Vēṭālam laps up are analogized to drops of semen by both the myth and Kerala's Malayalam language (p. 164). Essentially then, "Bhadrakālī is modelled on a virgin female who suffers from unfulfilled desire for sex and procreation, whose lack of fulfillment is one source of her anger, and who requires the blood sacrifice of a male to cool and satisfy her thirst" (p. 167).

It is to the women on the margins that Caldwell turns in chapter 5, "Female Frustrations, Women's Worlds." Employing an explicitly feminist lens, Caldwell is able to show that control of the female body is omnipresent in Kerala dress, social practices, and values, and that open discussions of sexuality are actively suppressed, rendering the sexually explicit myths and violent ritual actions of Bhagavati suspiciously "not female". "Who in the world was this Bhadrakālī," Caldwell asks, "shouting and running with long protruding teeth and tongue, her naked red breasts bouncing, chasing men wildly in the middle of the night? The sheer impossibility of Bhadrakālī's femaleness, combined with the reverent concentration of the audience as they watched her movements, seemed to cry out to me that something was very odd in this picture of female gender" (Caldwell, pp. 202–3). Clearly, Bhadrakālī is everything that a Malayali woman should *not* be (p. 204). Add to this the fact that because of their polluting menses, women can never

play the role of the Goddess, and one is left with the troubling conclusion that "[t]hat which makes them female disqualifies them from embodying the divine feminine, or even from coming near the goddess at such times" (p. 205). Far from providing role models or empowering images for real women, Bhagavati's performances and myths "serve to reinforce cultural ideas about a woman's inherent danger *vis-à-vis* men, which she is responsible for containing and controlling" (p. 206). Little wonder that Keralite women find little resonance in the ritual theater, or perceive menstruation taboos, temple restrictions, and childbirth pollution laws to be "fairly arbitrary, incomprehensible, and imposed from without" (p. 208). These are almost entirely male constructions designed primarily to deal with male fears of and fantasies about female sexuality.

Certainly one of the most poignant examples of this radically asymmetrical system is the manner in which Kerala society defines female possession as "demonic inspiration" (*bādhi āvēṣam*) and male possession as "divine inspiration" (*āḍva āvēṣam*). Historically speaking, the Bhagavati cult in ancient times was under the control of female shamans, whose roles were wrested from them by upper-caste males sometime after the fourth to seventh centuries C.E. Today, it is an entirely male preserve. Although males do sometimes experience *bādhi*, it is normally women who undergo this culturally defined "demonic" ordeal. Caldwell recounts what she saw at a local Bhagavati temple known for the healing of mental illness: "All rules of female propriety were contrived by the wild screaming and shameless jumping of the women, their matted hair flying about loose, dirt clinging to their faces, obscenities pouring from their angry tongues. . . . While I wondered what suffering could drive a woman to such extreme antisocial behavior, the obvious parallel to the dancing of Bhadrakali in *mūyettu* . . . came painfully to mind" (Caldwell, p. 214). Often such possessed sufferers are instructed to pound large nails with their heads into a tree in the temple compound, which Caldwell poetically describes in her field journal as "the enormous tree full of pain and spirits, fairly groaning under the weight of its thousands of nails" (p. 215). Caldwell goes on to interpret such possession states, much like Obeyesekere and Castillo before her,<sup>43</sup> as symptomatic responses to the extreme repression of sexual and aggressive emotions that Kerala women must endure for most of their lives. Indeed, what Caldwell found in her interviewing was that women who suffered from "fits," "voices," and more serious disorders usually did so at times of sexual deprivation or emotional stress—that is, before or immediately after marriage, during pregnancy, or while suffering the extended absence of a husband—but seldom within a stable and complete nuclear household (p. 217).

Caldwell rejects the traditional Freudian reading of such states as stemming back to the incestuous wishes of the woman—effectively blaming the woman for her own trauma—and opts instead, with Castillo, to read them

(and their common link to sexual dysfunction [Caldwell, p. 228]) as traumatic responses to actual sexual abuse. And indeed, as both Sered and Obeyesekere have suggested,<sup>44</sup> female possession states often look remarkably like sexual states, with a woman orgasmically shaking from being entered or penetrated by a male ancestral spirit. Kerala's traditional practice of adult-child marriage pairings, cultural restrictions on sexual access that lead to considerable frustration among both sexes, intimate familial sleeping arrangements, and a tropical climate demanding little clothing may all further undergird and support such possession states as culturally syntonetic expressions of sexual trauma (p. 229) and religious healing (p. 224). The same may, moreover, be equally true with male spirit possession: "If the female's possession by aggressive male demons renaacts actual memories of childhood rape, then the male's possession by Kāli could likewise recall either a sexual seduction by an aggressive maternal figure or threatening homosexual contacts in childhood" (p. 231). Unfortunately, only the latter, male possession, is valued and legitimated by the culture as divine. Such rituals may, moreover, supply an outlet, even provide transforming spiritual experiences, but "they do not change the fundamental social causes of trauma, which remain hidden and flourish in secret" (p. 236).

