

The Power of Ecstatic Song: Poetic Language in *Alekh* Vocal Rituals¹

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“Who knows God²?
Who knows the creator?
Who knows how all this came into existence?
Your fate and mine.
God will bring them together.
Don` t cry, don` t cry !
Oh, You!
The large and the length of earth!
I will hold you
And purify -
With the dust of the earth.”³

Introduction

The present chapter explores the poetics and functions of song, speech and music in vocal ritual performances of Mahima Dharma, a new ascetic religion in Orissa (Eastern India)⁴, known as *alekh dharma* in Koraput (southern Orissa). Concentrating on the phenomenon of ecstatic ritual singing it will illustrate how the primary singer, the *alekh-*

¹ I am thankful to the readers of earlier drafts of the article. Responsibility for the content, however, rests solely with myself.

² God=*Deibo*.

³ A spontaneous composition of an old *alekh gurumai*, recorded in October 2000.

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shamans, transmit a rich oral culture and how they use language as a tool for ritual and social transformation. As such, this section may contribute to recent approaches to ritual as “dynamic and dialogic medium of negotiation and transformation” (cf. introduction in this volume) through the medium of poetic language (Gaenszle 2001, Wilce 2000). In particular this article presents some extracts of collected and translated vocal rituals⁵ which illustrate the power of a complex poetic interweaving of speech, song and instrumental music in ritual performances of healing (cf. Laderman 1991).

It will thus be argued that the poetic of this ritual functions on several levels. One is the ecstatic construction of the séance as a divine play and a sacred sphere, which is brought about by monotonous music, parallelism and incomprehensible narration. This aspect echoes the thesis of M. Bloch (cf. Introduction of this volume) in the sense that it is the meaninglessness of the performance that makes it work.

Yet, and contrary to Bloch`s argument, there is also a rich semantic and meaningful dimension of the verbal performances and narratives. As the present paper argues, both aspects constitute a particular poetic register marked by a code switching between several languages by way of glossolalia, invocations, and poetic fragments. This code transforms communication into a divine event and a holy otherness where dialogues with the supernatural are articulated. For *alekhs* (the followers of Mahima Dharma in Koraput) the Divine is, in a very literal sense, the “crazy” (*baaya*) “play” (*kheelo*) of voices, words, and their meanings. Finally, since the performance also transmits and re-combines vital aspects of the local and regional culture, the analysis of the poetics undertaken here might also help to highlight the oral creativity of the culture (Lavie/ Narayan/ Rosaldo 1993).

⁵ The fieldwork was mainly conducted in a Rona village in Koraput. During the six months of my stay in Koraput I witnessed over one hundred ecstatic song séances of *alekh gurumai*. I collected and recorded more than one hundred examples and my Indian colleague, Sunita Dolhai, translated them from Desya (=the local language of the Desya of Koraput). The presentation of some extracts of this work will illustrate the oral creativity of local cultures.

The general context

Mahima Dharma, literally “the glorious dharma”⁶, consists of monks and laymen. The main features of this new religion are asceticism, a vegetarian diet, and a denial of caste. Mahima Dharmis worship Mahima Alekh as the highest, unwritten (*a-lekha*)⁷, indescribable God. Mahima Alekh is conceived to be *sunya* – the void – all and nothing. This God can only be approached by meditation, an ascetic life-style, and ritual practices, and is thus opposed to idol worship. These concepts and values go back to the founder of the religion, Mahima Gosvami, who lived at the beginning of the 19th century. His origin is unknown, but for his devotees, Mahima Gosvami is considered to be the incarnation of Mahima Alekh.

As a monastic organisation, Mahima Dharma is represented by two brotherhoods of monks, the Balkaldhari and the Kaupindhari, which are primarily dispersed throughout central Orissa (Dhenkanal) and have their institutional axis in the holy city of Joranda (Dhenkanal). The laymen mainly come from the rural and, only recently, also from the indigenous population in Orissa (Eschmann 1975: 9-22; *ibid* 1986 [1978]: 386-387; T.R.B. 1968-9.52; Guzy 2002).

In the last decade, proselytising ascetics from Dhenkanal (*baba*) spread the new religion among the indigenous population of Koraput, where the percentage of the Mahima Dharma adherents is now assessed to be about 10% of the local Desya⁸ population.

Within the Desya it is especially the Rona people who have adopted the new religion in the last twenty years. However, in Koraput professional ascetics are rare, appearing once a year from Dhenkanal to initiate new devotees (*dikhya*). In an indigenous context the new teachings have become ever more popular due to vocal rituals of the *alekh gurumais*, the local ritual specialists of the new religion.

⁶ This polysemic socio-religious concept of South Asian ethics can also be translated as “religious order”. For discussion see: O’ Flaherty and Duncan Derrett (eds.) 1978.

⁷ *a-lekha* was explained to me as ‘not to write/ unwritten’ referring to everyday usage. In Sanskrit the term itself means ‘without writing’ indicating a pejorative meaning.

⁸ “Desya” is a local term shared by all people living outside of the towns in the hinterland hills of Koraput. Literally it means “locals”. The term describes many social subcategories including Rona, Mali, Gauro, Didai, Gadaba, Dombo, Ghasi or Chondal. At the administrative level *Desya* is associated with the formal categories of *Scheduled Tribes* (ST), *Other Backward Classes* (OBC) and *Scheduled Castes* (SC). For more details see: Pfeffer 1997; Otten 2000; Berger 2001.

