Gateways to the Goddess: Devotion to Kali in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Nicole C. Petersen
Hamline University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/dhp
Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons, Other Religion Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/dhp/26

This Honors Project is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in Departmental Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hamline.edu, lterveer01@hamline.edu.
Gateways to the Goddess:
Devotion to Kali in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Nicole Petersen

An Honors Thesis
Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors in Global Studies from Hamline University

Fall 2014
Table of Contents

| Tables and Figures                              | ii |
| Abstract                                       | iii |
| Acknowledgments                                | iv |
| Dedication: A Lover's Ode to Ma Kali, Vamadeva Shastri | v |
| I Introduction                                 | 1 |
| A Theoretical Synthesis                        | 4 |
| Methodology                                    | 9 |
| II Gateways to the Goddess                     | 11 |
| Liminality and Kali                            | 14 |
| The Goddess, Globally                          | 17 |
| III Sharanya                                   | 19 |
| Mundane: Kali in the Western World             | 21 |
| Separation                                     | 24 |
| Limen: Circling with the Goddess               | 26 |
| Reaggregation                                  | 36 |
| Interpretation: The Five Essences of the Dark Goddess | 37 |
| IV Kali Mandir                                  | 41 |
| Mundane: From Kolkata to California            | 42 |
| Separation                                     | 43 |
| Limen: At the Feet of the Mother               | 45 |
| Reaggregation                                  | 56 |
| Interpretation: Preserving the Dakshineswari Tradition | 56 |
| V Analysis: Devotion to Kali in Cross-Cultural Perspective | 60 |
| VI Conclusions:                                | 64 |
| A Goddess Beyond Borders                       | 64 |
| Reclaiming the Divine Feminine: Many Goddesses, Many Gateways | 66 |
| References Cited                               | 70 |
| Glossary                                       | 72 |
## Tables and Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Turner on Liminality and Social Structure</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Senses and Elements at Sharanya and in Classical Indian Philosophy</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Figure 1 | Theoretical Framework | 7 |
| Figure 2 | Yoni and Kali on Northern Altar, Sharanya | 27 |
| Figure 3 | Casting the Circle, Sharanya | 28 |
| Figure 4 | Leaving the Mundane, Kali Mandir | 44 |
| Figure 5 | Inner Sanctuary, Kali Mandir | 45 |
| Figure 6 | Base of Altar, Kali Mandir | 47 |
| Figure 7 | Altar, Kali Mandir | 48 |
| Figure 8 | Ritual Objects, Kali Mandir | 49 |
| Figure 9 | Arati, Kali Mandir | 52 |
Abstract

Kali, the dark Hindu goddess of time and fierce Mother of the universe, has a pervasive global presence. This project traces Her from historical roots in India across borders to temples in California. A theoretical synthesis of the experiential approaches of sensory anthropology and Victor Turner's three-part model of ritual processes, the project presents an innovative approach through which to study and articulate devotion to Kali in diverse cultural contexts. Through textual research, interviews and observant participation, I analyze the process whereby devotees separate themselves from the mundane and enter liminal spaces of worship, understood both spatially and temporally. I look at devotional sensoriums, fluid networks of interconnected sensory stimulations, with specific emphasis on how they are created and experienced by devotees in liminal spaces, in addition to exploring their functionality as gateways to the goddess. Finally, the paper examines the cultural and individual variations in processes of reaggregation, of leaving the limen and re-entering the mundane, where practices of worship and experiences in devotion to Kali are interpreted.

Through this analysis, the project highlights the diversity with which devotion to Kali has been localized in different contexts, from radical preservation of conservative Hindu norms to integration into New Age spiritualities. Ultimately, the significance of this study lies in its transdisciplinary foundation and approach, influenced by concepts from global studies, theory from anthropology, and literature from the field of religious studies, to develop a holistic model through which to study, experience and more accurately illustrate the many gateways to the goddess, Kali.
Acknowledgments

I am filled with gratitude as I reflect on the number of individuals and institutions who have supported me in the completion of this Honor's Project. Firstly I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Van Dusenbery, who has provided me with endless support and guidance throughout this process and who has continued to challenge me as a student, writer and undergraduate researcher. I am infinitely grateful for his contributions to this project. I also thank Professor Kathryn Geurts for introducing me to the wonderful world of sensory anthropology and for inspiring me in the art of ethnographic writing. I would also like to thank Dr. Mary Storm who not only inspired me to embark on this project but also to travel as a pilgrim, to experience art as a rasika, and to maintain the spark of bodhichitta lit during my time in India. I also thank Hamline University and SIT Study Abroad for providing me with opportunities and support for undergraduate research. I am particularly thankful to the Hamline University Summer Collaborative Research program and the Ridgway Forum Fund without which this project would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to the temples in West Bengal and California which graciously welcomed me and, moreover, to the incredible individuals I met while working on this project, both in India and the US. I have been continuously humbled by the love and openness in these communities and feel incredibly honored and blessed to have been in the presence such powerful energy. Jai Ma!
A Lover's Ode to Ma Kali

Dark and beautiful I have always loved you, 
serpent lightning of the boundless sea. 
Wild and wanton you have always entranced me 
ethereal temptress of the cosmic night,

Forsaking all things I have always sought you, 
finding nothing worth seeking in this world of dreams. 
Beyond all remembrance I have always known you, 
unbounded primordial yearning 
in the secret cavern of the heart.

Life and death 
and life in death, 
you poured out blood 
in whose stream of transformation 
we blindly come and go, 
transfixed by the glitter of your dance.

Alone I have always felt you with me, 
your face in stone that declares all time, 
your body, which encompasses all space.

And the witness and the nothingness 
of your elusive embrace beyond desire, 
the secret fire of which we drink 
to never thirst again. 
In birth and death I have always returned to you 
through a life that is the shadow of your light.

I know your birth and death 
that is every moment and every breath, 
and the all-consuming will that cannot be denied.

The all-perceiving point of a perfect love that has no form, 
where beauty and terror become a single cry of freedom, 
a laughter of impervious innocence 
which carries us across all the worlds.

- 

Vamadeva Shastri
I

Introduction

Long before I encountered her in India, I was drawn to the Hindu goddess, Kali. I found images of her to be provocative, casting upon the viewer things they might rather not consider in their conceptualizations of the divine. Bloodied tongue hanging from her mouth, a garland of human heads draped around her neck and wielding a sword, I saw in images of Kali chaos, terror and death. I read stories of her as a war goddess, so fierce that she threatened the universal order in her wild dance. Yet the more I learned about Kali the more I realized that in addition to being the very embodiment of destruction, violence and ferocity, she is also a universal source of love, protection and fertility. I came to know her as jagad-amba, the world mother, who gives birth and brings death to all things, good, terrible, light and dark. I recognized Her as a symbol of the womb from which all creation arises and ultimately returns. To me, Kali represents the integration of all of these qualities and the transcendence thereof in her boundless, divine nature.

Kali’s presence in my life became pronounced as I traveled to India in the fall of 2013 to study with the SIT National Identity and the Arts program, directed by Dr. Mary Storm. Upon arriving in New Delhi, greeted by the hot, thick air of an Indian summer, a small brass statue of Kali on a taxi dashboard caught my eyes. I took it as a sign, one that was reinforced as I continued to encounter Kali throughout my journey in street-side shrines, books, temples, and museums. She resonated with me as a manifestation of the divine feminine, and I found solace in her as a wellspring of personal power. Seeking to delve into her mysteries, I continued to learn about Kali from both devotees and academics and was given the opportunity to travel to Kolkata, the heart of Kali worship in northern India, to study the songs and images used in devotion to her. I was
enamored by these creative expressions of worship and enchanted by the many forms of Kali I stood before in temples.

As I observed and participated in worship in Kolkata, I noted the deeply sensuous nature of devotion to the Goddess. Images of Kali were dressed in fine red and gold fabrics, adorned with jewelry and bedecked with garlands. She glowed amidst the lights that surrounded her and her eyes met those of the devotees who bowed at her feet. Ringing bells provided a melody to the low voices chanting invocations and prayers. The sweet fragrance of red hibiscus wafted through the air and mingled with the dancing smoke of incense. The taste of prasad, food that had first been offered to Kali, lingered on the tongues of those who had taken her blessing. Body, mind and spirit were overcome by this arousal and interplay of the senses.

Taken together, the sense-scapes within sacred spaces of worship comprise what I term here as devotional sensoriums, fluid networks of interconnected sensory stimulations. I refer to sensoriums in the plural due to the multiplicities I have encountered while working on this project, lending to an understanding that an idealized, static sensorium is non-existent. In each setting of worship I have found unique blends of devotional practices which themselves are ever changing. This results in a fluidity and plurality of these sacred sensory landscapes across time and space. Even within the same setting under the same sensory stimulations, devotees' experiences thereof will undoubtedly vary. The notion of sensoriums thus honors not only the multiple approaches to Kali in contexts of temples and religious organizations but the unique spiritual paths of individuals therein.

Upon returning from India I began researching devotion to Kali globally, inspired primarily by Rachel Fell McDermott's work on Kali's presence in the west.¹ I navigated Kali's

transcendence of her native India, to her manifestation across borders and even into virtual spaces.

Within this global framework, I ultimately sought to delve into the following question: How is devotion to Kali, a global goddess, de/territorialized and customized, in terms of local culture, in each locale it is found?

De/territorialization is a neologism coined by Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo in the introduction to their reader, *The Anthropology of Globalization*:

>The term captures at once the lifting of cultural subjects and objects from fixed spatial locations and their relocalization in new cultural settings. It refers to processes that simultaneously transcend territorial boundaries and have territorial significance. The key to the meaning of this term is the slash. It allows us to separate 'de' from 'territorialization,' thus calling attention to the fact that deterritorialization always contains territorialization within itself. For us, this means that the root of the word always to some extent undoes the action of the prefix, such that while the 'de' may pull culture apart from place, the 'territorialization' is always there to pull it back in one way or another. So there is no deterritorialization without some form of reterritorialization. There is no dislodging of everyday meanings from their moorings in particular localities without their simultaneous reinsertion in fresh environments.²

Using this concept of de/territorialization as a guide, I examine Kali worship as a cultural performance, and explore the ways in which devotion to Kali has not only been de-territorialized, or “dislodged” from its moorings in West Bengal, but also re-territorialized in so-called “fresh environments” such as California, where the two temples central to this research project are located. The following chapters illustrate the particularities of re-territorialization by analyzing processes of customization, whereby in each locale, devotion to Kali takes on unique forms, shaped by the individuals and cultural characteristics of each locale. Inda and Rosaldo explain customization as follows:

>...consumers faced with an imported text, media or otherwise, will not simply or necessarily absorb its ideologies, values, and life-style positions. Rather, they will bring

their own cultural dispositions to bear on such a text, interpreting it according to their own cultural codes... What takes place in the viewing encounter is that foreign cultural forms have a tendency to be customized. They are interpreted, translated, and appropriated according to local conditions of reception.³

The theory of customization presented by Inda and Rosaldo suggests that interpretations of Kali, iconographic representations, devotional practices, and interpretations of rituals necessarily vary across time and space according to cultural context. I suggest that devotional sensoriums, the creation and experience of which appears to be central to Kali worship cross-culturally, provide a helpful lens through which to explore these processes of customization and the diversity inherent to Kali worship, globally. Given that devotional sensoriums themselves differ and that experiences thereof are specific to each individual, what can we learn from the interpretive frames used to make sense of these sensory experiences? Are these interpretive frames culturally specific? If so, can they shed light on patterns in the de/territorialization of Kali worship?

A Theoretical Synthesis

A study of the devotional sensoriums central to worship of Kali necessitates the establishment of a cohesive theoretical framework through which to approach, analyze, and articulate them. Recent developments in the field of sensory anthropology have been of tremendous help in shaping this frame.⁴ In Portals, Lynne Hume examines the role of the senses in producing alternate states of consciousness and ultimately as tools that transport individuals to mystical, religious, and other transcendental realities. In spiritual contexts, Hume suggests “not only that the notion of moving through some sort of portal or doorway to access another type of

⁴ See Portals (Hume, 2007); Culture and the Senses (Geurts, 2002); The Deepest Sense (Classen, 2012); Empire of the Senses (Howes, 2005).
reality is widespread, but that there are certain techniques employed to do so.”