Such a psychoanalytic model explains why only certain individuals are attracted to Kāli figures and why others—no doubt the vast majority of any culture, including Kerala—are left appalled, amused, baffled, or completely uninterested by her myths and rituals. As Obeyesekere has argued with his notion of the "personal symbol," there must be some resonance, some "fit" between personal idiosyncratic psychological experience and the cultural myth or ritual for the latter to "take." We thus cannot and must not confuse the public meaning of a *cultural symbol* whose meanings are usually stylized, "safe," and publicly known (such as the *mūyēṭtu* ritual or the Kāli Pūjā festival), with the intensely personal and somatic expressions of the *personal symbol* or somatized symptom, whose meanings have ideational value only to the individual experiencing it.<sup>45</sup> One might speculate, then, that individuals who have suffered sexual trauma might be particularly attracted to a Kāli-like goddess and become adept in her mythology, ritual, or possession states. It may also, I might add, tell us something about those scholars who give academic and intellectual devotion to her. Caldwell, for example, has spoken intimately and passionately to this provocative truth—in her case, and in her own words, a personal history of sexual abuse inflicted by males (her uncle and former husband) lie behind her research as the motivating and inspirational sources of her work. Inspired by her reflexive transparency, I too have written confessionally of a near-deadly anorexic adolescence and a painful crisis of religio-sexual orientation as the catalyzing process behind both my mystical life and my Kāli studies.<sup>46</sup> In the end, it was sexual suffering and physical violence that revealed to both of us the

ferrifying and liberating truths of the Goddess and her ritually possessed devotees.

#### WHY THE TĀNTRIKA IS A HERO

So why is the Tāntrika a hero? To begin to frame an answer to our question, let us first summarize what we have learned about the psychoanalytic perspective on the Goddess. Here we can do no better than quote Steve Derne's useful summary:

Psychoanalytically oriented scholars . . . convincingly argue that the particular childhood experience of caste Hindus cause the child to perceive the mother as both loving and hating, nurturing and destroying, and that this is the psychological root of the salience of the symbol of the fierce goddess. The young wife's isolated, subservient role in the joint family is such that she may i) indulge her infant son, ii) form erotic attachments to the child, and iii) unknowingly display repressed rage toward the infant. Thus, the structural position of the young Hindu wife . . . creates a psychological disposition in her sons to perceive women as demanding, capricious, uncontrollable and terrifying—a perception that is projected on images of the fierce goddess.<sup>47</sup>

Certainly, the particular manners in which this model has been applied to specific case studies can and should be debated. We are dealing here, after all, with a hermeneutical art and a set of multivocal symbols and acts, not a hard science. Still, one thing seems unmistakably clear “after psychoanalysis,” that the salience of Hindu goddesses is deeply rooted in, if never fully explained by, the psychosexual experiences of infancy and childhood within the Indian family. If the model seems extreme and excessive in places—and it no doubt does—we must remember that it is trying to explain some extreme and excessive mythological, ritual, and textual material; the method mirrors and reflects that which it is trying to understand. How, for example, can one possibly understand a mother goddess whose myths are filled with violence and sexuality without addressing explicitly the themes of mothers, violence, and sexuality? Is there any way to understand a goddess with fetus-earrings and a garland of decapitated heads having sex with a husband likened to a corpse in a cremation ground *without* being excessive? I do not see how.

But, strikingly, all of these phenomena make good sense once we understand them as psychological responses to the sexually powerful, emotionally blissful, and fearfully engulfing presence of the mother-figure, who has herself been constructed and formed by the broader culture and its construction of gender, mothers, fathers, power, and subjectivity. Indeed, in such a context (and South Asia is by no means alone here), we would expect them.