Alekh Dharma or *alekh* shamanism in Koraput

Mahima Dharma in Koraput is known as Alekh Dharma or as *alekhs*. *Alekhs* wear *gerua*-coloured (red-orange) clothes and worship the God Mahima Alekh as well as the earth goddess Basmati or Basudha. *Alekhs* use a symbolic code in their dress. The colour of their clothes (*gerua*) is the same as the colour of the red anthills, local manifestations of the earth goddess. A symbolic identification with the goddess makes *alekhs* as holy as the earth. *Alekh* specialists become ecstatic *alekh gurumai* and, as such, capable of divine communication. Accompanied by the sound of the *dudunga*, they will perform their vocal rituals and utter prophecies, narrations, and give advice. Following Kakar (1984 [1982]: 92-121), Vitebsky (1993, 1995), Vargyas (1993: 120-127; *ibid* 1994: 123-175) and Atkinson (1992: 307-330), I will call the local religious specialists “*alekh*-shamans.” After their initiation they are also regarded as husbands or wives of the earth goddess or other male and female Hindu deities and become singers of the Divine. Biographies of *alekh gurumais* show the very personal transformation that this process of “becoming” a shaman and divine singer entails.

Biographies of *alekh gurumais*

Alekh gurumais often relate their prolonged suffering, destructive dreams and attacks of insanity (*baaya*) before being compelled to undergo a *dikhya*. Had they refused, they insist, they would have died. Through their initiation, however, and by receiving the *gerua* clothes they were able to be cured. The next step in becoming a socially respected and sought after religious and healing specialist consists of a symbolic marriage – the *alekh biba* – with a favoured god or goddess. After an elaborate and costly marriage ceremony, the worldly *alekh* bride or bridegroom – as among Vitebsky’s Sora – will meet his or her spouse while going “*baaya*”. The altered state of consciousness (Lewis 1971 and Bourguignon (ed.) 1973) is preceded by a long fast and culminates in a dialogue with the divine spouse. After an *alekh*-wedding, the shamans achieve the power to heal with their words and voices. Moreover, in this way their destructive madness (*baaya*) is transformed into its contrary, the capacity to communicate with the supernatural, or what is called “good” *baaya*.

An old *alekh gurumai* tells:

“...Just after my marriage and after the birth of my first son I had an attack of madness (*baaya*). I thought of death. I could not eat. I could not sleep. My whole body trembled. I dreamt that a lion took me away to the jungle to eat me. For many weeks I could not do anything until Gondas Baba [a local guru of *alekhs* in Koraput] came. He put incense into my face and spoke *mantra* [holy verses] into my ear. Then in Lamra [the local place of pilgrimage for *alekhs*] I took the *gerua* clothes from him. From this time on a red ant hill arose in the store room of my house. The earth goddess Basmati came into my house and my house became her altar...”

Another *alekh gurumai* tells the following about her story:

“...Earlier I was beautiful. But after the birth of my second son, I did not want to eat anymore. I lost all my strength and I became thin and ill. During this time I suffered a lot. I took medicine from the hospital but it did not help me. At this time my mother-in-law was very bad to me. She tortured me and gave me nothing to eat. Until today she is not good to me. Until today she cannot forgive me for marrying her son out of love [*udilya*] and not through the arrangement of our parents [*maghu aniba bibha*]. After our marriage we fled from the village. Years later we came back. At this time I was so ill that the father of my children [her husband] had to bring my *guru* Tula Bati from Lamra to me. She came and told me that I needed *dikhya*. Then I took *dikhya* and it saved my life. Then I had my *alekh biba* [*alekh-wedding*]. Now, only when I sing and when God (*Mapuro*) speaks out of me, do I again gain strength.”

As these biographies illustrate it is the personal suffering that always precedes the ritual specialisation of the *alekh gurumai*. Before becoming capable of healing the afflictions of others, they first had to experience their own personal pain and transform their own suffering and 'madness'. Only when they achieve that altered state of consciousness the suffering person can become an *alekh gurumai*. Thereafter, however, people come to her when they suffer.

In fact, both biographies also show that the ritual of initiation, which is in itself a ritual of ecstatic song séance, has the power to calm moral and

social crises and to console, for the *alekh gurumai* as well as for her surroundings. In the last mentioned case, for example, due to conflicts with her mother-in-law resulting from the loss of social status in the local Rona society, the *alekh gurumai* suffered from psychological and social distress. The spiritual marriage and her activity as ecstatic ritual singer, however, placated the Rona society and also the *alekh gurumai* regained social status due to her reputation as a “voice of God”. The rituals of ecstatic songs are thus to be seen as a constructive way to overcome individual and social crises.

***Alekh* vocal rituals - the ethnography of song**

As night falls in a Rona village the sound of the *alekh gurumai*'s voices can be heard. Accompanied by their one-stringed *dudunga* – made out of melon and snake-skin – they perform the “divine play”. An *alekh gurumai*, sitting on the ground with loose hair and the instrument in her⁹ hands, will keep her eyes closed. She is singing for herself and for the sake of those who suffer. Those who are sleepless or those who “carry some pain (*dukho*) in their heart”¹⁰ gather to listen to the voices of gods. This is possible because during the performance, people say, God Alekh and the Goddess Basmati speak through and out of the shaman and appease the afflictions of the listeners. Three central features mark the performance, namely *baaya*, *kheelo* and *dudunga*.