She describes these techniques as “set[s] of spiritual syntactics,” in which “all the senses are employed to enable people to move beyond the physical body into what has been described as other realms of existence, union with the divine, or deeper levels of consciousness.”

In essence, Hume's model can be understood as follows. As the senses are engaged through devices and technologies including- but not limited to- voice, instruments, bodily movement, bodily decoration, entheogens, and olfactory, gustatory and tactile stimuli, individuals begin to transcend their mundane worlds, characterized by their ordinary physical and conscious realities. Sensations coalesce, inducing altered states of consciousness, ultimately opening metaphorical portals to alternate realities in which spiritual and mystical experiences transpire.

Hume's concept of portals as vehicles which transport individuals from mundane to divine realities can be positioned within Victor Turner's anthropological model of ritual processes. In his seminal work, *The Ritual Process*, Turner expands upon Arnold Van Gennep’s *Les Rites de Passage*, in which it is indicated that “all rites of passage or ‘transition’ are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*, signifying ‘threshold’ in Latin), and aggregation,” and applies it to his analysis of Ndembu ritual. In Turner's theoretical frame, subjects begin ritual journeys in the mundane and engage in specific behaviors in order to detach from that ordinary realm of existence. He describes these processes of separation as “symbolic behavior[s] signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both.”

---

ritual subjects spatially and temporally enter a liminal landscape, a state of limbo, “betwixt and between” all previous lines of classification. Here, “characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.” When a group of individuals collectively experience this liminality, Turner suggests that the formation of communitas, a relatively structureless social group, characterized by the equity and solidarity brought on by the homogenizing qualities of the limen, can be observed. Finally, Turner's ritual subjects leave the limen and re-enter the mundane by means of reaggregation, the process whereby the “passage is consummated,” and “the ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more.”

Read in light of Turner, Hume's portals are fundamentally liminal. As in Turner's model, the analysis of spiritual seekers in Portals suggests that subjects begin their journeys by first separating from mundane realities. Through various techniques involving sensory stimulation and/or deprivation, altered states of consciousness are attained in which subjects transcend their conscious, physical worlds. Portals, liminal channels betwixt and between Heaven and Earth, the mundane and the Divine, the this- and other-worldly, transport individuals to alternate realities. Though not specifically analyzed in Portals, it can be assumed that, as in Turner's model, Hume's subjects go through a similar stage of reaggregation as they come back down to earth, so to speak, leave alternate realities experienced in the limen and re-enter their respective mundane realities.

When integrated, a theoretical synthesis emerges in which both Hume's sensitivity to sensory and experiential realities and Turner's attention to symbols and social structures are highlighted. The notion of devotional sensoriums essentially binds these two approaches, since they occur in liminal space-time and their creation and experience is embodied and fundamentally sensory. The result is a holistic framework through which to approach and analyze worship of Kali cross-culturally (figure 1). Both individual and culturally shared religious backgrounds, past experiences, and basic biographic data paint a picture of the realities of devotees in the mundane. Ritual behaviors such as changes in setting, dress and the use of ritual names or vocabulary illuminate processes of separation. Here we find the creation and experience of devotional sensoriums, which, in a similar manner as Hume's portals, open gateways to the goddess. The concept of communitas is also explored here, as devotees, in many cases, experience worship
collectively. Finally, I explore the means by which devotees leave the limen, and ultimately reaggregate into their mundane realities. Significant in this final step is the interpretation of liminal experiences, prompting questions such as: Who does the interpreting? How are these interpretations shaped and shared? What do these interpretations suggest about the cultures in which they are found?

I contend that this model is best understood when conceived of as circular rather than linear. The lives of the devotees at hand do not end upon reaggregation. Rather, it is likely that they will soon re-enter the spaces “betwixt and between,” taking with them past liminal experiences and interpretations and thus new mindsets, expectations and desires. The circular understanding of this model also challenges the notion of liminal spaces as static and unchanging. Each individual that enters the limen, whether with past experiences or for the first time, brings with them their own proverbial baggage that shapes the liminal landscape. In a similar fashion, the circular model also highlights the fluidity inherent to mundane worlds, given that liminal experiences, brought back to the mundane by individuals, hold the potential to reshape beliefs and understandings, not only of the individual who had the experience, but of others who encounter liminality in the mundane.

Finally, considering the sensory approach taken in this project, it is important to establish what is meant by “the senses” and how they are understood and used in the context of this project. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, I hope that this study complicates the popular, western, five-sense paradigm, limited to sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. Both as a researcher, encountering Kali through personal experiences and the experiences of others, and as writer, in attempting to put these experiences into words, I have found this paradigm to be useful, in that it provides a basic model for analysis, but ultimately inadequate given that it fails to account for a
number of experiences of extra-sensory perception in worship that transcend the bounds of mundane sensory categories. Visions in the mind's eye and sensations of energy in auric fields, for example, do not fit in the Western sensory categories of sight and touch. The paradigm is also limited in that it encourages a disjointed excavation of sensory landscapes, prompting questions such as: what is heard? smelled? tasted? etc., rather than a holistic analysis in which the interplay and relationships between sensory faculties are explored. Reliance on this paradigm is further problematized given an understanding of senses and sensory experiences as culturally constituted. Since this model is Western, and, thus, culturally specific, sole reliance on it in a cross-cultural study would necessarily raise concern. Thus, I have attempted to remain receptive to the diversity and plurality of experiences and expressions of sensoriums in devotion to Kali cross-culturally.

**Methodology**

The variety of contexts in which Kali is found and the multiple forms of worship necessitated a multi-sited study whereby I could begin to explore the vast landscape of devotion to Kali cross-culturally. While in India, I spent one month in Kolkata, home to two renowned Kali temples and pilgrimage centers, Dakshineswar and Kalighat. During this time I collected and analyzed images, songs and poems used in devotion to Maa, and observed and participated in worship at temples and shrines throughout the city.\(^{13}\)

As I returned to the US and continued to explore devotion to Kali, my research took a significantly less concentrated form, taking place in a variety of spaces over a longer period of time. Furthermore, both virtual and actual field sites provided insight on Kali worship, locally and nation-wide. I began by exploring devotion to Kali online, finding a number of organizations, discussion forums and even temple websites with webcams, pictures and online classes. In the

spring of 2014, with guidance from Professor Kathryn Geurts in her Ethnographic Research Methods course, I engaged in participant observation online, began writing ethnographic fieldnotes, and interviewed a handful of devotees via e-mail.\textsuperscript{14} During the 2014 Summer Collaborative Research Seminar, with additional funding from the Ridgway Forum Fund and with the help of my advisor and chair of the Global Studies Department, Professor Van Dusenbery, I was able to travel to California for on-site fieldwork at two of the temples I had been researching. I engaged in observant participation at Sharanya, a non-profit religious organization and Devi Mandir in San Francisco, and Kali Mandir, also a non-profit religious organization and Kali temple in Laguna Beach. Over the summer I also conducted semi-structured interviews with devotees both from the Californian temples and online organizations devoted to Kali. I hope that this ethnographic approach serves to draw readers, to a certain degree, into the sensory worlds of these temples and the experiences of devotees therein.

This project is unique in its holistic and transdisciplinary approach. Perhaps most obviously, this project is tied to the field of religious studies in that it explores religious practices, experiences, iconography and texts related to Kali. The cross-cultural exploration of devotion to Kali is grounded in a global studies framework, examining the ways in which devotion to Kali, a global goddess, has been de/territorialized and is customized in various locales. Finally, the methodology used in this research project, including ethnographic fieldwork and writing, semi-structured interviews, and personal experiences, stems from the field of anthropology. This transcendence of disciplinary approaches is intended to facilitate an exploration of the Goddess through various lenses, academic and otherwise. The approach is holistic in the sense that it analyzes the individual, cultural and universal aspects of Kali worship, recognizing the

\textsuperscript{14} Nicole C. Petersen, “Gateways to the Goddess: Sensory Experiences and Affective States in Devotion to Kali,” Term Paper, Ethnographic Research Methods, Professor Geurts, 2014.
importance of individual accounts of experiences with Maa, the cultural characteristics that influence the shape Kali worship takes across global contexts and, ultimately, the significance of Kali as a representation of the Divine Feminine, as a manifestation of a universal Mother Goddess figure. The following chapters are a presentation of this transdisciplinary exploration, in which I hope to have captured and presented a holistic picture of devotion to Kali cross-culturally.
In order to begin to orient ourselves to the world of Kali, we must first develop an understanding of Her in an Indian context. Much of the Religious Studies literature on Kali is written from this perspective, illustrating Kali as she is interpreted and worshiped in India. While these descriptions are of assistance in painting a picture of Kali for those unfamiliar with Her, it must be remembered that descriptions and interpretations of Kali and approaches to Her are fluid. They have changed and will continue to change both over time and space, in India and beyond.

In such traditional accounts, Kali is described as the great Goddess of time. She symbolizes death, rebirth and cosmic cyclicity as *jagad-amba*, mother of the universe, whose womb is both the fertile source of all creation and a devouring maw that takes back what it has birthed. She is a goddess of transformation who, with her sword, cuts the ties of ignorance and attachments to ego. She forces her followers to face the darkest aspects of themselves, yet just as all colors dissolve when mixed with black, the Dark Goddess absorbs all darkness and remains unchanged. As a manifestation of Devi, the divine feminine Goddess of the Hindu tradition, Kali is a life giving force. Yet Kali also dances wildly on battlefields, becomes intoxicated by drinking the blood of her victims, dwells in cremation grounds, and threatens the cosmic order in her reckless abandon. Kali thus juxtaposes good and evil, pure and impure, and challenges devotees to accept and transcend these binaries in order to truly know Her.

Although Goddess worship in India dates back to the Indus River Valley civilization, descriptions of Kali, in a form recognizable to modern devotees, first appear in the Epics, poetic narratives of the Indian literary tradition composed around the 5th century CE. Comprised mainly
of stories praising deities of the Hindu pantheon in various incarnations, the Epics also include
myths about the origin of the universe, the process of time, and conflicts of good and evil forces.
In these texts, names, myths, and other illustrative details are given to represent numerous Hindu
Gods and Goddesses, including Kali. In these classical texts, she is described as “having an awful
appearance: she is gaunt, has fangs, laughs loudly, dances madly, [and] wears a garland of
corpses.” She resides in cremation grounds, cemeteries, battlefields, and more generally, on the
periphery of Hindu society. These descriptions indicate that in her earliest forms, Kali was
conceived of as a fearful, violent, and adharmic goddess.

One of her most famous textual appearances is made in the Devi-Mahatmya, a Hindu text
written around the 5th century CE. In one chapter, Kali appears as the “‘forceful' form of the Great
Goddess Durgā.” Summoned to fight the demons Chanda and Munda, Kali emerges from
Durga's forehead, wearing tiger skin and wielding a skull-topped staff. Kali roars before leaping
onto battlefield where she “grasps the two demon generals and in one furious blow decapitates
them both with her sword.” This is Mahakali, Kali the Great, who, in her ruthless, awe-inspiring
form destroys all evil. Again, Kali is depicted as a chaotic and dangerous incarnation of the
Divine Feminine.