So, too, with the Tāntrika's heroism. Certainly, such a heroism is multivalent. His confrontation with death, his handling of potentially dangerous

forces, and his transgression of powerful cultural taboos render any exclusivist approach to the *vīra*, including a psychoanalytic one, simplistic at best. Take, for example, the problem of his antinomianism, that is, the Tāntrika's intentional and ritualized deconstruction of cultural taboos and purity codes, most famously summarized in the ritual of the Five M's. Certainly, the psychological and religious power of such acts cannot be explained without first contextualizing them within the sociological framework in which they were first conceived and practiced as taboo. To put it differently, transgression requires something to transgress. Tantric transgression is only “Tantric” and “transgressive” within a Brahmanical value system that defines the substances and acts as highly polluting, impure, and dangerous. Tantrism, in other words, is dialectically related to, even dependent upon, Brahmanical orthodoxy.<sup>48</sup>

Certainly, these sociological and cultural factors go a long way in explaining why the Tāntrika is a hero. But we can add more richness and depth to our explanation by listening to psychoanalysis and looking again at the hero. In this new light, the Tāntrika's courage appears as a brave refusal, against considerable psychological odds, to renounce his adult heterosexuality before the mother and her individuality-denying, if sexually blissful and loving, presence. He is a hero precisely to the extent that he refuses absorption, decapitation, castration (as a threat or a wish), or infantilization before the (mother) Goddess and insists instead on his own phallic adult identity. Quite unlike the cultural models of Gaṇeśa or Skanda,<sup>49</sup> both of whom renounce their adult sexuality before the mother, or the counter-model of the demon Mahiṣa, whose bold phallicism is punished with death at the hands of a similar goddess,<sup>50</sup> the Tāntrika boldly asserts his phallicism and literally has sex with the mother Goddess in the form of his ritual consort. He has become his father Śiva, the paradigmatic Tantric hero. Little wonder that such heterodox traditions lead a marginal, if nevertheless influential, life on the edges of Brahmanical society. They both deconstruct the Brahmanical values of society in their antinomian rituals and deny the oedipal norm in their central act of ritual intercourse with the mother (goddess).

And at what is Kālī's sword aimed? If we are to respect the images and myths, we must answer: directly at the male head. And how are we to interpret this threatened head? Psychoanalytically inclined Indologists have traditionally read decapitation as a symbolic form of castration, and with good reason (if through a remarkably poorly chosen term).<sup>51</sup> After all, in Tantric symbolism, the head is the storehouse of semen, the ascetic is literally “the whose semen is turned up” (*virbhavetas*), and the rising of the *kuṇḍalin* energy is imagined as an “upward displacement” from the genital region to the top of the skull, where it bursts out into a kind of mystical orgasm. Hugh Urban can thus rightly note that “[l]ong before Freud developed the idea of

sublimation and upward displacement . . . Indians had been aware of the symbolic relationship between the genitals and the head, as well as between castration and beheading."<sup>52</sup> Along similar lines, Serena Nanda has pointed out in her study of Hijra emasculation that the mother goddess as "castrator" of her human lover or devotee is a common theme in Hindu mythology and ritual.<sup>53</sup> In one striking myth, for example, after the Goddess has slain the buffalo demon Mahiṣa by decapitating him, she finds a *lingam* on the severed neck in place of the now missing head; Mahiṣa's head and Śiva's phallus are thus symbolically equated in the myth itself.<sup>54</sup> Even more strikingly, we know that Hijras often become possessed by a goddess trance before they undergo the surgery that will literally take away their male genitals,<sup>55</sup> certainly one of the more dramatic confirmations of the general psychoanalytic perspective.<sup>56</sup> To read decapitation as symbolic castration/penectomy, then, need not be construed as a wild Freudian speculation imposed from without; quite the contrary, such a hermeneutic can be practiced in a way remarkably consistent with the culture's own symbolism. If anything, such a psychoanalytic hermeneutic honors that symbolism by taking it seriously. Such a hermeneutic can certainly help us understand—if never fully explain—why the male sense of Kālī is often filled with a certain anxiety and dread: the Goddess cuts off, takes away, and absorbs his masculine identity back into herself; indeed, she boldly wears a whole host of such male heads as her decorative garland.<sup>57</sup>

And we need not read such conclusions negatively. Girindrasekhar Bose, for example, long ago transformed the European "castration threat" into an Indian "castration wish," arguing that Indian men are more balanced in their gender identities and so often wish to become female.<sup>58</sup> It is also worth noting that the "French Freud," Jacques Lacan, felt that to be a truly great male mystic it is necessary to surrender one's maleness and experience "a jouissance that is beyond," that is, a polymorphous pleasure that is con-nected to being and that is beyond the phallic function.<sup>59</sup> In older and less precise psychoanalytic terms, that is, in the words of Jesus, one must castrate oneself "for the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19: 11–12).