During the performance, the shaman enters an altered state of consciousness that is characterized by the people as a form of madness. However, this is not the madness of everyday life. The “*gurumai* is *baaya*,” people explain, but it is “good *baaya*,” a beneficial and, most important, divine “craziness.” This is also underlined by the fact, that after regaining consciousness, the *alekh gurumai* will not remember even a single word expressed during her trance.

The second element, *kheelo* (play), relates to the, as it were, “playful” character of the performance. The sacred madness of the *alekh gurumai* is expressed through unsystematic song compositions, poetic fragments,

⁹ Since there are empirically more female *alekh gurumai* than male I use the female form for description. Males are included in the generalisation.

¹⁰ Free translation of an often used expression.

and hymnal sequences. The narration thus appears as impulsive, spontaneous, and situational according to the specific mood of the *alekh gurumai*. Moreover, her speeches and songs which are composed during her altered state of consciousness are often incomprehensible. Her sacred utterances and songs can thus be regarded as fragments of what Thomas and Humphrey (1994: 1) have termed “inspirational religious practices”.

Taken together *baaya* and *kheelo* indicate a specific genre that is characterized by a typical interweaving of music, song compositions, and the sphere of the conceptualised Divine. Both are elements of a particular “religious language” (cf. Keane 1997: 47-71) that is characterised by a code switching between several languages¹¹, through glossolalia, invocations, and poetic fragments. This is a code, that is applied in divine communication to express a holy otherness and where dialogues with the supernatural are articulated by a high degree of incomprehensibility. Those passages indicate the speech of the supernatural, for what is not understandable to humans must be divine in character. In this context, then, frequent shifts between comprehensive and incomprehensible passages show the temporal appearance of the sacred.

The third basic element of the performance is the *dudunga*, the one-stringed musical instrument that is only used by *alekh gurumai*. In the context of the present chapter two main functions must be mentioned. First, it is this instrument that structures the temporality of the performance to a large extent and, indeed, the whole ritual grammar of *baaya* and *kheelo* is based upon the music of the *dudunga*. Repetitive and monotonous in its rhythm, the *dudunga* is directive for the development of the séance by inducing an altered state of consciousness, by accompanying the divine singing and, finally, also by terminating *baaya* and *kheelo* and as such the performance itself, which usually lasts two to three hours.

The second function of the *dudunga* is to indicate and, in fact, induce sacredness. The regular, monotone, one-stringed music of the *dudunga* indicates the rhythm of the holy sphere into which the *alekh gurumai* immerses herself. Playing the *dudunga* she is airing the voices of gods. Both functions make that the time of the trance appears as a sacred time,

¹¹ As for instance Desya, Orya, Kui, Gutob.

that is expressed by a vocal “play”. But the sacred “play” is also characterised by its finality, its pauses and ultimately divine appearance has also its limits, again marked by the *dudunga*.

Performances

An exemplary transcription of one *baaya* and *kheelo*, composed by an *alekh gurumai*, will serve to show the key poetic features of the ritual discourse and its divine speech. The local language of the Desya¹² was used. This *baaya* was induced by the sound of the *dudunga* after a worried mother of a child suddenly suffering from a disease consulted the *alekh gurumai*.

Transcription of one *baaya*
dated 9th October 2000,
recorded in Uppapara village in Koraput; the *alekh gurumai* was an
older woman, without any personal relation to the client.

...

Oh, mother!

Oh, father!

Dhenkanal, Joranda [holy places of the Mahima Dharma monastery in
Central Orissa]!

My father is Mahima Guru!

I will give food for my

Guru Brahma,

for my Guru Mahima!

Hey Guru, Mahima Guru, Invisible Guru!

Mahima Alekha!

Forehead of the invisible God!

We will not tell you any lies!

We will not pretend anything!

¹² There are many other languages known by the Desya-Oriya speaker. Specific indigenous groups within the Desya population have their own language such as Gutob and Kui. The common language for communication between the different groups is Desya-Oriya. It can be seen as local dialect of Oriya.

Bhima Bhoi and Gondas Baba [names of *alekh* saints]!
My door is open for you!
Bhima Bhoi, give me an order!
I will give a message, oh Bhima Bhoi!

Oh, truthful Narayana,
I will give you a true message!

Oh, Goddess Lamunda [local Goddess],
Oh Goddess Chamunda [local Goddess],
Oh temple of Lamunda!

In Lamra [local pilgrimage place], there is a Chamunda temple and there
was an invisible God!

God and *sunnya* [nothingness], oh invisible God, oh Nirakara.

In the temple of *sunnya* you cure diseases and sorrow!

Oh, invisible One, save me and him!

Thirty two thrones [*singh asono*]¹³!
Your foot is like a lotus blossom!
I serve you!

Who knows, oh mother?
Who knows, oh father?

Have Mercy, Oh Bhima Bhoi!

[Unknown language/polyglot glossolalia
in dialogues; mixture of some Oriya words with incomprehensible
utterances]

My master, my father Mahima !
Who knows how I should worship you?
How should I do my fasting for you?

¹³ metaphor of worldly and sacred power.

Oh, Josudha Doimoti [name of local Goddess]!
The goddess of seven sisters of the palace!