Descriptions of Kali in these texts became a source of inspiration for the iconography of
the goddess central to the visually oriented forms of worship found in Hinduism today. With wild,
disheveled hair, a bloodied tongue hanging from her mouth, and an emaciated body, descriptions

15 David R. Kinsley, Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition, (Delhi:
Ltd., 1996), 189.
18 David R. Kinsley, Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition, (Delhi:
of Kali sharply contrast illustrations of early Mother Goddess figures whose soft faces, wide hips and full breasts express fertility and abundance. Kali, however, holds a sword in one hand and a severed head in the other. She wears a necklace of skulls and a skirt of human arms which barely cover her otherwise naked body. She is often depicted standing on the body of Lord Shiva, “symbolizing the interaction of Śiva and Śakti and the ultimate superiority of the latter” in the divine dance between masculine and feminine.20

As her iconography developed and worship spread, a duality in Kali’s conception became increasingly apparent. This notion is illustrated by Jeffrey Kripal, whose research has evidenced that devotees, in approaching Kali, experience tensions between the gentle and violent, between being fascinated and repelled, mesmerized and horrified.21 In classical texts and images, Kali's gruesome and frightening form is a threat to the universal order. Yet, to her devotees, She transforms from the Puranic “awe-inspiring demon-slaying goddess to an all embracing merciful mother.”22 Thus, to many, Kali is known not as a source of fear and terror, but as “the highest manifestation of the divine,” and, accordingly, “is approached as 'Mother.’”23

Liminality and Kali

Traditional descriptions paint a picture of Kali as a liminal entity. Consider the following binaries used by Turner to contrast liminality and social structure respectively:

Table 1: Tuner on Liminality and Social Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liminality</th>
<th>Social Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nakedness or uniform clothing</td>
<td>distinctions of clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disregard for personal appearance</td>
<td>care for personal appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unselfishness</td>
<td>selfishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>continuous reference to mystical powers</td>
<td>intermittent reference to mystical powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simplicity</td>
<td>complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acceptance of pain and suffering</td>
<td>avoidance of pain and suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sacredness</td>
<td>secularity²⁴</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In each binary, a facet of Kali, as she is traditionally described in religious studies literature in Hindu/Indian contexts, can be recognized in the first “Liminality” column: She is *digambara*, nude, apart from the skulls draped around her neck and her skirt of human limbs; Her disregard for her personal appearance is apparent in her flowing mane of unkempt hair, which, like her nudity, is a marker of impurity; Kali's sword, which is believed to sever bondage to ego and ignorance, signifies the selflessness inherent to liminality; Continuous references to Her mystical powers are made in the many myths about her in texts such as the *Devi-Mahatmya*; Simplicity is evidenced in Kali's blatant presentation of truth to her devotees; Acceptance of pain and suffering is necessitated when devotees look upon illustrations of Her in battlegrounds with blood dripping from her tongue; and finally, that Maa is sacred is fundamental to devotees.

The apparent tension between grotesque and violent images and the sacredness of Kali can also be understood in the context of Turner's model, particularly in his illustration of the reflective potential of liminal spaces:

...much of the grotesqueness and monstrosity of liminal *sacra* may be seen to be aimed not so much at terrorizing or bemusing neophytes into submission or out of their wits as at making them vividly and rapidly aware of what may be called ‘factors’ of their culture... [they] startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of

their environment they have hitherto taken for granted.\textsuperscript{25}

Similarly, in her radical presentation of death and violence, Kali forces devotees to reflect upon aspects of life which are deemed taboo by society. For example, her lolling tongue, according to David Kinsley, “denotes the act of tasting or enjoying what society regards as forbidden, foul, or polluted.”\textsuperscript{26} Images of blood and death and even psychological shadows are brought to the surface through the invocation of the Dark Goddess. Inherent to them is a shock factor that forces difficult or unsettling content upon the viewer, in turn eliciting intense emotions and even new modes of awareness.\textsuperscript{27} Yet her liminality also provides devotees with a sacred space in which to encounter these taboos, these apparently troubling images and ideas which are typically censored in their mundane worlds. As a liminal entity, Kali is at once the figure that evokes these terrifying realities and the loving Mother who comforts devotees as they confront them.

Her seemingly paradoxical nature also parallels Turner's understanding of liminality as blending lowliness and sacredness. Thus, Kali stands betwixt and between, conflating love and violence, purity and impurity, rebirth and death, the sacred and the profane. She epitomizes liminal properties, as do the spaces in which worship to Her take place. Positioned between the ordinary and other-worldly, sacred spaces carry ambiguous and indeterminate attributes of liminality which have been “frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus, spaces of worship, made sacred by devotees through ritual, are bridges between mundane and divine

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
realities. In addition to having liminal qualities, sacred spaces are also frequently analyzed in the context of the Divine Feminine. Hume explains that in India, for example, “some Hindu holy places were caves whose entrances were painted red to represent the Great Mother’s yoni (vagina).”

Furthermore, the Sanskrit term, garbhagrha, denoting the sanctuary, or the center most area of a structure in which worship takes place, literally means 'womb-chamber.' Thus, in entering a space of devotion to Kali, devotees, in a way, reenact this process of returning to the Goddess as a Mother figure.

The womb narratives in relation to the Divine Feminine and spaces of worship are also significant in that by describing a space as womb like, the space is thereby characterized as safe and nurturing, a shelter from hardships faced in the mundane. Womb narratives also evoke a sense of cyclicity. Similar to the cyclicity with which devotees enter and leave liminal spaces through worship, individuals enter and leave the womb with cycles of life. Finally, the narratives often suggest that by entering sacred spaces such as caves or temples, devotees metaphorically re-enter the womb of the Divine Feminine. Thus, liminal spaces in which devotion to Kali take place must be understood within this context of sacred spaces which themselves serve as portals to the divine.

Given that these liminal characteristics of Kali and the spaces in which worship to Her take place are based on accounts of Her from an Indian perspective, it is crucial to this study to ask: How well do these associations between liminality and Kali and the spaces in which devotion to Her take place travel cross-culturally? Is the Kali we find in San Francisco characterized by liminal qualities as well? Can the Kali temple in Laguna Beach be characterized as a liminal space

as the womb-like caves of early Indian Goddess worship? I turn to these questions throughout my ethnographic accounts in the chapters to follow.

*The Goddess, Globally*

Before delving into Kali's cross-cultural presence, it is important to develop an understanding of Her as a manifestation of the Divine Feminine, specifically as an archetypal Mother Goddess. As a powerful feminine force, the Mother Goddess holds the primordial creative principle, gives birth, grants fertility, and offers protection, all of which are characteristics associated with Kali in myth and iconography. Because of her universal reach, the Mother Goddess has been symbolically represented in innumerable forms in various cultures throughout history. In India, representations of Goddess figures are believed to date back to the Indus Valley civilization, as early as 2500 BCE, when, in agriculturally based communities, Goddesses were venerated to bestow agricultural abundance, to ward off evil and disease, and to provide strength against enemies.32 Kinsley cites similarities between depictions of the Divine Feminine in Indus Valley artifacts and later Hindu iconography: “It seems typical of both Indus Valley iconography and medieval Hindu iconography to emphasize elaborate adornment when portraying goddesses... There are also a few examples of images in the Indus Valley which are reminiscent of the slim-waisted, large-breasted images of goddesses in later Hinduism.”33 Prototypical Mother Goddess figures of the Indus Valley civilization may therefore be considered foundations from which later Hindu Goddesses would emerge.

The modern Hindu pantheon illustrates a number of Mother Goddess figures, including Saraswati, Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi, and Kali. In India, Kali has been worshiped in many forms by various groups including esoteric Tantriks, yogini cults and conservative Hindus, as one of the ten

---

32 Shanti Lal Nagar, *The Universal Mother*; (Lucknow: Atma Ram and Sons, 1988), 110.
33 Ibid, 217.
Mahavidyas, a consort of Shiva, or as one of many manifestations of Shakti. Today, devotion to Kali in India remains widespread and diverse, particularly in West Bengal, home to two major pilgrimage centers, Dakshineswar and Kalighat. Yet, despite her roots and pervasive presence in India, Kali is not bounded by borders.

While other cultures may not have such well-documented histories of widespread Goddess traditions, globalization has enabled individuals from anywhere in the world to encounter representations of Mother Goddesses from other cultures. Globalization is defined by Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo in *The Anthropology of Globalization* reader as “the intensification of global interconnectedness, suggesting a world full of movement and mixture, contact and linkages, and persistent cultural interaction and exchange... a world where borders and boundaries have become increasingly porous, allowing more and more peoples and cultures to be cast into immense and immediate contact with each other.”34 This intensification of global interconnections assists in explaining Kali’s presence beyond India.

While globalization has increased the ease with which ideas, images and objects flow across time and space, a certain resonance is required for these ideas, images and objects to take root in new cultural landscapes. Essential to this study of Kali as a global deity lies the question of why She has been embraced as a representation of the divine by individuals from around the world. I argue that Kali’s global appeal is grounded in the fact that She can be understood and as a Mother Goddess, as a manifestation of the Divine Feminine, who, through the language of symbols sparks a reconnection to these archetypes. This archetypal resonance is deeply rooted within the psyche and, I argue, is what makes Kali universally relatable and cross-culturally accessible. In this way, Kali transcends cultural specificities and connects her devotees to one

another in a cosmic imaginary.

While I contend that there is a universality in content, i.e. the deep-seated archetypal resonance with the Divine Feminine sparked by encounters with Kali, I also maintain there are specificities in forms of worship. Through processes of globalization, Kali, as a cultural flow, does not float freely in global space-time. Rather, she is reinscribed in specific ways in new cultural environments. In each locale, devotion to Kali is customized, taking on a unique form. This is illustrated by the two case studies of devotion to Kali in Californian temples in the chapters that follow. Customization is evidenced in the interpretation of the Goddess and in practices of worship that vary from the the preservation of conservative Hindu norms to Kali's incorporation into New Age rituals in traditions such as Indo-Paganism and Shakti-Wicca. Through study of these diverse ways in which devotion to Kali has been customized, it is learned that gateways to the Goddess can be opened globally, whether seated before Her image in Kolkata or California.

III

Sharanya

In 1998 Chandra Alexandre, a scholar, activist and devotee of Kali, received *diksha*, initiation into the path of Kali's mysteries, in India. Upon returning to the US, with the intention of creating a community to “serve those committed to embodied and engaged spirituality for social justice and transformation,” Chandra founded Sharanya, a non-profit religious organization and Devi Mandir (goddess temple) in San Francisco.35 The word, “sharanya,” originates from the Sanskrit language and is translated to mean “refuge,” or “sanctuary.”36 Sharanya is the birthplace

of Sha'can, a *marga*, or path of devotion. Sha'can is a term comprised of two elements, “Sha” which refers to Shaktism, or the denomination of Hinduism devoted to the Goddess, and “can” which refers to Wicca. Chandra explains that the Sha'can *marga* was developed with the intention to “co-create and evolve the tradition to meet the needs we have as modern, western practitioners.” As such, worship at Sharanya integrates Earth-based spiritualities and ecofeminist philosophies into Shakta Tantra, resulting in a multifaceted path, both in thought and practice.

Sharanya holds public *Amavasya* (new moon) and *Purnima* (full moon) gatherings, annual Kali and Yoni Puja festivals, monthly yogini ritual circles (open only to initiates) and a yearly pilgrimage to India. Chandra has also developed an online school, Kali Vidya, to allow devotees from around the world to further explore the Goddess and the path of Sha'can through writing, discussion, spiritual practices, and community.

In the sections that follow, devotion to Kali at Sharanya is explored, guided by my analysis of articles, images and videos on the Sharanya website, participant observation at the 8th annual Yoni Puja Festival in San Francisco and interviews I conducted with Chandra and initiates of the Sha'can tradition in 2014.

*Mundane: Kali in the Western World*

Sha'can, with its unique integrative approach to Kali, creates ritual environments accessible to diverse groups of devotees. The syncretic Sha'can tradition makes rituals approachable to non-Indians by guiding worship primarily in English and incorporating Wiccan ritual elements, the symbolism of which is arguably more accessible to a Western audience.

Simultaneously, Chandra Maa recounts that devotees from India who have attended worship at

---

37 Chandra Alexandra, interview by Nicole Petersen, April 9, 2014.
Sharanya have commented: “It feels like my village at home.” While Sha'can undoubtedly opens doors to devotees from varied backgrounds, there are still noticeable demographic characteristics. At the 2014 Yoni Puja, the majority of the devotees were of non-Indian descent and there were significantly more females than males in attendance. These distinctions are even more pronounced among the group of initiates, none of whom are of Indian descent and all of whom, apart from one, are women. This observation prompted the following question: What has drawn these American women to Kali?