What is so remarkable about South Asian Tantra, particularly in its left-handed or "hard-core" models,<sup>60</sup> is that, against so many other mystico-erotic traditions in the world, it so often refuses this kind of mystical removal of the phallus/head and opts instead for an explicitly phallic affirmation. To the extent that he is a "hero," a *vīra*, a man (Latin *vir*), the Tāntrika engages the divine, not as a woman or through a feminine jouissance or a bull-ish death, but through an explicitly phallic, adult (hetero)sexual act. He has sex with the sword-wielding, head-wearing Goddess and comes back alive, with his head. From the perspective of comparative mysticism, this kind of assertive heterosexuality is both remarkable and rare: "heroic" seems an exactly right and perfectly accurate descriptor.

Psychoanalysis can also help us to understand Tantra's normative objectification of women. It is well known that Tantric texts and rituals often call for a low-caste or sexually illicit woman (that is, a "harlot" figure) for its central *mūhūrta* ritual. However troubling this may be to contemporary humanists or feminists (and it is troubling to me as well),<sup>61</sup> such a "splitting" makes psychological sense for the Tāntrika, as it allows him to have sex with a woman without making the incestuous connection between "woman" and "mother" that is so often made elsewhere in the culture and its salient myths. Indeed, the move accomplishes two important psycho-religious tasks at once: the woman is both socially dangerous (hence any contact, and especially sexual contact, with her is transgressive and so potentially liberating) and obviously *not* the Tāntrika's mother (who can thus remain idealized as pure and nonsexual). The Tāntrika phallicism thus preserves itself from the unconscious fear of incest and, at the same time, appropriates to itself through a transgressive act new dangerous energies and powers.

Another feature of Kālī's *cultus* that has puzzled interpreters for years is also illuminated by the psychoanalytic approach: the fact that, quite despite all appearances and a long textual history to the contrary, most contemporary devotees approach her as a sweet, consoling mother figure. She is "Kālī-Mā," "Kālī the Mama," a far cry indeed from the often outrageously sexy, violent, and macabre figure of Western appropriations (see, for example, McDermott's chapter in the present volume). How do we explain both this indigenous insistence on Kālī's motherly nature and this Western view of her as a supersexualized goddess? Psychoanalytically speaking, the two very different cultural appropriations again make good sense, as each speaks to and answers a particular oedipal and religio-cultural dilemma. In terms of South Asia, it is incorrect to speak of Kālī as simply the "fierce mother," for she possesses two radically different sides: a consoling, nurturing, protecting "right" side, and a violent, threatening "left" side. She grants boons *and* decapitates. She protects *and* threatens. What the devotional tradition has done is to reaffirm the positive, affective aspects of the mother over the sexual, potentially destructive ones, emphasizing the right over the left, if you will.<sup>62</sup> And this resonates with the Brahmanical value system in which the vast majority of South Asian Hindu children no doubt experience the love and nurturance of their mothers in memorably positive ways.

But it makes little oedipal sense within a Western system of individuality, phallicism, open sexualities, and the search for a feminine divine. Western religious seekers are generally not looking for a way to sublimate their sexualities within the idealized innocence of devotion and the beauties of a childlike love. Quite the contrary, much like the left-handed Tāntrika and his consort, they are seeking to affirm their adult sexualities within a religious model that has a place for the divine feminine. This is why, I would suggest, the South Asian Kālī traditions so often appear devotional and

gentle and the Western Kālī traditions so sexualized, extreme, and even offensive to Hindus. There is seldom, I would guess, any intended offense. Each culture is simply responding to a different set of psychological, religious, and cultural problems.<sup>63</sup>

Finally and most radically, the psychoanalytic model allows us to answer the question of why the Tantric traditions insist on linking sexuality with spirituality. Psychologically speaking, the instinctual powers of sexuality and affection were originally inseparably joined in the human being's first and most important relationship with an Other. Consequently, every quest for union, every longing for love, every mythology of mysticism is, in some very real sense, an attempt to recapture a state of being that, by virtue of time and human maturation, can never be fully realized again—that overwhelmingly blissful physically delightful merger with a Presence of truly mythological proportions, the infant's human mother. Tantric mysticism is thus a nostalgic song to the mother, a passionate longing for her body, an always frustrated effort to return to her loving embrace, however overwhelming and frightening that merger might be. It is an attempt to reunite affective and sexual powers back into a unitive experience of the (m)other.