Oh God Mother, oh my God Father!
Oh holy Mother, oh holy Father!
Goddess Basudha, holy Earth!

I have never seen your shape.
Your heart is big I pray to you,
Inexplicable Basmati!
You have no shape, you have no figure !

Go away! 33 Millions of gods!
I give you the order: away!

Holy Narayana,
Great God [*Maha Probhu*]!
You see the entire Universe!
Oh Holy Mahima!

As the god of the winds goes all over the world, I speak to you:
Never worry, for what, about what?

Oh three times Indescribable One!
God, you save the mother!
Oh Mother, you serve God in heaven!

Twelve years I remembered the name of God! Twelve years I meditated!

Oh holy goddess of chastity!
Oh my Earth, hear my words
Goddesses Maybati, Chayabatti!
Save us from the destruction!

I take rest in your feet!
Oh Mother, oh Father!

All over the world I spread this message!
Rama Lakshmana, first Mother [*Adi Mata*]!

Puri Jagannatha, enter into my heart and speak to me!

Lamunda, Chamunda was born here.

[medial possession]

“ I need this type of temple which was built there”.

Tell I lies or tell I truth?
I am telling you only the truth, I promise!

I give an order, without cheating!
You know it!

You hear my words, oh God, oh God!

I am wearing the type of clothes of the ascetics.

Oh Mayabati, Chayabati, Ishwara, Parvati!
Oh, invisible Nirakara!
I am holding the stick in my hands and the whole world in it!

Oh, sacred place Kotinmala [(place in A.P.) !
A temple is built there for you!

Millions of fruits and flowers people give me for you!

I will give you this time an order:

[Glossolalia in dialogues]

[Incomprehensible language,]

I serve at your feet!

[medial possession]

“I am not usual, I am the Earth”

I have no chastity and I am no goddess like you !

Who knows the Mother?
Who knows the Father?
Who knows the Earth?

“ When the war began, I saw it.
I was there.

My name is Adi Mata, the First Mother!
I am the Universal Beauty [*Tripura Sunduri*]
The Beauty of the Universe!
My name is Basudha, the Earth!

I am also your Mother, your Father!
I am also your guru and God [*Maha Deivo*]
I have no shape!

How many brave men, leader and heroes were there! There was a big
war but it did not destroy me!”

I give you this order!
I am telling you the truth!
I do not tell any lies!

Oh, Ayodya, Puri, Cuttack, Baleshwar, Bhubaneshwar! Cabinet and the
Minister!

I will give you the type of government of the time when Indira Gandhi
was the Prime minister!

I am now in heaven!
I am telling the truth!

Do not tell me any lies, go away¹⁴!

You are searching everywhere and you visit all places, also the places of
the white people and of the Muslims!

¹⁴ It is not clear to whom or to which entity the expression “go away” is addressed exactly. It is possible that by this, bad spirits connected to the illness of the child, whose parents consult the *alekh gurumai*, had to be chased away. The expression is not an indicator for the end of the possession.

This type of government I will give you!

When the earth will be destroyed,
Oh, Mother, I will see all the gods and goddesses!
[medial possession]

“ I am the Earth Medini
I am telling you only the truth!”

Indira, Chandra, Nakulo, Saha Devo, Bhima Bhoi, Gondas Baba !

I am always telling the truth!
What are you worried about?

[Glossolalia in dialogues]

What are you worried about it?
I give you my promise, oh Guru Mahima!

Guru Brahma Mahima Alekh, you the temple of the nothingness!
I give order to the Earth.

Millions of invisible gods and goddess told: go away!
Go with fire!

I have eaten only fruits
and meditated 12 years.

Do not worry about it, I promise you. How many times have I served
you?

Oh, Mahima Brahma Guru Brahma Guru!

Vishnu, Jeipori, Basmati, the First Mother, Seven hundred Snake
Goddesses!

Oh Tula Batti, Phulmati, Komla, Bhimla Radhika!

Go away !

I will give you all! What are you worried about?

Go away, I give you the order!

Nirakara, You Invisible, Indescribable, God of *sunnya* [nothingness]!

...

The whole performance lasted two hours and when it was over the *alekh gurumai* sacrificed a coconut brought by the troubled mother for the God Mahima Alekh and the earth goddess Basmati.

Poetics: ritual poetry as prayer

As this exemplary text shows, the performance involves a range of poetic devices, operating on a linguistic but also on an extra-linguistic instrumental level. Regarding speech the songs of the *alekh gurumai* have a hymn-like and explicit sacred character and can be compared to a prayer. This poetic feature is to a certain extent due to the structure of the verbal interaction itself. During *baaya* – the ritual ecstasy of song – there is no explicit communication between the *alekh gurumai* and her audience. *Baaya* of the *alekh gurumai* represents dialogues between gods and their chosen mediators, the shamans, only. The different states of consciousness during the vocal séances of the *alekh gurumai* are understood as a play (*kheelo*) with gods, but not with humans. As such, humans are excluded from the divine play.

This feature is complemented by a second tool that also helps to bring about 'sacred prayer', namely verbal parallelism. The ritual speech of the *alekh gurumai* displays the repetitive linguistic structure of "parallelisms," (Jakobson, cited by Fox, 1988: 3) which, according to Jakobson, consists of the bringing together of two linguistic elements which "speak in pairs" (Fox 1988). In our case, a range of parallel forms occur, like "who knows oh father – who knows , oh mother – I speak to you – I serve in your feet – I am unusual – I am the Earth – I am your Mother – I am your Father." With poetic language a special vocabulary rarely used in other contexts is implied. Most important in the present context, however, is the fact that the vocal and linguistic expressions of the *alekh gurumai*'s ritual parallelism classifies the singing as a demonstration of ritual poetic prayer.