When I asked Chandra and two Sha'can initiates, Chinnamasta and Vibutihi, about their histories with Kali, including how or why they developed interest in the Goddess and the Sha'can marga, they shared the following responses:

“Kali has been with me since 1992 when she came to me in a terrifying dream that brought me to question many of the choices I was making in my life at that time. She stood before me in the dream, larger than life, and the image communicated to me one simple question: do you wish to live or die? She didn't speak, but the question was clear. I awoke bolt upright in bed, sweating and shaking. That was the real beginning of my quest for healing, first from the physical and immediate psychological damage I had endured through the travails of anorexia nervosa, and second from the deeper layers of internalized oppressions I had come to bear from living in a patriarchal world. The dream catalyzed my commitment to living a meaningful life, and is what eventually led me to India in 1998. It was there that I got to know Kali much more intimately.”

Chandra Maa, founder, Sharanya

“I initially discovered Kali on a personal level in the summer of 2009. I was sitting in the Nevada desert asking for guidance. I needed support for the next phase in my life and was unsure of what that support was. I sat in meditation on the earth and within several minutes of sitting in silence a fierce blood red Kali appeared in my mind’s eye. I was slightly terrified, but mostly interested. From that moment I began searching for someone who could teach me about Kali and I found Sharanya. I worked with Chandra

39 Chandra Alexandra, interview by Nicole Petersen, April 9, 2014.
40 Interviewees have given me permission to use their ritual Sanskrit names for the purposes of this study.
41 Chandra Alexandre, interview by Nicole Petersen, April 9, 2014.
Maa individually for almost a year and then in the Fall of 2010 I committed to the path in devotion of Kali Maa.”

Chinnamasta, initiate at Sharanya

“Kali first came to my conscious awareness through the movie *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* when I was around 9 years old. In the movie, Indiana Jones stumbles upon a Kali worshiping cult. I was obsessed with that movie and watched it almost every day that summer which I think, upon reflection, is probably due to Kali being present in it, although at the time I had no idea who Kali was and had no reference point to her.

“When I was 13 years old my mother and my grandmother took me to Salem, Massachusetts (I grew up on Cape Cod) where I discovered Wicca and the idea that god could be a goddess. My mother and my grandmother were engaged in Christian mysticism, saw Jesus as their spiritual teacher, and infused god with male energy. Being offered the alternative to see god permeated with female energy took me deeper into my own spiritual practice and interests. Goddess woke me up that year to this life in this body and mind and marked the beginning of my psycho-spiritual development and exploration.

“When I was 14 years old I started reading Anne Rice’s vampire and witch series where, again, Kali came into my conscious awareness through Anne Rices’s vampire Akasha who plays center stage in the book *The Queen of the Damned*. I later learned that Kali served as a model for Akasha. Kali has a very vampiric quality to her. She sprang from Durga’s forehead to help her eliminate the demons that she was battling by licking up their blood droplets because their blood droplets were multiplying into more demons.

“I was officially introduced to Kali in India where I studied abroad for four months when I was 20 years old. I was attracted to her strength and the empowerment that she exuded. Shortly after I returned from India to the states, I was briefly stalked by a man who tried to break into my apartment one night. This experience triggered the reverse culture shock as well as PTSD symptoms. I put images of Kali around my home and visualized her in meditations to help to alleviate my fear and to feel protected, nurtured, and loved. I also established a friendship with a woman who, for a variety of reasons, I felt unknowingly channeled some Kali energy and my connection with her helped me to feel safe. Within a year my PTSD symptoms diminished.

…

“Something else that is important to mention is that Kali appears in my life serendipitously a lot through symbols, signs, images, books, movies, music, etc. in ways that are meaningful and personal to me. For example, the other day I was driving behind a car that had a license plate that said NDNA JNS, translated as Indiana Jones. To me, that is communication from Kali because she first appeared to me in that movie. I always feel this sense of knowing, an affirmation, that I am exactly where I am

42 Chinnamasta, interview by Nicole Petersen, May 22, 2014
supposed to be when she comes through in those symbolic ways.”
Vibutihi, initiate at Shranya

We find in these stories threads of a common narrative. It is significant that in each of these histories there is a description of Kali appearing somewhat serendipitously before the devotees. The first encounters of Vibutihi, Chinnamasta and Chandra Maa with Kali were not explicitly sought out. Rather, Kali came to them. Whether through dreams, visions, or pop-culture references, this first unexpected and encounter with Kali sparked a subsequent interest and quest to explore the Goddess with intention on a deeper, spiritual level.

Another common element is that Kali appeared before these devotees during difficult periods in their lives. Kali came to Chandra Maa as she was wounded physically and emotionally by anorexia nervosa, to Chinnamasta as she was in need of guidance during a transitional period, and to Vibutihi while struggling with PTSD and reverse culture shock. Chandra Maa explains how her first encounter with Kali sparked her “quest for healing.” Similarly, Vibutihi, in her assertion that invoking Kali while experiencing PTSD symptoms helped her alleviate fear and “to feel protected,” illustrates the role of Kali in the lives of devotees as a catalyst for transformation and healing.

Finally, it is significant to note that both Vibutihi and Chandra had experiences with Wicca early in their lives (Vibutihi in Salem, and Chandra through her maternal grandmother). These early experiences with Earth based spiritualities that emphasize a recognition of divinity in many forms, feminine and masculine, perhaps planted a seed allowing these devotees to be receptive to Kali as a manifestation of the divine and, more specifically, to the Sha'can marga.

43 Vibutihi, interview by Nicole Petersen, April 27, 2014
44 Chandra Alexandre, interview by Nicole Petersen, April 9, 2014.
45 Vibutihi, interview by Nicole Petersen, April 27, 2014.
Currently, Sharanya does not have a permanent physical temple. In turn, rituals and gatherings take place in varied locations throughout San Francisco, including the Cultural Integration Fellowship, an educational, non-denominational religious organization founded on the teachings of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, where the 2014 Yoni Puja was held. Without a temple serving as a constant sacred space, devotees at Sharanya must not only set a tone of worship internally, but also externally, in the spaces in which they gather. Guided by Chandra Maa, initiates and devotees come together prior to rituals to set spaces as sacred containers for worship. Separation, or the processes whereby devotees detach themselves from their ordinary realities, is the first step in the creation of sacred space both internally and externally.

I knew I had arrived at the Cultural Integration Fellowship when I saw a woman in a flowing, ruby-red salwaar-kameez, a traditional Indian outfit, turn the corner and walk up the stairs leading to the building. As I had learned prior to the puja, at Sharanya devotees are requested to wear the color red and to refrain from wearing black at public rituals. Chandra Maa explains this custom as follows:

One of the questions people often ask when they are exploring or encountering SHARANYA for the first time is, 'Why can’t I wear black to puja?'. For some it can seem almost counterintuitive, as Kali is black Herself. Others may assume that it’s because we are buying into overplayed stereotypes about the color.

In our tradition and lineage, black is a color only worn by the initiated, and only in certain ceremonies. For others and on most occasions, red is the color that is appropriate to don for worshiping Maa in Her many guises; for example as Bhadra Kali or Dakshina Kali. However, initiates within our Kaula (spiritual family) also work with non-dualistic practices and open to Her as Smashan Kali, or Kali of the cremation grounds. When we wish to acknowledge and honor this path, we bring practices and knowledge to help facilitate experience with this more encompassing aspect of Maa’s presence. In public community pujas, we do not wear black because it requires clear intention and dedicated effort to contain among those not familiar with Her path.
SHARANYA certainly doesn’t turn away people who come to ceremony wearing black; but there is a responsibility that comes with calling in the non-dualistic energies of Kali Maa, and it is important to be aware of this in one’s surrender to Her. Ultimately, everyone has to make their own decision about what is appropriate to wear within their own practice. We ask, however, that if you choose to worship with us, you observe our custom out of respect. 

Accordingly, as I entered the building, draped in a blood-red shawl, I was met by a group of devotees all wearing different shades of red. Some simply wore red t-shirts or sweaters with jeans while others were fully dressed in vibrant red salwar-kameez or saris. One mother wrapped red shawls around the shoulders of her two sons before the puja. I noted the feeling of warmth that wearing and being surrounded by the color red provides. In addition to honoring Kali and the customs of Sharanya by wearing red, gathering in common dress also establishes a sense of communitas amongst individuals as devotees, many of whom at this public event were strangers.

Another means by which individuals are separated from their mundane worlds is the removal of shoes upon entrance into the space of worship. By shedding their shoes devotees also shed labels and identities associated with these external elements, preparing them for entrance into the liminal space of worship. In a more subtle sense, by removing shoes and connecting bare feet to the floor, devotees are collectively brought closer to the earth, a fundamental practice in Earth-based spirituality.

Other devotees and I waited quietly in the entrance hall of the building, a point of transition between the outside world and the ritual space. Inside, Chandra Maa and a group of Sha'can initiates were setting the space and making final preparations for the puja. Soon, the glass doors, separating the entrance hall from the ritual space, were opened. A woman holding a shallow 

bowl of water with pink rose petals floating upon the surface greeted us silently on the other side of the entrance. Upon stepping through the doorway, she sprinkled droplets of the water over our heads and gestured for us to proceed into the space and join the circle of initiates circumambulating the room. This purificatory act, accompanied by a physical step into the space of worship, was the final marker of separation. As devotees passed through the open doorway a threshold was crossed, one that sent them into liminal space-time.

*Limen: Circling with the Goddess*

In order to orient the reader to the Yoni Puja, I begin with a description of the room, taken from my ethnographic fieldnotes written following the puja and edited for inclusion in this essay. I have colored the notes with images from the evening, taken by Chandra's husband and posted publicly on the Sharanya website. While I recognize that images and words alone will not suffice to orient the reader completely to the ritual space which I will proceed to analyze, I hope that it will at least provide a foundation from which to better understand this particular devotional experience at Sharanya.

The sanctuary is a long room with white walls and wooden floors - nothing about the architectural design of the space itself suggests that it is a place of devotion to Maa. What defines it a place of worship for the Yoni Puja is the atmosphere Chandra Maa and the initiates have created. With images, rituals objects, fabrics and lighting they have transformed this physical space into a temple.

The room is dim, lit only by the red and white votive candles that line the walls of the room. Meditation cushions and chairs are set up in a circle transforming the rectangular shape of the room into a circular space for worship. In the center of the circle is a large brass bowl filled with water, referred to as the wishing well. Rose petals and pink candles float upon the water, the flames reflected in the soft ripples of the water. Images of the Goddess in her myriad forms rest against each side of the well.

On the North end of the room is the main altar. Tall vases of roses, hibiscuses and lilies in shades ranging from pastel-pink to maroon, frame the *yoni*, the image representing the Goddess for this puja. In Hindu and Tantric traditions, the *yoni* represents the vulva, and symbolizes the creative energy of the Divine Feminine, *Shakti*. Chandra told us that
her mother carved this particular **murti** herself. Directly beneath the **yoni**, mounted on a platform in the center of the stage is a bronze figure of Kali. The rest of the altar is lined with red and golden fabrics, images of Goddess, candles and flowers.

![Figure 2: Yoni and Kali on Northern Altar, Sharanya](http://sharanya.org/mandala/th_gallery/yoni-puja/)

On the East side of the room is a **lingam**. In Hinduism, the **lingam** is a phallic figure that represents Shiva, and more generally, the generative Divine Masculine energy. **Lingam** are commonly worshiped alongside **yoni**, in recognition of the divine dance between masculine and feminine energies and manifestations thereof in the universe. Beside the **lingam**, made of white marble, is a bowl of yellow flowers.

On the West side of the room is a smaller altar at the center of which is a censer holding incense. Paintings of the Divine Feminine in her many forms line the wall and offerings of fruit are placed atop the ornate fabrics that cover the floor.

Stepping through the doorway into this ritual space is like stepping into another dimension of reality. I join the devotees, walking clockwise in a circle taking in the sweet, earthy smell of incense wafting through the air, the dim lights and flickering
flames, the low drone of the harmonium being matched by the meditative chant, “Om Maa... Om Maa...” shared by those walking in the circle.

With each person that joins the circle, the chant grows louder, individual voices lost in collective invocation. We walk slowly, treading gently on the Earth. Some devotees place their hands over their hearts while others hold their palms open near their hips in gesture of receptivity. Some walk with eyes cast low while others seem to close their eyes, trusting completely in the rhythmic progression of the circle.