#### WHY THE PSYCHOANALYTIC THINKER IS A HERO

With such thoughts, psychoanalytically inclined thinkers bestow dignity and meaning on those human beings whose sufferings they have encountered by accident or by plan. Perhaps it is worth listening here to one of Caldwell's informants, a male ritual specialist of *mūṭhyāṭṭa* who spoke eloquently to the anthropologist about those who understand and those who do not: "No one thinks about what we suffer. They simply come and watch the performance and go home. Only we know what it is to live for this art."<sup>64</sup> What makes psychoanalysis so controversial (and so powerful) is that it listens carefully to such a confession of suffering, contextualizes it within the webs of myth and ritual in which it is found, and then interprets its dynamics, often against or beyond the self-understandings of the sufferer, in sociocultural and psychosexual terms.<sup>65</sup> It makes explicit what is only implicit in the religious phenomenon. In this, it is more radical, more "to the root," than any post-session state or mystical experience.

And this is precisely where the tradition becomes a kind of mystical tradition in its own right, working through "the secret" (*to musthion*), abreacting it in thought, writing it out on the page for the public. Little wonder that the tradition has always been infused with a genuine mystical sensibility: from Romain Rolland's "oceanic experiences," shared with a sympathetic but ambiguous Freud, to Jung's critical dialogue with *kundalini yoga* and his conviction, in J. J. Clarke's words, that "psychoanalysis constitutes the first glimmerings of a modern Western form of [Tantric] yoga,"<sup>66</sup> through Sudhir

Kakar's self-described "liberal-rationalist" Hinduism "with a streak of agnostic mysticism" and Alan Roland's early formative experiences with the Western Hindu tradition of Vedānta embodied in the person of Ramakrishna and the writings of Swami Vivekananda<sup>67</sup> to Sarah Caldwell's mystico-sexual hermeneutical experiences of Bhagavatī-Kālī, the psychoanalytic tradition has functioned as its own kind of Kālī-art, a culturally specific meditation on sexuality, violence and suffering with its own discursive rules, ritual techniques and esoteric communities—a psychoanalytic poetics of the goddess.

Within this same hermeneutical mystical vein, perhaps we could read the twentieth-century's psychoanalytic Kālī as a kind of embodied theorizing, as a century-long ritual gazing upon an iconography with which, as Lévi-Strauss might say, it is good to think. Surely such a vertiginous thought has not left us unchanged, for to think so long and deep about a subject is to become it in some sense. But "[w]hy would one wish to identify with, to actually become (in the logic of Tantra), a goddess such as Kālī . . . [who] dramatically embodies marginal, polluting, or socially subversive qualities?" David Kinsley asks us. The same could be asked of psychoanalysis itself: "Why would one wish to identify with, to actually become, a form of thought that dwells so obsessively, so obscenely, on sexual organs and acts, human aggression and ambivalence, and the deepest, darkest secrets of the human psyche?" The answer, I think, is the same for both questions: in order to be transformed, to lose one's egot head and its hardened categories in an exhilarating experience of freedom and depth beyond the surface consciousness we mistakenly take as all we are.

For those of us still identified primarily with modern forms of individuality and consciousness, perhaps all we can finally do is acknowledge the psychological, erotic, and even ontological depths of the Goddess's forms as we nevertheless choose to live our lives well outside the fearful, if blissful, continuity of her embrace. But even this realization is itself a form of wisdom, a deep and honorable sense of respect for both the primordial truths of the Goddess and the integrity of the adult human worlds in which we must live now. There are many ways to be a hero, and it sometimes helps to keep one's head, especially after one has lost it.

#### NOTES

EPGRAPH: David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahābhāṭās* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 7, 251, 252.  
NOTE: In the notes that follow, S.E. = *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (24 vols.; London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74).

1. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, pt. 3, in vol. 16 of S.E. (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 284–85.

2. Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 153.
3. For another perspective on some of the same materials, with a helpful discussion of some of the Jungian materials (which space has prevented me from treating), see David Wulff, "Toward a Psychology of the Goddess," in *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), pp. 283–97. I am deeply indebted to David Wulff's magisterial *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary* (New York: Wiley, 1997) for much that follows, both conceptually and bibliographically.
4. Sigmund Freud, letter to Romain Rolland, January 19, 1930, trans. in William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisiting the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 176.
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), in vol. 21 of *S.E.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 1–56.
6. Rolland, letter to Freud, May 3, 1931, trans. in Parsons, *Enigma*, p. 178 (cf. p. 174): "But I do not aspire to anything more, for myself, other than repose and effacement, unlimited and total."
7. Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), p. 6: "I myself do not believe in one personal God."
8. Rolland, letter to Freud, December 5, 1927, trans. in Parsons, *Enigma*, pp. 173–74.
9. Freud, letter to Rolland, January 19, 1930, trans. in Parsons, *Enigma*, pp. 176–77.
10. Parsons, *Enigma*, pp. 44–52.
11. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in vol. 22 of *S.E.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 79–80.
12. It was 1929 when the book was published. Rolland, disgusted with a demoralized postwar Europe, offers his book as an attempt to bring the sound of "the artery of Immortality" to the ears of fever-stricken Europe, "which has murdered sleep" (*Life of Ramakrishna*, p. 14).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
15. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), in vol. 21 of *S.E.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), pp. 64–73.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 68. I am indebted to William Parsons for pointing these passages out to me. See his *Enigma*, pp. 39–44, for a lucid exegesis of them.
18. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 73.
19. For some background on Daly and the colonial background of his writing, see Christiane Hartnack, "Vishnu on Freud's Desk: Psychoanalysis in Colonial India," in *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader in Psychoanalysis and Hinduism*, ed. T. G. Vaidyanathan and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 81–06. As of the submission of this chapter, Hartnack's monograph on the same topic, *Psychoanalysis and Colonialism in British India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), had not yet appeared. The latter work will surely add immeasurably to our understanding of the history of psychoanalytic approaches to Hinduism.
20. C. D. Daly, "Hindu-Mythologie und Kastrationskomplex," *Imago: Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Natur- und Geisteswissenschaften* 2/3/4 (1927): 145–98; henceforth referenced in body of text. See also "A Hindu Treatise on Kālī," *Sanskita* 1 (1947): 191–96. My thanks to Jake Erhardt for help with the German.
21. Hartnack has argued that the writings of Daly and Owen Berkeley-Hill, another British analyst practicing in India, helped stabilize colonial structures by portraying Hindu piety as childish and neurotic ("British Psychoanalysis in Colonial India," in *Psychology in Twentieth-Century Thought and Society*, ed. Mitchell G. Ash and William R. Woodward [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987], pp. 233–51).
22. Gananath Obeyesekere tells this story in *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 6–7.
23. Alf Hiltebeitel, "Hair Like Snakes and Mustached Brides: Crossed Gender in an Indian Folk Cult," in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, ed. id. and Barbara S. Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 145–76, explores remarkably similar connections.
24. Daly, "Hindu-Mythologie und Kastrationskomplex," p. 148. This same splitting pattern would be picked up by later thinkers, such as Lawrence Babb, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, Sudhir Kakar, and Stanley Kurtz, with significant effect.
25. Perhaps the best example of this is the menstruation motif. One could easily dismiss such a reading as a Freudian projection, but then what to do with a decidedly non-psychoanalytic thinker such as David Kinsley, who employs ethnography and the anthropological fact that Hindu women unbind their hair during menstruation to decode Kālī's disheveled hair as a likely symbol of her "impure" or "polluted" menstruation (Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, pp. 83–84)?
26. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, p. 320.
27. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 327.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
29. Harald Schjelderup and Kristian Schjelderup, *Über drei Haupttypen der religiösen Erlebnisformen und ihre psychologische Grundlage* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1932).
30. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, p. 321.
31. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (1958; New York: Norton, 1962), p. 264.
32. Schjelderup and Schjelderup, *Über drei Haupttypen*, p. 58; my translation.
33. See esp. Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, ch. 6, "Tantra and Tantric Healing," pp. 151–90.
34. Kripal, "Re-membering a Presence of Mythological Proportions: Psychoanalysis and Hinduism," in *Mapping Religion and Psychological Studies: Contemporary Dialogues, Future Prospects*, ed. William B. Parsons and Diane Jonte-Pace (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 256–58.
35. See Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 427–50 and 451–82, respectively. Obeyesekere's writings on Kālī are especially rich. See also "Kālī, the Punitive Mother," in Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 133–62; and *Medusa's Hair*.
36. Obeyesekere, *Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, p. 428; henceforth cited in body of text.