However, it is not speech alone but also the poetics of music that is involved here. In particular it is the *dudunga* that contributes to the

performative construction of the “sacredness” of the event. The sacred character of this play with words and sounds becomes clear when considering the specific use of this instrument. Contrary to other instruments, such as the *mohuri*, the local oboe, which is played during village rituals by Dombo musicians in order to initiate an interaction between the audience, the music and the ritual, the *dudunga* is never intended to initiate communication amongst the listeners.

The sound of the *dudunga* is particularly aimed at communication with the gods. It will never incite the audience to dance or sing. Only the *alekh gurumai* plays the instrument and, by creating the sound, starts to communicate with the divine sphere. Only she speaks in dialogues and verses with the gods. For others the ritual poetry may be hermetic. For the *alekh gurumai* it is an internal conversation. As such, this ecstasy of song represents a locally specific form of a personal prayer. The monotonous music of the *dudunga* is dedicated solely to the *alekh gurumai* and her dialogue with the Divine represents the individual and internal characteristic of ritual poetry.

Poetics: narratives, cultural meanings and creativity

Alekh narratives

The internal prayer of the *alekh gurumai* is only one facet of the vocal ritual. Another part of the individual meditation of the *alekh gurumai*, namely her poetic creations during *baaya*, are actively responded to by the audience and are negotiated between the listeners. During the ecstatic song séances *alekh gurumai* tell new and old stories of gods and humans. Often the ecstatic narrations reflect locally coloured motifs of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata.

However, these narrations do not simply replicate a given set of meanings but must be seen as creative devices through that they combine new religious concepts with traditional values and ideas. *Alekh* narrations disclose local expressions of oral compositions which amalgamate oral creativity with the continuity of local culture. They represent spontaneous compositions which arouse out of *baaya*, which is not only the ecstatic but also the creative play with words and meaning. Some narratives of *alekh gurumai*, presented in fragments below, can illustrate those aspects.

A fragment of a transcription of a *baaya* of one *alekh gurumai* dated on 06.10. 2000.

The *baaya* was introduced by a mid-aged *alekh gurumai* who sang narrations during night time to console her own individual sorrow. Many villagers surrounded her in order to listen to the divine speech.

....
Oh you truthful millenarian Empire [*satya yugora*]!
You God who created the holy Yuga Ages!
You shapeless God, You truthful holy woman!

Oh Mother, you are truthful !
Truthfully, I lie under your feet.

It is a story of Rama and Lakshmana. They were brothers.
I am not lying. All this, God told me!

I am not eating meat. God commanded this to me!

Both brothers were hunting a female deer.
Lakshmana told to Sita : „Please let me to hunt a female deer. Otherwise
I will refuse any meat !“

You came from Bilonka [Sri Lanka] and you wore the mask of a sage
saint [*rishi*].

The sister of the saint told, that in the jungle there lived a beautiful
woman.

„Brother, bring this beautiful woman to Bilonka!“, she told.

Ravana went hereupon to the wise saint [*rishi*] and told him,
that he would like to approach the woman in the shape of a female deer.

„My husband saw this! To make friends he went away from me!“

„Oh, you chaste wife Sita!“

„Which penalty you will give to my husband?“

“Run, you respectable people, who knows when the penalty will come?”

Ravana changed his shape and became an ascetic [*babaji*]
and he spoke to Sita: Oh, mother, give me some food [*vikhya*].”

“Since 14 years no one came this way along ! I have nothing!”

“If you will not give anything, than I will die!”

“Come to me, you holy man!”

“No, you should come and give me food!”

“I am Ravana, I have 10 heads !
I will take you and marry you!”

[incomprehensible cries / change to an incomprehensible polyglot
dialogue]

You have destroyed the garden of the pan fruit, at the time when Rama
gave his benedictions.

You will destroy thousands of evil spirits!

“I am speaking the truth, you can kill thousands of evil spirits but not
me!”

“I am the king of Lanka!”

“You are the leader of our soldiers”.

“Hanuman binds his tail and visits Sita.”

“Sita, you are a mother, a holy woman!”

“I am the earth, I touch the earth.”

“Oh, mother, give me peace!
Oh, mother the earth disrupts.”

“I am chaste and pure!
I will give you the proof through the fire, if ever I had done something
wrong,

I will burn myself. ”

...

Fragments of an other *alekh baaya* dated on 29.12.2000. This *baaya* had no external reason. She was performed by an *alekh gurumai* for herself only during night time, but again, those who suffered eavesdropped.

...

Namaste, namaste, Krishna, Jagia, Mohesvar Rusi,
Namaste, Lakshmi, namaste!

Lakshmi, you create peace,
You truthful Lakshmi!

Birth, hundred times birth [*jonmo*]!
Oh, you female human creature!

Namaste, *shaanti* [peace]!
Oh God [*Probhhu*], you give peace!
The spell [*mantra*] you give me, I will read it!

I swear you, oh Lakshmi !
Oh, almighty God, listen to my word!