The chant continues as effortlessly as the rotation of the circle, step after mindful step, syllable after sacred syllable. Gradually, the melody of the harmonium softens and the collective voice follows suit, quieting to a whisper. Footsteps slow until we stand still in a circle. The room now silent, we are asked by Chandra Maa to take hands.

Within these first few minutes of this ritual a liminal, sacred space, had been established. Furthermore a sense of *communitas* was being nurtured. Individuals were equalized, in a Turnerian sense, by receiving the same purificatory anointment of rosewater upon entering the space. Moreover, devotees immediately joined a circle, already set in motion by Chandra and the initiates who were the first to enter the room. There was no hierarchical design to the circle.

48 [http://sharanya.org/resources/galleries/](http://sharanya.org/resources/galleries/)
Chandra Maa and the initiated Daughters of Kali walked in the same circle as newcomers. By stepping into the circle, matching the gait of those walking before them, and vocalizing the simple chant, “Om Maa,” in tune with others, devotees quite literally harmonized with one another. In this short frame of time, bodies began to sync as breaths altered to accommodate the melody of the chant and as heart rates attuned to the slow and steady pace with which the circle spiraled. 

*Communitas* was created on a deeply internal level. This communal spirit was central to the creation of a ritual environment at Sharanya. The space was further established as sacred as the ritual progressed.

Chandra Maa welcomes everyone to the circle and asks us to share our names. The initiated devotees introduce themselves by their Sanskrit names (taking a name is a hallmark of initiation in Sha’can as well as in other Hindu traditions), while other devotees simply introduce themselves by their birth names. Thereafter we are asked to close our eyes and meditate upon a *sankalpa*, an intention, we would like to set for the evening. When invited by Chandra to share our *sankalpas*, words emanate from around the circle: love, strength, commitment, courage, trust... With eyes closed the words are anonymous but the act of speaking them aloud has a concretizing effect.

The silence is broken by the sound of a foot stomping the ground. I open my eyes and look to the northern end of the circle from which the sound has echoed and see that one of the initiates has stepped into the circle. He speaks in prose as he calls to the Northern spirits and their associated element of Earth. He retreats back to his space in the circle. Another initiate steps forth, this time to call forth South and Fire. This invocation continues with the East and Air, the West and Water, reminiscent of the Wiccan practice of casting a circle for a ritual.

We then invoke Agni, a Vedic fire deity, by chanting the *bij mantra* “Ram” (a Sanskrit root syllable) and Ganesha, the elephant-headed God, with the *bij mantra*, “Gam”. Finally, we call to Shiva with the well-known chant “*Shiva Shambo, Mahadeva Shambo*.” While we are chanting, one of the initiates pours libations of water, milk and honey over the *lingam*. Another walks around the circle with a platter of yellow flower petals from which each devotee takes a small handful. In turn, we each approach the *lingam*, kneel down before it, and gently place our offerings at the *lingam*.

Chandra describes the significance of invoking these deities prior to Kali in an article about *puja* at Sharanya:
We first invoke Agni, Lord of the sacrificial fire, the dancing flame of all beings. Agni helps open a channel for us to commune with the Divine. Agni is also one of the most ancient deities of the Vedic tradition, honored with the first nine verses of the Rig Veda, the oldest religious text still used today. Our ceremony continues to open to the Divine by next calling Ganesha, the elephant-headed Lord of Obstacles who opens our minds and hearts to touch the Great Mystery. Through His worship, we are resolved of all that hinders our path and keeps us from fully experiencing the Divine.

Moving into deeper awareness of God and Self, we invoke Lord Shiva, the destroyer of life, sensuous yogi, Father of the Three Worlds, and Cosmic Consciousness alive in all things. His is the dance that turns the cycles of the seasons, the stars in orbit, and the ebb and flow the Universe. We welcome Him with our voices, chanting sacred verses that have lived in the hearts of humanity for thousands of years. Together we offer flowers and praise Shiva, singing "Shiva Shambo Mahadeva Shambo", honoring Shiva as the Great God and the bringer of peace. Opening to His love and compassion, we see the beauty and divinity of the world.49

Thus, the sacred space for the ritual invocation of Kali was set. As Chandra explains in her description of puja on the Sharanya website, “the ritual begins by casting a circle hand to hand, creating a sacred space between the worlds.”50 This understanding of sacred space corresponds to understandings of liminal spaces as positioned betwixt and between mundane realities and transcendental realms of the divine. Within this sacred space, sensoriums of devotion were taking shape as mantras were heard in the form of sound and felt as they vibrated throughout bodies; as eyes adjusted to the dim lights and flickering candles; as fingers interlaced to weave the circle together; as smoke of incense mingled with essences of flowers.

In this light, this first portion of the puja can be understood as serving a preparatory purpose. Beyond the preparation of the physical space, a psycho-spiritual foundation was nurtured through sankalpa and the invocation of the elements and deities of the Hindu pantheon.

Furthermore, the internal sense-scapes of devotees were stimulated by the already developing devotional sensoriums described above. With this groundwork in place, Kali was invited into the

circle.

The process of inviting Kali into the circle, whereby each devotee could nurture their individual connection to Kali, began visually. Instructed by Chandra, we shifted in our seats to face the North altar and centered our awareness on the images of the yoni and Kali. This act of visually engaging with the Goddess can be understood in the context of Hindu worship wherein images of deities play a significant role in the individual's understanding of and relationship to the divine and are central to the practice of darshan. Darshan is defined by Diana Eck as “‘seeing’ the divine image,” the fundamental act of which is “to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes.” But the act is not solely dependent on the devotee. Inherent to darshan is a divine encounter wherein the devotee both sees and is seen by the divine. It is important to note that it is not the psychical image itself which is being worshiped, but rather what the image represents. The energy of Kali fills the form and is channeled through the image by devotees. Thus, images of Kali and the practice of darshan can be seen as visual gateways to the goddess.

This visual stimulation was intensified by the use of a breathing technique known as So-ham which translates roughly to “you are the same as I am.” Using this technique, the breath is vocalized by making the sound “so” on the inhale, and “ham” on the exhale which results in one repetition of the so-ham mantra with each breath cycle. Individuals voices soon began to sync into rhythm, producing one collective breath, the entire room breathing in and out, colored by the calm, whispered mantra. This moment, in which the bodies of devotees moved in synchronized waves of breath, vocalizing the sacred syllables in time with one another, further strengthened the creation of communitas within Sharanya's ritual circle.

Having quieted the mind with breath work and the visual focus on Kali, Chandra proceeded to lead the group through a guided meditation in which Kali was encountered internally.

We are told to envision ourselves as children seated before Kali, to feel the darkness as it slowly begins to envelop us... In that darkness, as Chandra explains, we see shadows, representative of the darkest parts of our selves... We are asked to relinquish control, to surrender into the loving arms of the Goddess as we sit together amidst our shadows.

The following quote from an initiate and Elder of the Sha'can marga resonates strongly with the message sent by Chandra during the meditation:

“Let the strong black arms of Kali Maa wrap snugly around you, offering guidance and protection. As this happens, know too that as all earth-bound spirits cast shadows, there will be a time you must confront your own...your own Shadow. A shadow, that which is neither light or dark, that which veils, that which can be deceiving, changing shape so constantly that it becomes nearly impossible to tell where the source actually originates.”

Sha'can initiate and Elder

This portion of the puja highlights that devotional sensoriums are created and experienced not only throughout the room but within the body. In this meditation, wherein devotees are guided to feel Kali's loving arms and to see darkness and shadows, individuals engage with internal sense-scapes. Thereafter, we were guided by Chandra to open our eyes to the murti at the northern altar. Two initiates rose and walked around the circle silver dishes of incense from which we each took a pinch into the palms of our hands. Guided by the initiates we walked to the western altar and kneeled before a bronze censer.

This portion of the ritual begins with the collective chant of the Shapodhara Mantra, “for the removal of curses from Goddess, the Feminine and any internalized or external expressions of female subjugation.”

---

A set of actions correspond with each repetition of the mantra. While chanting the first syllable, “Om,” we pinch a small amount of the incense in the palm of our left hand with our right thumb and ring finger. While chanting “Hrim Klim Shrim Kram Krim Chandika Devyai Shapanashanugraham” we point our right thumb and ring finger, holding the incense powder skyward. With “Kuru Kuru,” we touch our right thumb and ring finger to our foreheads and with “Svaha!” dust the incense into the censer.

The process repeats until all of the incense has been ritually offered into into the censer. The sweet scent of incense fills the room, growing stronger with each repetition of the mantra.

The association of particular movements with mantras is something I have found across devotional contexts. It seems as though there is something meditative about the practice, that these forms of sensory stimulation prepare the body and mind for spiritual experiences. Devotees become so absorbed by reciting the complex Sanskrit mantras and performing associated actions that the ego-mind begins to relinquish its control over consciousness. As the ego dissipates, the veil between the phenomenal and the transcendental thins. Through this process of altering mental states, devotees are more apt to the total experience of devotional sensoriums. Accordingly, the Yoni Puja became increasingly complex as it progressed, with each ritual element allowing individuals to continue to develop a connection to the Goddess. In the following portion of the puja, ritual connections deepened still in the act of touching the murti and receiving blessings from Chandra.

Chandra walks around the circle and hands out a small piece of paper and pens to all. She instructs us to write down our prayers, thoughts, hopes intentions or wishes. The room is still as individuals retreat into their inner worlds and inscribe what is found. Beginning with the northern end of the circle, devotees, with folded prayers in hand, take turns walking to the center of the circle. When my turn arrives, I walk to the

mantra/
wishing well and kneel next to an initiate waiting there. She hands me a penny and a flower blossom. Following the actions of those before me, I dip the blossom into the well and anoint my prayer sheet with the water droplets that fall from the flower.

I follow the devotees before me in walking to the main altar. Here, we are greeted by Chandra Maa and another initiate. The initiate invites us to dip the fourth finger of our right hands into a dish of red paste. Fingers died red, we touch the murti, tracing its grooves and curves, painting its terracotta surface a deep and vibrant red. We then place our flowers at Kali's feet and walk to the right of the altar where Chandra stands. She pours a cloudy, white liquid into the palms of our right hands and instructs us to take three sips before tossing the remaining liquid over our heads. With sweetness of sugar and flower essences on my tongue and a burn in the back of my throat, I close my eyes as Chandra marks the center of my forehead with the same red paste with which I anointed the yoni.

It is apparent that through these various ritual processes, each with specific meanings and purposes, the connection to Kali is explored through various sensory levels. At this point the Goddess had been encountered by devotees through meditation, mantra, visual focus, breath and touch. With the following portion of the puja, another layer was added to the devotional sense-scape as sacred substances were passed around the room to be taken by devotees. Chandra describes this aspect of worship as follows:

These substances are symbolic of the pañcha makaras, the five “m’s” of the Tantras: matsya (fish), mamsa (meat), mudra (the exact nature of this substance is unknown, but it is thought to be parched grain from which altered states arise upon consumption), madya (liquor/wine) and maithuna (sexual intercourse). In the Kamakhya Tantra, it says the following: “The true devotee should worship the Mother of the Universe with liquor, fish, meat, cereal and copulation.”

... For the purposes of this ritual, the five substances are tobacco, beer, wine, honey, and a prayer for peace and union.⁵⁴

Each of these five representative substances were passed clockwise from devotee to devotee around the circle. Chandra made it clear that devotees were not required to ingest any of the substances, that they could hold the substances in their hands and meditate on their symbolic

---

significance rather than actually drinking or smoking. Following the sacred substances, a deck of Tarot cards were passed around the circle from which each devotee drew a card. Finally, we were invited by Chandra to gather before the northern altar.

An initiate begins to play the familiar tune of the *Jai Ma* mantra on a harmonium near the altar. Guided by the melody, devotees begin to fill the room with a collective voice singing *Jai Ma*! Devotees clap their hands and stomp their feet in time with the mantra.

One of the initiates holds an *arati* lamp in her outstretched arm, circling the flames before the *murtis* which glimmer in the warm light. The initiate then walks towards the devotees with the arati lamp. As she walks through the semi-circle which has formed before the altar, devotees take turns sweeping the palms of their hands over the flames and then drawing the warmth and light of the fire back towards themselves, over the tops of their heads or to their hearts.