37. Ganamath Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). The earlier two books of the trilogy are cited in nn. 22 and 35 above.
38. Obeyesekere, *Putini*, p. 430, referencing M. N. Srinivas.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 440; cf. p. 449. Of course, numerous cases could be presented that refute or deny such a psychoanalytic reading, but this is hardly a refutation of the model, which asks questions of public myths and practices developed over large stretches of time by innumerable individual cases. The question is not "Does this model fit every case?" (the answer is "Of course not") but rather "How do we explain the broad cultural salience of these particular images?"
40. Diagrammatically, Obeyesekere's model looks like this: "the values of the society → the female role → mother-child relationship → perception of the deity by the child" (429).
41. Obeyesekere, *Cult of the Goddess Putini*, p. 452, citing Freud.
42. Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence, and Worship of the Goddess Kālī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); henceforth cited in body of text.
43. Richard J. Castillo, "Spirit Possession in South Asia, Dissociation or Hysteria? Part 1: Theoretical Background," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 18, no. 1 (1994): 1-21, and "Spirit Possession in South Asia, Dissociation or Hysteria? Part 2: Case Histories," *ibid.*, 18, no. 2 (1994): 141-62.
44. Obeyesekere, *Madusa's Hair*, and *Cult of the Goddess Putini*, p. 33; and Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
45. Obeyesekere, *Madusa's Hair*, p. 37.
46. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
47. Steve Derne, "Images of the Fierce Goddess: Psychoanalysis and Religious Symbols—a Response to Kondos," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 22, no. 1 (1988): 89. Derne's essay is a critique of the psychoanalytic study of Hinduism and in particular of Vivienne Kondos, "Images of the Fierce Goddess and Portrayals of Hindu Women," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 20, no. 2 (1986): 173-97.
48. I have been informed in my thinking here by the thought of Georges Bataille, particularly his *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), "Part One: Taboo and Transgression," pp. 27-146.
49. Sudhir Kakar, "The Maternal-Feminine in Indian Psychoanalysis," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 16 (1989): 335-62.
50. Carmel Berkson, *The Divine and the Demonic: Mahisa's Heroic Struggle with Durga* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).
51. As Gary Taylor has pointed out recently, what Freud and psychoanalysts are really talking about is penectomy (the surgical removal of the entire sexual organ), which they misidentified with castration (the removal of the testicles). Castration possesses a long and complicated history in Western culture—with some fascinating connections to Mesopotamian goddess traditions and Christian mystical thought (Jesus, for example, counseled his closest disciples to castrate themselves [Matt. 19:12])—revolving around issues of royal power and the protection of inheritance (hence the importance of eunuchs in royal administrations), animal and human re-

production, marginal or liminal sexualities (like homosexuality), the control of foreign peoples and slaves, and, later, the censorship of texts and birth control. See Gary Taylor, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

52. Hugh B. Urban, "The Remnants of Desire: Sacrificial Violence and Sexual Transgression in the Cult of the Kāpālīkas and in the Writings of Georges Bataille," *Religion* 25 (1995): 70.

53. Lawrence Cohen, "The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas, and Academics," in *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, ed. Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 276-304; Serena Nanda, *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (Berkeley, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1990); and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

54. *Ibid.*, p. 85; quoted and interpreted in Berkson, *Divine and the Demonic*, pp. 126-27.

55. Cohen, "Pleasures of Castration," p. 276.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 295. For three important essays exploring the connections between decapitation, eunuch penectomy, cock sacrifice, and hair-cutting in the Tamil folk cult of Aravān, see Alf Hillebeitel, "Dying Before the Mahābhārata War: Martial and Transsexual Body-building for Aravān," *Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 447-73; "Hair Like Snakes and Musached Brides: Crossed Gender in an Indian Folk Cult"; and "Kūṭraṅṅavar: The Divine Lives of a Severed Head," in *Ways of Dying: Death and Its Meanings in South Asia*, ed. Elisabeth Schömbucher and Claus Peter Zoller, Heidelberg: University South Asian Institute Studies 33 (Delhi: Manohar, 1999), pp. 276-310.

57. Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, 2d ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 102. There is one important caveat in all of this, however, and it goes back to Girindrasekhar Bose, who long ago argued that his Hindu male patients displayed no fear of a castration threat but, on the contrary, manifested clear signs of a castration wish, that is to say, they displayed a "desire to be female." This is an important point, and one supported by the remarkable series of Tantric ritual paintings that Indra Sinha has recently published, in which multiple decapitated heads (which appear along with ithyphallic sadhus and severed phalluses throughout the series) display a remarkable calmness and peace in their severed state, as if this is precisely what they wished to be (*The Great Book of Tantra: Translations and Images from the Classic Indian Texts with Commentary* [Rochester, Vt.: Destiny Books, 1993]).

58. "The Genesis and Adjustment of the Oedipus Wish" (1956), reprinted in T. G. Vaidyanathan and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader in Psychoanalysis and Hinduism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 21-38.

59. See Jacques Lacan, "God and ~~Woman's~~ Jouissance," in *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 76-77. For an application of this hermeneutic to Indic materials, see Catherine Clement, *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*, trans. Sally O'Discoll and Deirdre M. Mahoney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

60. I am indebted to David Gordon White for his modern renditions of "right-handed" and "left-handed" as "soft-core" and "hard-core"; see his introduction to his edited *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 6.

61. These overwhelming androcentric and often misogynistic features of Tantrism are some of the most difficult for Westerners to understand and appreciate. Accordingly, Western appropriations of Tantra—both popular and scholarly—often try to reunite the affective and the sexual, effectively transforming the rites into a practice that is more isomorphic with Western oedipal resolutions, cultural values about romantic love, and contemporary concerns about agency, feminism, and reciprocal sexuality. Such a desire is all well and good and certainly understandable, but I have serious doubts about how well it reflects the traditional Indian patterns that it often claims to reproduce. David Kinsley, for example, in his recent study of the Tantric Mahāvidyās, could not find a single piece of textual or ethnographic evidence that suggested a female perspective (*Tantric Visions*, p. 250). Psychoanalysis here, as elsewhere, must insist, I think, on both the genuine otherness of the Tantric oedipal solutions and on their grounding in universal psychosexual dilemmas (i.e., the love of and for the mother).

62. For the definitive study of this process in Bengal, see Rachel Fell McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Kālī and Umā in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

63. Kinsley has noted and commented on this same phenomenon of the conservative-Hindu "insider" and the radical-Western-Tantric "outsider" readings of Kālī (*Tantric Visions*, p. 91).

64. Caldwell, *Oh Tarrying Mother*, p. 257.

65. For a brilliant analysis of this difference, see Peter Homans's discussion of Kakar's work, "Once Again, Psychoanalysis, East and West: A Psychoanalytic Essay on Religion, Mourning, and Healing," *History of Religions* 24, no. 2 (1984): 133–54.

66. J. J. Clarke, *Jung and Eastern Thought: A Dialogue with the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 110. See also C. G. Jung, *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932* by C. G. Jung, edited by Sonu Shamdasani (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

67. Alan Roland, "Psychoanalysis and the Spiritual Quest: Framing a New Paradigm," in *The Unknown, Remembered Gate: Religious Experience and Hermeneutical Reflection in the Study of Religion*, ed. Elliot Wolfson and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York: Seven Bridges Press, forthcoming).



## CHAPTER 10

# Doing the Mother's Caribbean Work On Shakti and Society in Contemporary Trinidad

Keith E. McNeal

### MOTHER KALI'S SECOND EXILE: DISCREDITED AT THE CENTER, RESURGENT ON THE MARGINS

To many diasporic Indians of the nineteenth-century Caribbean, it must have been painfully obvious that the world had progressed deeply into Kaliyug—that cosmic multimillion-year period when the world falls into decline and evil rules the day. At least this is how many of Kali's contemporary devotees in Trinidad see the matter. They are aware of the cruel hardships their ancestors endured in coming to the New World, and of the courage that survival through those times necessitated. And their own experiences vividly suggest that the worldly degeneration of Kaliyug is here to stay. Thus it is clear to them that one should seek the protection and blessings of Mother Kali, for it is her mysterious *shakti*, or power, that liberates us from suffering in this turbulent age.

This connection is actually not so obvious to many in contemporary post-colonial Trinidad. Indeed, something peculiar has happened to Mother Kali in the Caribbean regions of the vast Hindu diaspora. Put simply, she has fallen from grace; her worship is embarrassing to many respectable Hindus. Not only was she brought by her spiritual children to wander the wilds of the New World, far away from the homeland of Mother India, but she has also been exiled yet again, this time within the cauldron of the Caribbean itself. She has become highly marginalized over the past hundred years in Trin-