I am born out of sins and waters!

But you, you are truthful!
You always give bliss!
You are listening to are our complaints.
You help us through our dreams.

Through dreams you will
show us the male and female flowers, that we should offer you!

[change to an incomprehensible polyglot dialogue]

Which evil spirit [*groho*] is above us?
Which power is above us?
We are praying to the Tulsi tree !
One day you will come!

Who has done it, oh Lakshmi?

I do not know,
but I know,
that God is a male human being !
I know that God is a female human being !

Lakshmi, write it!

We beg you !
We lie under your feet
und pray to you, oh Lakshmi!

...

As these fragments demonstrate, the ritual speech employs a creative combination handling of Hindu motives and local concepts. Beside her abstinent life-conduct, the *alekh gurumai* expresses the vegetarian ideal through the phrase: “I am not eating meat. God commanded this to me!” In her ritual speech she associates the ideal of chastity with the virtuous Sita, who - when addressed with: “Oh, you chaste wife Sita!”, “Sita, you are a mother, a holy woman! ” – is equated with purity, chastity and the sacred. In an internal dialogue the *alekh gurumai* identifies with Sita and voices: “I am chaste and pure! I will give you the proof through the fire, if ever I had done something wrong, I will burn myself.” Her utterance refers to the classical Hindu ideal of *sati*, the self-destruction of virtue through fire.

The metaphors of the narratives combine regionally spread images of gods and goddesses of the Hindu epics – such as Rama, Sita or Krishna – with a local understanding of the ritual specialist who is an ecstatic singer. An *alekh gurumai* narrates the spontaneous images and in this way communicates with the world of gods and goddesses. She also speaks of social change, especially visible in the appearance of the scripture. In the Rona society, Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, is associated with scripture. As such, in the local context, Lakshmi represents prosperity through education and knowledge. However, for the local understanding of wealth and prosperity, the connection with the earth goddess remains crucial.

The metaphors of the ecstatic narrations of the *alekh gurumai* depict a continuous relationship between the metaphors of traditional worship of the earth as goddess and as mother. In particular the worship of the earth as mother is expressed by ecstatic poetic words as: “You shapeless God, You truthful holy woman!”, “Oh Mother, you are truthful! Truthfully, I lie under your feet”, “I am the earth, I touch the earth.”

The ecstatic composition shows the crucial importance of the earth goddess and her advice. This is especially noticeable in the role of the dream, as presented in the *baaya* dated from 29 Dec. 2000. “You help us through our dreams”, utters the *alekh gurumai* and “through dreams you will show us the male and female flowers, that we should offer you!”, she adds. Such a reference to the dream is a traditional expression of the local knowledge system in Rona society. Knowledge is transmitted and acquired through dreams. Dreams represent divine guidance from the world of gods and goddesses. The language of dreams speaks through these metaphors which give an explanation to the local world view and its value-system.

The metaphors used in these ecstatic narrations communicate mental pictures expressing and referring to the imagined cosmos of the Rona society. Some additional examples recurring to further narrative fragments will illustrate these diverse concepts: “Sunya Probhu [the invisible God] threw his sweat and dirt into the ocean. From this dirt and sweat Basmati, the earth, arouse. Sunya Probhu commanded the earth to give birth to other gods as Kalika, Chandi, Durga and Boirava,” tells one of the narrative fragments of the *alekh gurumai*'s séance and thus elucidates the coming into existence of goddesses and gods. Another fragment explains the specific characteristics of the sun:

“The gods above the earth are like the brother sun and his sister moon. Surja, the brother sun was married to Phulmati, the queen of the flowers. Chandra, his sister, the moon, was married to the king Haris Chandra Raja. At this time Surja had many children. Always when he rose out of the depths, the earth became very hot. Once, the earth became so hot, that there was a danger that the earth might start burning. Chandra, the sister, thought how to save the earth from burning. Suddenly she had an idea! Her brother Surja had to eat his own children in order to prevent the earth from burning out! The sister roasted groundnuts and ate them. When coming back from his wanderings Surja asked his sister: “What

are you doing?” She told: “I am eating my children.” As a result Surja also roasted his own children and ate them. Short after this incident Surja’s wife Phulbati, the queen of the flowers, died. She died because one day she wanted to go with Surja to the top of the sky and thus became very thirsty. But Surja gave her nothing to drink and so she went dry and died.

This is the reason why Surja, the sun, is today alone at the sky, whereas his sister Chandra, the moon, appears at the firmament with all her children, the stars.”

This narrative, during one of the *alekh gurumai*’s séances, explains the origin of the cosmos by using concrete anthropomorphic images of siblings, children, and the act of eating. By using those images, on one hand, the special social relationship between siblings is underlined. On the other hand, the symbolic, social and antisocial values of eating are shown.

Another narrative fragment explains the indigenous philosophy of the finality of life:

“The married siblings’ couple wanted to attain immortality [*omoro boro*]. They sent a crow to Probhu in order to get *omoro boro* from the earth for them. But while flying towards them, the crow lost *omoro boro* and this is the reason why the earth is immortal, but not are the humans.”

All metaphors expressed by these narratives explicate the realities of life and of the surrounding world. They speak a language of common understanding and communicate a creative speech. Due to the ecstatic character of the transmission, no narrative will be told again in the same way. They vary in their combination of concepts and words, but they remain stable in the metaphors to which they are referring. The creativity lies thus in the ecstatic manner of performance.