Chandra proceeds to pick up a large white conch shell from the altar. She draws it towards her mouth and blows three times. In response to the call, the chant ends and the harmonium fades. Devotees lower to their knees and bow their heads to the earth in prostration. In silence, we bow together before Kali.

Gradually, devotees begin to lift themselves from the earth, the room still silenced with prayer and breath, a sharp contrast from the ecstatic chant that enveloped us only a short while ago. As individuals rise to their feet, Chandra invites us to join hands in a circle.

*Reaggregation*

Through this symbolic act of calling us back to the same positions in which the ritual began, the process of reaggregation, whereby devotees leave the limen and return to the mundane, was initiated.

We stand in silence for a few moments, breathing slowly together. Softly, we are asked by Chandra to turn to face person to our right and place our right hand over their heart. As we closed our eyes, feeling the heart of another devotee beat into the palm of our hands, we were encouraged to feel the love of one another. We open our eyes and bow to one another, saying, “*Jai Maa*.”

Rather than setting *sankalpas*, at the end of the ritual, statements of gratitude are expressed: for the presence of the Goddess, for Sharanya, for Chandra, for the devotees who gathered on this evening, faces old and new, for the spirit and laughter of the
children present.

Holding hands in the circle, the four directions are called once again as initiates one by one thanked the spirit world for holding a strong container for this ritual. Chandra closes the ritual, declaring our circle open but never broken, and devotees respond with a resounding “Jai Maa!”

As we release hands I watch as smiles wash over faces. Two initiates pick up the platters of prasad, food which had first been offered to the Goddess and was thereby blessed, from the North altar. They begin to walk around the room, offering the prasad to devotees who happily munch on the spread of bread, chocolate, fruit and nuts. After taking prasad, some devotees file out of the room while others stay to speak with one another. Contrasting the intensity of the height of the ritual, a sense of ease and lightness now fills the room.

I leave the ritual sated by the sweetness of chocolate, heart warmed by the community and beaming from the beautiful experience of the Goddess with Sharanya.

Clearly central to the process of reaggregation was the ritual closing of the circle, mirroring the casting of the circle at the beginning of the ritual. Thereafter, the circle was physically broken as devotees released hands and stepped out of their places in the ritual circle. Finally, devotees ingested the experience and the essence of the Goddess as they ingested the blessed food that was passed around the room by initiates. In another light, the act of eating, being a fundamental need of the physical form, has the effect of bringing devotees back to their bodies, to their mundane realms of existence. Finally, I noted that the sense of communitas was further concretized during the process of reaggregation. Acts such as holding hands, setting palms another's heart and conversing following the ritual suggest that collectivity is central to invocation of the Goddess at Sharanya.
Interpretation: The Five Essences of the Dark Goddess

Devotional sensoriums at Sharanya are characterized by the five qualities or essences of dark goddesses described by Chandra through her teachings at Sharanya. Upon learning more about my project, Chandra directed me to the many articles she has written, one of which outlined the threefold approach to the Goddess practiced at Sharanya: setting intentions, activating the five qualities of the Goddess, and integrating experiences. This threefold approach is evident in the progression of the ritual described above: setting intentions at the beginning of the puja, the activation of the five qualities, which I will explore below, and the integration of experiences following the puja. It is also worth noting that, to a certain extent, this threefold model mirrors Turner's model of separation, liminality and reaggregation.

The five qualities of the Goddess central to worship at Sharanya are the antinomian, relationality, embodiment, cyclicity, and the chthonic. The qualities, as they relate to the Goddess, are described by Chandra as follows:

**Antinomian** - She sits outside the mainstream, breaking normative conceptions in order to provide safe and free spaces for embracing of the whole, uncensored spectrum of beingness. With this consciousness, She helps us fly in the face of convention, questioning the doxa or unspoken agreements we have about life and our values, ethics and moral concerns;

**Relational** - She enables connection across divides of difference (gender, race, culture, ethnicity, species, age, etc.) and is facilitating new meanings for the union of opposites, particularly of Sacred Female and Sacred Male;

**Embodied** - She is sacred Earth, sacred matter, calling for a recognition of the immanence of Spirit. She is the power of our ancestors, upon whose shoulders we stand in new consciousness, demanding to be honored for the sake of including, synthesizing and then transcending their and our greatest aspirations;

**Cyclical** - She is the power of spiraling space-time and non-linear constructions of reality helping us collectively move into new awareness (such as offered through Life-Death-Rebirth and Creation-Preservation-Destruction-Transformation constructions); and
Chthonic - She is cāyā, our shadow individual and collective, brought to consciousness from the depths of all we have repressed and suppressed so that we may reintegrate ourselves, kissing our patriarchal wounds and coming to wholeness. She brings the Ouroboric Primordial Snake of Transformation to consciousness so that we can all do our own deepest self-reflective work.  

Each quality is associated with an element (ether, air, earth, water and fire) and a sensory experience (hearing/sight, touch, smell, taste and trace). These models depart from typical western models of elements (which typically omit ether) and sensory experiences (which typically omit trance and distinguish between hearing and sight as separate sensory categories). The presence of the five essences of the goddess were evident in the Yoni Puja: The Antinomian was invoked through chanting, music and darshan; Relationality through holding hands, anointment, and touching the murti; Embodiment through burning incense, circumambulation and mudras; Cyclicity in the taste of Maa's nectar, the ingestion of sacred substances and the taking of prasad; and the Chthonic in deep states of meditation.

An analysis reveals that the five qualities and their associated elements and sensory categories correspond to the five tanmatras and mahabhutas found in classical Indian philosophy. The tanmatras, or “subtle essences” of pure elements are “sound (sabda), touch (sparsa), sight (rupa), taste (rasa), and smell (gandha).” From these subtle elements, the gross “five great elements,” or mahabhutas, are derived. “They are ether (akasa), which emerges from sound (sabda); air (vayu), which emerges from touch (sparsa); fire (tejas), which emerges from color (rupa); water (ap), which emerges from taste (rasa); and earth (prthivi), which emerges from smell (gandha).” The table below illustrates the correlation between Sharanya's model of

57 John A. Grimes, A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy, (New York: State University of New York Press,
sensory experiences and elements and the model offered in classical Indian philosophy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sharanya, Sha'can Qualities of the Dark Goddess</th>
<th>Classical Indian Philosophy Mahabhutas &amp; Tanmatras</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Antinomian</strong></td>
<td>Ether (akasa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ether</td>
<td>Sound (sabda)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing, Sight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationality</strong></td>
<td>Ether (vayu)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air</td>
<td>Touch (sparsa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Embodiment</strong></td>
<td>Earth (prthivi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Smell (gandha)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cycliticy</strong></td>
<td>Water (ap)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Taste (rasa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Chthonic</strong></td>
<td>Fire (tejas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Color (rupa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Senses and Elements at Sharanya and in Classical Indian Philosophy*

Rather than using Sanskrit, Chandra has created and assigned English terminology to represent these somewhat abstract and archaic Indian philosophical concepts. The use of English rather than Sanskrit during the ritual and in her explanations and interpretations illustrates the intent of Sha'can to make Kali approachable to a Western audience by developing a syncretic path through which to understand and worship Her.

Further characterizing worship at Sharanya is an emphasis on empowerment. Throughout the ritual, devotees were given voice by stating their names and sharing their *sankalpas* and statements of gratitude. While the ritual was organized by Chandra and guided by both Chandra and her initiates, devotees were given the opportunity to engage in ritual processes rather than to simply observe. Devotees at the Yoni Puja not only approached the altars and *murtis*, but anointed

---

1996), 180.
them and offered libations. This involvement of devotees in ritual processes at Sharanya contrasts my observation of the central role of priests in carrying out rituals in West Bengal.

Also contrasting devotional practices observed in West Bengal is Sharanya's emphasis on collectivity in devotion. By sharing names, holding hands in a circle and resting hands on one another's hearts, a connection between individuals in their worship to Maa is made. This approach to worship also has an equalizing effect, placing Chandra Maa and the initiates on the same level as other devotees as they stand side by side in a circle. In Bengali Kali temples, on the other hand, I did not observe practices such as those at Sharanya which emphasize a connection between devotees. Rather, the individual connection between the devote and Maa was emphasized. Thus, gathering collectively in devotion can be understood as another Western characteristic of the Sha'can path, attributable to the centrality of covens in Wicca or even congregational worship in Christianity, making Goddess worship more approachable to those who are familiar with such practices.

IV

Kali Mandir

Founded by Usha Harding in 1993, the Laguna Beach temple, Kali Mandir traces its lineage to Dakshineswar temple in West Bengal, India, and to the 19th century mystic and devotee of Kali, Sri Ramakrishna. The image of Kali at the temple was brought to Laguna Beach by two priests from Dakshineswar, Sri Haradhan Chakraborti and Sri Pranab Ghosal, and was given the name, “Ma Dakshineswari Kali,” upon its ritual awakening. The temple thus has a direct connection to Dakshineswar and the modes of worship practiced there. In addition to worshiping

Kali, the temple also regularly honors Sri Ramakrishna, his spiritual consort Sri Sarada Devi, and his well-known student, Swami Vivekananda. Images of these three devotees rest below the awakened image of Kali at the Kali Mandir altar. Other Hindu deities such as Shiva, Ganesha, Radha-Krishna, Durga and Hanuman are also worshiped alongside Kali. In addition to a public temple in Laguna Beach, Kali Mandir has a web page which includes videos and images from past pujas and a virtual altar to the Goddess.59

Since the awakening of Ma Dakshineswari Kali, the temple has offered daily worship (puja and arati), monthly New Moon rituals (Amavasya puja) and yearly festivals. Worship is led by the initiated priests, Swami Bhajanandana and Swami Ambikananda, who live and serve at the temple. The temple is open to the public for two hours in the morning and evening and arati is performed twice daily during these times. During these open hours, devotees either come to the temple and worship individually or participate in arati, guided by the Swamis.

_Mundane: From Kolkata to California_

Based on my participant observation at Kali Mandir, I noted that the majority of devotees at Kali Mandir were of Indian descent. In contrast, Usha, Swami Ambikananda and Swami Bhajanandana, who live and serve at the mandir, are of non-Indian descent.60 Usha has spent most of her adult life living in Laguna Beach, although she was born and raised in Vienna, Austria. After retiring from her full time job as a journalist, Usha “dedicated her life full time to work for the Divine Mother Kali.”61

Swami Bhajanandana Saraswati, originally from the US, met his Guru, Swami Vishnudevananda Saraswati of Prayag (Allahabad) in 1987. Twelve years later, Swami

---


60 Rather than birth names, given Sanskrit names, “Usha,” “Swami Ambikananda,” and “Swami Bhajanandana,” are used as identifiers for the purposes of this study.

61 [https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#/staff](https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#/staff)
Bhajanananda received *diksha* (formal ordination into the renounced order) from Swami Omananda Saraswati at the Triveni Sangam in Allahabad.\(^{62}\) Swami Bhajanananda lives at Kali Mandir, “where he happily serves the awakened deity of Ma Dakshineswari Kali and Her devotees.”\(^{63}\) Swami Ambikananda also lives and serves at Kali Mandir. In addition to being a disciple of the former head pujari of the Dakshineswar Kali temple, Sri Haradhan Chakraborty, he has been a student of Swami Bhajananda's for over 25 years. In 2011, he received *diksha* from Swami Bhajanananda Saraswati and Swami Omananda Saraswati in India.\(^{64}\)

Another interesting point to note regarding the life worlds of Usha and both Swamis at Kali Mandir is that there is a significant conflation between the mundane and the limen. Rather than entering the temple to participate in rituals and leaving thereafter as visiting devotees do, Usha and the Swamis both reside in the liminal space of the temple, spending more time in the limen than elsewhere. The mundane worlds for these figures have thus, to a certain extent, blended with the liminal. Accordingly, Usha and the resident Swamis can be understood as what Turner refers to as liminal *personae*, or “threshold people,” who are “necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”\(^{65}\)

*Separation*

The modes of separation at Kali Mandir need to be analyzed in accordance with the positionality of the residents and visiting devotees. Since Swami Bhajanananda, Swami Ambikananda and Usha reside at Kali Mandir and thus can be characterized as liminal personae, their mundane and liminal realities and thus the ritual processes used in transition differ from

\(^{62}\) [https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#staff](https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#staff)
\(^{63}\) [https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#staff](https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#staff)
\(^{64}\) [https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#staff](https://www.kalimandir.org/about/#staff)
those of visiting devotees. For Swami Bhajanananda, Swami Ambikananda and Usha, processes of separation relate not to entering the temple, but rather to entering into the altar space, a space restricted to the liminal \textit{personae} of Kali Mandir. Prior to entering the altar space the Swamis dress in traditional \textit{lungis}, engage in ritual purification by washing their hands and feet, bow in full prostration before the altar space and circumambulate the \textit{lingam} in the courtyard.