Besides the recurrence of the presented metaphors in narratives, verbal poetics expressed during ecstatic séances depict the plurality of local concepts of the sacred and the lack of a systematised theology: Several invocations of the different names of God and holy places indicate that the conceptually sacred is always associated with an existing locality, that is, holiness is local. Moreover, the fact that God is approached as the earth goddess Basudha or Basmati at times, and Jagannath, Shiva,

Narayana and Mahima Alekh, illustrates the different categories and concepts that coexist in a plurality of ideas about the sacred. God is female and male, but also nothing and the whole of creation. The invocations of the various names of God can also bring to mind adjuration and its exorcising quality. Multivalent concepts of the Divine portray the locality of the ecstatic narrations. When God is conceptualised as a human female or a male being (“I do not know, but I know, that God is a male human being! I know that God is a female human being ”), this refers to the local concept of the Divine incorporated in the human body. When local ritual specialists (*gurumai*) enter into an altered state of consciousness in order to communicate with the other sphere, they transform into gods on earth. These concepts refer to the social experience within the Rona society wherein ecstatic humans represent the temples of gods and goddesses.

Besides the plurality of the concepts on the sacred, the cultural meaning of the earth goddess, as already indicated, remains central within the Rona society. The words and sounds expressed in the ritual of ecstatic singing are seen as manifold manifestations of her power. “My speech has power (*shakti*)” explained the *alekh gurumai* after her séance. For herself as well as for her listeners the sound of her voice, the rhythms and words expressed during her singing séance are understood as the power, the voice, and the speech of the earth goddess.

Cultural meanings

We have seen that narratives sung during ecstatic séances transmit, in addition to the incomprehensible utterances, understandable explanations about the order of the cosmic world. Additionally, and as the following transcription will illustrate, *alekh gurumai* not only often sing about the origin of the world and the humans, but often the stories recall traditional social values.

A traditional story sung during a *baaya* dated on 12 Oct. 2000. The *baaya* occurred during a daily evening worship of God (Bhagvan/Probhu). By the listeners it was considered as an interlocution between God (*Bhagvanku kota barta*) and the *alekh gurumai*.

...
You have born the whole world!
You are the mother [*mata*] of the world!
No one knows like you the tripartite world [*tini puro*]
Heaven-Earth-Netherworld [*sorgo-mortio-patalo*]!

You Inexplicable [*Nirakaro*], you are Goddess Thakurani!
You give advices, mother Takurani!
You speak to the brother and to the sister!

God asked them, but they did not recognise each other.
They told: You inexplicable!
We do not know each other!

Oh God [Probhu], it is true!
They did not recognise that he was her brother and that she was her
sister!

God [Mapuro] laughed!

Brother and sister became husband and wife.
As husband and wife they formed a new world.
This is the way God created the world.

It is true, the humans came from the belly of a mother!
She is the only one.
She is one life, one heart.

This is the story of the Golden Age [*satya yuga*].
I am telling you, nothing is a lie, all is truth !

...

As these texts demonstrate, the ecstatic story refers to the metaphors of siblings and to the idea of a disguise. Disguised by an illness, brother and sister marry and in this way they create humankind.

The motif of other sex-siblings marrying each other refers to the central social value of Rona society which is the cross-cousin marriage. *Mena bhai* and *mena bhoni*, the cross-cousins, should ideally marry each other.

When the children of a brother and a sister marry as cross-cousins, brother and sister ally in this way again by way of this disguise through a next generation!

The practice of the cross-cousin-marriage depicts a re-enactment of the mythical story of the first incest and its creation of humankind. Ecstatic songs and narratives recall the ideal and value of the cross-cousin marriage as a disguised form of the marriage alliance between a brother and a sister. Ecstatic song séances thus recall the most central social value of Rona society consisting of the ideal of cross-cousin-marriage. The method of singing the story in an ecstatic way disguises it through its unstructured character. The story, which speaks of the disguise, simultaneously disguises itself!

Cultural Creativity

We have seen that ecstatic song séances and narrations use culturally specific metaphors in order to explain the world and to memorize the most important social and religious values of the Rona society. But finally, the ecstatic way of performance escapes a structure and a definitive meaning. Purely, in this way, the disguising ecstasy itself reveals to be an enclosing value of the Rona society.

Ritual Poetics transmit meanings and values by using contradictory and non-systematic expressions. On one hand, the ritual poetry and narratives of the *alekh gurumai* venerate a plurality of the concepts of the Divine, but at the same time concentrate on the earth goddess. On the other hand, the value of marriage, particularly here with the preference for cross-cousin marriage in Rona society, is re-enacted through ecstatic song performances. Consequentially, the narratives reformulate traditional obligations for the ritual practice. All narratives are inspirational and creative compositions which have arisen out of an altered state of consciousness.

The song-séances of the *alekh gurumai* are not simply a representation and replication of fixed and given meanings but a creative oral process of combining words, meanings and values through metaphors.

As these fragments illustrate, the ecstatic song séances of *alekh gurumai* integrate a regionally and culturally “Other” into to the “Other” of one’s

own divine sphere (earth goddess).¹⁵ In vocal rituals of *alekh gurumai* the ecstatic language amalgamates regional and local concepts and thus generates new creative expressions. Hence, the creativity of local culture finds its expression in the poetic metaphors of ritual language.

Transformations

The performance, however, not only transmits, creates and recreates cultural meanings, it also transforms subjects and relations. It does this on two levels, internal and external. With respect to the internal process, the transcription clearly indicates a ritual transformation from the ritual subject (*alekh gurumai*) into the ritual object (earth goddess). In the beginning, the *alekh gurumai* approaches the conceptually divine by using the second person. Later, she transforms herself into the earth goddess and expresses this in the first person. This process can be regarded as an intermittent possession during the *alekh* vocal ritual. Finally, for the transformative character of the solo séance, the playing of the *dudunga* is of the greatest importance. Only this sound will open her ecstatic singing and change her ritual personality during the ritual “play”. The music transforms the *alekh gurumai* into a singing goddess.

The ritual transformation of the *alekh gurumai* does not concern her exclusively but is also operative on an external level. As contextual material reveals, particularly suffering listeners are consoled by listening to the words and the sounds of the séance, which appease sorrow and pain. As it turns out in the present case, for example, the poetic words and the sounds of the *dudunga* alleviate the worried mother’s pain. Moreover, the gathered villagers participate in the sufferings of the mother and discuss with her what they, for their part, have understood as divine advice from the poetic language of the *alekh gurumai*’s ritual performance. Outwardly, then, the séance has transformed the crisis in a double sense. On one hand, the fragile faith of the mother has been restored. On the other hand, the séance has venerated the earth goddess Basmati and re-established the faith of the Rona community. Negotiations of the gathered villagers about the sense of the divine *alekh gurumai*’s expressions reconfirm the strong cohesion between the whole community of the Rona village and the suffering mother.

¹⁵ On the creative contact with the cultural “Other” see Kramer 1987.

Conclusion

The article has attempted to illustrate the different levels and dimensions of ritual poetic speech as witnessed in the vocal rituals of Eastern Orissa. It describes the interrelationship of music, speech and the creative combination of cultural meanings, metaphors and values through ecstatic song séances. Parallelisms and the monotonous sound of the one-stringed *dudunga* highlight the repetitive dimension of the vocal ritual which is essential for entering into a trance. Music and poetic speech mark the internal and external workings of the vocal ritual. Ritual poetry and music represent the internal part of the séance: hermetic and incomprehensible for others, the music and speech transform the *alekh* shaman into the earth goddess. The sound of the *dudunga* alters to a sacred play (*baaya / kheelo*) which incites words and dialogues with the other sphere. During the performance of ecstatic singing, the voice and the poetic speech of the shaman become a manifestation of the Divine. According to Roger Bastide (1997 (1975), 227-237) it is a “wild” holiness which manifests itself in the ecstatic, “wild” ritual poetry of the *alekh gurumai*. The ecstatic construction of the séance is crucial for its efficacy as divine advice and healing ritual.

The ritual poetry and sound have a power to heal. Ecstatic poetic songs act against affliction. The poetic prayer not only consoles the suffering person, but it incites a social gathering which negotiates the poetic expressions of the earth goddess.

The external aspect of the vocal ritual can be seen in the interpretation of the ecstatic song by its listeners: On one hand, the meaninglessness of the words, as seen through glossolalia or the polyglot shift between incomprehensible languages, expresses the sacred sphere for the listeners. On the other hand, comprehensible passages and narratives sung during the ecstatic séances bring into play commonly known metaphors and thus recall the cultural values and ideas of the local community.

In *alekh* vocal rituals a dynamic process of conciliation between the afflicted person and his or her social background can be seen. Through the process of negotiating the *alekh* shaman's poetic words by the listeners, the ecstatic song performance creates a sort of social empathy. This collective understanding ultimately leads to the social healing of the afflicted person. The ecstatic *alekh* song séance proves to be a ritual healing performance that re-integrates a fragile member into the local community. Particularly, the narratives of the *alekh* shaman, which

verbally perform a traditional story, evoke the negotiation of social values and reconfirm the traditional moral strength of the local society. *Alekh* vocal rituals, in this way, play a crucial social role in personal and collective consolation within the Rona society of Koraput. They demonstrate that ritual poetic song has the power of social action.

Simultaneously, the ecstatic vocal rituals of Eastern Orissa not only confirm traditional cultural metaphors and meanings but also create a type of meaninglessness. Finally, the ecstatic séance necessarily escapes an ultimate meaning. The ecstatic structure itself is revealed to be an enclosing value.

The ecstatic structure of song compositions by the *alekh* shamans can be included in the broad spectrum of the creativity of oral cultures in South Asia (see: Champion (éd.), 1996). I encourage an interpretation of the cultural creativity of the *alekh* ecstatic tradition in terms of a cultural *bricolage*¹⁶, or the creation of a tradition by re-composing common elements in order to integrate and innovate. In trance, the *alekh gurumai* continuously create new songs to heal and console in a traditional way. The presented extracts of recorded ecstatic songs of the new religious specialists illustrate instances of poetic re-compositions of local cultural elements. This new religion is entirely embedded in the local shamanistic tradition of the Rona which heals, consoles, negotiates and conciliates through ecstasy, poetry and music. The power of language in vocal *alekh* rituals demonstrates the creativity of a local culture which copes with social and personal crisis through the preservation of traditional techniques of healing.

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¹⁶ Term borrowed from Lévi-Strauss 1962, Chap. I.

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