For visiting devotees, the processes of separation relate to the entrance into the temple. Devotees engage in various ritual behaviors to separate from their mundane worlds both internally and externally prior to entering the sacred space of the mandir. Because Kali Mandir is a physical structure, one of the most significant aspects of the separation from the mundane is the actual entrance into the temple. Before this step can be taken, devotees are asked to take a number of guidelines into account: “Please bathe before visiting the mandir and wear clean clothes; Please do not wear shorts, short skirts or tank-tops (exception: small children can wear shorts); Do not wear leather in the mandir; Shoes are not allowed past the gate of Mother’s courtyard.”

These guidelines indicate that purification is central to processes of separation at Kali Mandir for devotees.

Upon arriving devotees must cross a series of thresholds which serve to gradually integrate them into the sacred space:

- On a dirt road at the foothills of rolling mountains, tucked away from a busy road that leads to the ocean, is a small residential neighborhood, where Kali Mandir could easily be mistaken for another home on the street. The property, which has been transformed into a space of devotion to Kali, is enclosed by a red wooden fence.

- I approach a gate with a tall archway, from the peak of which hangs a large brass bell. I lift the latch, open the gate and pass through. I enter a small space and notice another fence and another gate just a yard ahead.

---


44
Tile floors cover the earth and sandals are neatly placed at the side of this entry way. I too remove my shoes and place them on the tiles. I open the second gate to the Mother's Courtyard, at the center of which I see a red lingam placed on a pedestal. Shaded by the branches of beautiful trees, the air in the courtyard is cool, yet the soles of my feet are warmed by the terracotta tiles beneath them.

The Mother's Courtyard is connected to the Mandir by a wall with glass doors that are opened, bringing fresh air and sunlight into the temple. In effect, it is a space of holding between the outside world and the inner sanctuary.

At Kali Mandir, in addition to physically entering the sacred space of worship, devotees enter sacred spaces internally. Upon entering the temple, I observed as many devotees immediately set their gaze on Kali, bowed in prostration, raised their hands to their hearts in prayer, or quietly sat on the floor in meditation. Through these processes, both internal and external, devotees prepared for entrance into the liminal space-time of worship to Kali.

Illustrations, both verbal and visual, of the physical space serve to orient the reader into the liminal space-time of devotion at Kali Mandir.68

Through the doors from the Mother's Courtyard, devotees step into the inner sanctuary of the temple. The sanctuary is essentially divided into two parts: east and west.

The doors open to the western half of the room. The hard wood floors are covered in oriental rugs in shades of red upon which devotees sit during puja. Directly ahead, on the north wall, are three large portraits of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. They are depicted wearing white robes, seated in meditative postures, with contemplative expressions. On the floor, beneath the portraits, are instruments including a hand drum, a harmonium, and finger cymbals. To the right of the instruments is a lingam, black, with three white horizontal lines painted across its center.

Upon turning to face east, eyes are immediately drawn to the awakened image of Kali Maa that rests in the center of the altar space. The altar space in the eastern half of the sanctuary is symbolically demarcated in a number of ways. Most notably, it is raised one step above the main floor upon which devotees sit and is covered in glistening marble tiles, checkered black and white. Red, velvety drapes cover the back wall, and at the front of the altar, red curtains are tied to pillars on either side. The curtains can be

---

68 Ethnographic fieldnotes have been edited for inclusion in this essay
opened and closed, revealing and hiding the altar space, during rituals. The altar space is also distinct from the other half of the room in that it is filled with flowers, images of deities and ritual instruments including a conch shell, candles, incense, oil, a silver cup filled with water, and a whisk that hangs on the wall in the far left corner. Above the ritual space, hangs an image of Kali at Dakshineswar. It has been framed and adorned with fabric.

On either side of the altar are white marble statues. On the right, the Goddess Durga sits atop her lion with six arms wielding weapons. Elephant-headed Ganesha, with rounded belly and handful of sweets, sits on the left. Both are adorned with fabrics and flowers. On a ledge near the base of the altar are three framed portraits, mirroring to those hung on the northern wall. The portrait of Sri Ramakrishna is slightly larger and sits between Sri Sarada Devi, on the right, and Swami Vivekananda, on the left. A dot of sandalwood paste marks the forehead of each figure.

This base supports an intricate white structure with a raised platform, columns and arches. Red and yellow Hibiscuses carpet the platform. At the center of the structure stands Kali. This murti strongly resembles the image of Kali at Dakshineswar. She stands atop the prone body of Lord Shiva, who lies on a pink lotus bed. In one hand She wields a knife, in the other, a severed human head. A red tongue hangs from her mouth and her long, black hair nearly reaches her feet. She is dressed in elaborate fabrics and adorned with bangles and a golden crown.

Garlands of fresh, fragrant, flowers are draped across her body. Her image is framed by a backdrop of silver plates that reflect light during the ceremony, casting flickering beams of light upon her.

The ceiling, directly above the image of Kali, is domed. Upon it, the Kali yantra, a geometric pattern, has been painted in gold. Lights mounted on the ceiling, around the dome, beam down on the altar, casting a brilliant white aura around the structure. The rest of the room is dim in comparison.

These descriptions of Kali Mandir reveal the symbolic nature of its layout. The curtains, differentiation in floor height and lighting all serve to mark a distinction between the two halves of the room. While the western half of the room, where devotees sit, is representative of the this-worldly and phenomenal, the eastern half of the room, housing the image of Kali, is representative of the other-worldly and transcendental. Within the liminal space of the temple and the liminal time of the ritual, devotees gain access to the transcendental realm of Kali as they are both

literally and metaphorically positioned betwixt and between the mundane, outside the mandir, and the divine, accessed through the awakened image of Kali.

The image of Kali is central to Kali Mandir not only spatially, in that the layout of the sanctuary draws attention to the center of the altar where the image resides, but in terms of spiritual practice, in that caring for the awakened image of Kali, making offerings and taking *darshan* is central to worship. These practices are included in daily public rituals. The following set of fieldnotes describe a public *arati* and *darshan* held on a Sunday morning at Kali Mandir:

Myself and other devotees are seated on rugs that cover the floor of the sanctuary. We face east, eyes directed at the main altar, the image of Maa. Swami Ambikananda enters the room, wearing an orange *lungi*, exposing the lines of Sanskrit mantras tattooed on his arms. He walks towards the front of the room, kneels, and then lays down in full prostration before Kali. He bows twice more before proceeding to walk outside to the courtyard where he circumambulates the *lingam* three times, uttering Sanskrit *mantras* under his breath while holding his hands in prayer at his heart.

When he returns to the sanctuary he steps up into the altar space and lays out a small rug. He then replaces vases of flowers on either side of the *murti* with fresh flowers that had been placed near the front of the altar space. He then walks to the back of the altar and turns on the lights, casting a brilliant glow upon the image of Kali.

Swami returns to the rug he has laid out and sits down at Kali’s feet, facing the Goddess.
In this description, the process whereby sensoriums of devotion begin to take shape is illustrated. Lights are turned on, illuminating the Goddess, and fresh flowers are placed on the altar, further contributing to the visual experience of gazing at the altar. In addition to changes in the physical space, the description also indicates that these early moments of the ritual serve to bring Swami Ambikananda into the space of worship, internally. Because Swami resides at the mandir and doesn't physically enter the space for worship, ritual movements such as bowing before Kali and circumambulating the lingam, suggest that there are processes whereby he enters and leaves an internal liminal space of devotion to Kali.

The ritual begins with the blessing of food that will later be offered to the Goddess and then to devotees.

To the left of Swami Ambikananda, now seated cross-legged in the altar space, are silver platters of apples, bananas, oils and some prepared dishes which devotees brought with them to the mandir.

While reciting mantras, all in Sanskrit, Swami lighthly sprinkles water over the food with his fingertips, places a pink floral blossom on each, and moves his hands through a series of intricate mudras over the plates.

He returns to face Kali and lights a stick of incense. Gently rotating his wrist, spirals of smoke rise, twirl and fade into the air. With his left hand, he rings a small brass bell. The high pitched ringing fills the room.

The devotees are silent, gazing intently at the altar.

The beginning of the ritual, particularly for the devotees seated beyond the altar space, is strongly oriented to visual experiences. Seated before the altar space, the eyes are entertained by the play of color and light. Darshan, the visual component of worship whereby devotees both see and are seen by the Goddess, is clearly emphasized here as devotees sat silently before Her image, meeting her gaze. Yet as the ritual progressed, other sensory stimulations were incorporated into the sensoriums of worship experienced by devotees. The mantras, gracefully recited by Swami Ambikananda in the rhythmic language of Sanskrit, and ringing bells brought even more life to the visual world of the altar space. Essences of freshly cut roses, hibiscuses, and marigolds blended with the smoking incense and wafted towards devotees. The room began to fill with these stimuli, compounding the power of the visual experience of darshan, creating the devotional sensoriums that open devotees to experiences of the Goddess.

Swami draws sweeping circles of smoke with the incense around the images of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda prior to raising his arm and drawing even larger spirals of incense before the image of Kali. The mantras begin to take on a song-like quality as Swami places offerings of red hibiscuses and red and gold fabric at Maa's feet.

....

Swami reaches to his left for a golden lamp with an intricate handle near the base and a number of wicks at the top. He lights each of them. The flames grow and dance, reflecting off of the golden lamp. Holding the lamp in his right hand, he picks up the
small bell with his left. As he waves his wrist, bringing the vibrant sound of the bell back to the room, Swami circles the lamp in front of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda.

Swami rises from his seated posture to stand on his feet. The devotees follow, standing as Swami raises the lamp towards the image of Kali, illuminating her eyes which begin to sparkle as they reflect the flames.

Swami draws sweeping circles around Her image, the flames leaving a trail of light behind the lamp. As Kali basks, shining in the dance of flames, Swami sings the mantra, “Jai Maa!,” Praise to the Mother! The devotees join, filling the room with the popular chant dedicated to Kali.

The sound in the room grows as Swami Bhajanananda, standing in the back half of the sanctuary beside devotees, picks up a hand drum and produces a heavy beat in sync with the voices filling the room. Another devotee picks up a pair of hand cymbals, the sound of which complements the ringing bell from the altar. Many begin to use their hands to contribute to the rhythm of the mantra, clapping in time with the beat of the drum.

Devotees sway from side to side as they continue to repeat the mantra in song, eyes fixed on the Goddess.

Finally, Swami Ambikanananda turns to face the devotees and gestures to the back of the room where Usha is standing. She glides to the front of the space, holds the palms of her

hands over the flames and draws them back towards her face and over the top of her head, as if washing herself in light. Swami Bhajanananda follows, setting down his drum to walk towards the altar and draw in the light.

Swami Ambikananda then steps down from the altar and moves through the sanctuary, allowing each devotee to hold their hands before the flames and draw the warmth and light back towards themselves. Together, the collective mantra, the upbeat drum, the high-pitched bells, cymbals and flickering lights create an ecstatic aura. Pure joy fills the sanctuary.

As is evidenced in the notes above, the sensory stimulations build throughout the ritual, reaching their peak when the entire room joins in collective song and movement, enamored by the image of Maa. Symbolically, devotees were brought closest to Kali during these moments, at the height of the puja, when Swami Ambikananda, after offering light to Maa, left the altar space to walk from devotee to devotee, offering to them light from the same fire. By drinking in this ritual light, devotees connected not only to Maa, but to one another. In a similar fashion, by seeing and being seen by Kali, devotees also connected with one another through Her image.

Swami Ambikananda returns to the altar space and we repeat the mantra together once more. He reaches for the conch shell at his feet and draws it towards his mouth. With a powerful exhale, the call of the conch shell fills the room, drowning out any other noises that lingered in the air.

In response to the conch, devotees lower onto their knees and drop their foreheads to the earth, arms outstretched before them. As we bow before Maa, Swami Ambikananda recites a number of mantras in Sanskrit to which the devotees collectively respond “Jai!”

With the last mantra, a warm silence washes over the sanctuary; a sharp contrast from the ecstatic musical chant that filled my body only a short while ago. We stay silent in this moment of reflection, prayer and surrender, each individual absorbed by their unique connection to Maa.

Slowly, devotees rise back up to their knees, many holding their hands in prayer, and gently blinking their eyes open to the image of Kali.

Marking the end of the ritual, voices slowly break the silence as devotees greet one another with the ubiquitous “Jai Maa!”
This description of a daily ritual illustrates a number of characteristics of the liminal space-time of worship at Kali Mandir, including the centrality of lineage, the sense of communitas that stems from Dakshineswar, the role of Swamis as intermediaries between devotees and the Goddess, and that the forms of devotional practices here, while appearing to be primarily visual, are ultimately multi-sensory.

The images of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda, on the walls and in the altar space, serve as obvious indicators of the centrality of lineage at Kali Mandir. The three spiritual figures, all of whom are closely connected to the Dakshineswar Kali temple, are revered for their unconditional love for and devotion to Kali and were invoked alongside Kali in the ritual described above. The sense of lineage is further established by the photograph of the Dakshineswari Kali which hangs from the ceiling directly above Kali Mandir's murti, which was ritually awakened by a priest from Dakshineswar and takes on a very similar iconographic form as the Dakshineswari murti.

With such a strong connection to the Dakshineswar Kali Mandir, it seems that the sense of communitas established within the liminal space-time of worship at Kali Mandir stems less from a connection between the devotees present at the Mandir and more from their connection to a lineage of gurus, devotees and the Dakshineswari tradition of Goddess worship. This is evidenced in the relatively individualistic practices of devotion described above wherein worship centers around the image of Kali and there is little interaction between devotees during ritual. Rather, devotees connect to one another through their shared interaction with Kali and the Dakshineswari tradition of Goddess worship, a connection established at Kali Mandir primarily through the murti, but also through Swami Ambikananda, Swami Bhajanananda, and Usha.
Both Swami Ambikananda and Swami Bhajanananda, through their spiritual pursuits, including formal monastic initiation in India under the teachings of an Indian guru, committed to this lineage which they share with others in their service at the Mandir. In a sense, they are a living bridge between the traditions of Dakshineswar and Kali Mandir, between Kolkata and California. The significance of their integration into the lineage is evidenced in practices of worship at the Mandir. The fieldnotes above, for example, reveal that in that ritual, only Swami Ambikananda stepped into Maa's altar space. Further observations, both on-site and online, indicate that only the Swamis conducted rituals and that they were also the only figures who entered the altar space.

In this case, Swami Ambikananda conducted the ritual: he placed offerings at Kali's feet, adorned the murti with fabrics and flowers, blessed the food which would later be distributed as prasad, and gave offerings of light to Kali and devotees. Devotees did not step beyond the divide, into the space of the goddess, nor did they approach or touch the murti. The Swamis can thus be interpreted as intermediaries, who, through their service, facilitate connections between devotees and Kali. This further emphasizes the role of the Swamis as liminal personae in the sacred space of the Mandir. As initiated devotees, with extensive training in ritual procedure and the Sanskrit language, in addition to their commitment to living and serving at the Mandir, they occupy a space not only between Dakshineswar and Laguna Beach, but between devotees and Maa.

What is discovered by delving into the devotional practices at Kali Mandir is that devotion to Kali is a fundamentally multi-sensory experience. Although the awakened image of Kali Maa is centrally placed in the sanctuary and is central to puja, experiences of devotion to the Goddess here are much more than visual. The body is stimulated as the sensory experiences within the room compound. From the smell of fresh flowers scattered across the altar to the sweet scent of
incense as it whispers around the sanctuary. From hypnotic colors, lights and flames to ringing bells, Sanskrit *mantras* and the song praising Kali that filled the room at the height of the *puja*. Mind and body quiet as eyes meet Maa's loving gaze and an overwhelming sense of submission washes over the body upon bowing, touching forehead to earth before Maa's feet. While Eck explains *darshan* as inherently visual, practices at Kali Mandir reveal that this visual act is inextricably linked to a number of other sensory experiences which, taken together, comprise the sensoriums of devotion particular to Kali Mandir.

**Reaggregation**

The process of reaggregation at Kali Mandir, for devotees, began with the consumption of *prasad*, food which has first been offered to the Goddess. Usha Harding describes it as follows: “These returned offerings are called prasad and considered a great blessing. God has taken the first bite - eaten the subtle essence of the food - and the devotee, swallowing the gross elements of the food, takes the second.”74 After final prostrations and prayers before Maa, candied ginger, nuts and dates were distributed to devotees by Swami Ambikananda. By consuming *prasad*, worship is literally internalized as devotees share their food with Maa, absorbing Her blessings as they digest the gross elements. Devotees thus take a piece of the limen with them as they exit the sacred, liminal space of Kali Mandir. Exiting through the doors of the sanctuary into the courtyard, moving through the first gate to put on their shoes, and to exit through the second gate, back into the mundane, leaving the liminal space and the liminal *personae* at Kali Mandir behind.

**Interpretation: Preserving the Dakshineswari Tradition**

It is clear from the fieldnotes above that the mandir is in many ways a daughter temple of the Dakshineswar Kali temple in West Bengal. Dedication to the path of devotion to Kali found at

Dakshineswar is clearly evidenced in the mission statement on the Kali Mandir website:

Kali Mandir aims to create a tangible spiritual atmosphere through daily worship, rituals, singing, chanting, volunteer service, scriptural study and spiritual discussions. Respectful of all religious traditions, Kali Mandir worships Goddess Kali in the mother/child relationship. Worship is conducted in a similar manner as that of the Dakshineswar Kali Temple in accordance with *dakshina-marg* or the right-handed path of Tantra which adheres to conservative Hindu norms in the mood of selfless devotion. No practices associated with a sectarian cult or left-handed forms of Tantra are performed.... Our focus is on the awakened deity Ma Dakshineswari Kali and the universal teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Promoting traditional Goddess worship, Kali Mandir aims to remove misconceptions about such worship, propagating a spiritual culture that forms a bridge between East and West.  

One notable point about this mission statement that resonates with observations from temple worship is the use of the mother/child relationship to illustrate relationships between Kali and devotees. Aspects of *puja* at Kali Mandir, such as prostration, highlight the manifestation of this relationship in worship. Stemming from Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, the mother/child relationship is a common metaphor used to describe the approach that should be taken in devotion to Kali in the right-handed path of Tantra, followed by Kali Mandir and Dakshineswar. The background of this approach is explained on the Kali Mandir website on a page titled “Our Inspiration:”

Sri Ramakrishna reveals the purest and safest approach to an often misunderstood goddess. There are many ways of worshiping Kali. While many may be authentic, not all are safe. Sri Ramakrishna mastered the sixty-four branches of tantra—many difficult and controversial. But when the time came to train his own disciples, he made the path to God simple and beautiful. He said:

*Pray to the Divine Mother with a longing heart. Her vision dries up all craving for the world and completely destroys lust and greed. It happens instantly if you think of Her as your own mother. She is by no means a godmother. She is your own mother….This attitude of regarding God as Mother is the last word in sadhana. ‘O God, Thou art my Mother and I am Thy child’—this is the last word in spirituality.*

---

That Kali Mandir follows the spiritual teachings of Sri Ramakrishna further illustrates the significance of lineage at the temple, evidenced not only by their connection to Dakshineswar, but to the spiritual teachers and leaders associated with the temple.

Another significant theme from the mission statement is the message that Kali Mandir seeks to preserve “conservative Hindu norms” and “traditional Goddess worship.” Dedication to conservative Hindu norms is illustrated by the temple's emphasis on ritual purity and disregard for left-handed practices of Tantra. This is most readily observed in the form of temple etiquette: all offerings are vegetarian; devotees are asked to dress modestly; no leather products are allowed in the temple; devotees are requested to bathe before visiting the temple and wash their hands before puja. Yet this emphasis on purity extends beyond the physical to the internal, with potential for the radical transformation Kali offers. This is indicated by Swami Bhajanananda as he explains the purpose of puja in an article, The Art of Seeing God:

The act of puja is a conscious redirecting of our mind and the senses toward the ever-present Reality. Our speech becomes purified through the recitation of the sacred mantras used in puja; our actions become purified through the use of mudras (hand gestures), pranayama (breath control), and the physical offering of gifts to the divine. Our thoughts become purified through the various meditations and visualizations occurring throughout the worship. Redirection, purification, and transformation: this is the process by which the Divine is awakened. 77

In addition to the conservative emphasis on purification as means to transformation, the intent to preserve “traditional Goddess worship” at Kali Mandir is evidenced, perhaps most obviously, in the centrality of the awakened image of Kali and in her given name, Maa Dakshineswari Kali, an homage to the lineage of the Dakshineswar Kali temple in West Bengal. On a more subtle level, preservation of traditional worship is found in the intricacy of puja at Kali

Mandir. The use of various ritual instruments, complex mudras and the exclusive use of Sanskrit during puja, with neither explanation nor translation into English, all point to this intention of adhering to tradition.

Another significant phrase used in the mission statement characterizing the form of devotion found at Kali Mandir is “selfless devotion.” This selflessness manifests as unconditional surrender and reveals itself to be a central tenet to the mother/child relationship with which devotees at Kali Mandir approach the Goddess. Usha writes about surrender in a blog post archived on the Kali Mandir website:

Years have passed, and I still don’t know how to completely surrender at Ma Kali’s feet. It’s a vicious cycle. The more I long to surrender, the deeper my understanding gets of what it means to surrender to the Divine. One moment I feel I have done it; the next, I realize how much farther I need to go.  

She goes on to explain that she looks towards Ramakrishna as a spiritual guide that emulated this unconditional surrender to Maa:

My ideal is Sri Ramakrishna, the Godman who lived at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple for 30 years. His passionate love and total surrender to Kali united his being with Hers, making Her will and his inseparable. ‘Surrender seems like such a passive act,’ remarked my friend Tray during a recent discussion. 'Yet, it’s really a lot of work.' To me, surrender to God means to live constantly in tune with God.

Tied to this concept of selflessness is the renunciation of ego. The severed head that Kali holds in her right hand is believed to represent the ego while her sword represents that which severs devotees' attachment to it. This theme is also illustrated by Usha: “As the destroyer, Kali clears the path for new creation. Shouting, 'Off with the ego!' the great Queen of the Universe

---

clothes Herself in chaos so awesome that our arrogance automatically falls off, giving way to unconditional surrender. Thus, Usha highlights the interconnection between ego and unconditional surrender and the ways in which devotion Kali facilitates these transformations.

Preservation of the Dakshineswari tradition through Maa's awakened image, renunciation of ego and unconditional love and surrender to Kali as Mother by devotees as spiritual children shapes the spirit of worship at Kali Mandir and the devotional sensoriums that are experienced there. The following quote from Swami Sivananda Saraswati posted on the Kali Mandir website synthesizes these elements:

Approach Her with an open heart. Lay bare your heart before Her with frankness and humility. Be as simple as a child. Kill ruthlessly egoism, cunningness, selfishness and crookedness. Make a total, unreserved, ungrudging surrender to Her. Sing Her praises, repeat Her name and worship Her with faith and unflinching devotion.

V

Analysis:
A Global Goddess in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Whether based on accounts of worship at ancient pilgrimage sites in India or modern transnational websites, it is clear that devotion to Kali is deeply sensuous. In any of these contexts, devotional sensoriums, the collective networks of various sensory stimulations created and experienced in worship, can be found. Comprised of stimuli brought on by iconographic representations of the Goddess, elaborate altars and shrines, candles, incense, music, chanting of *mantra*, the ingestion of sacred substances and the communal worship of devotees, devotional sensoriums bring about altered states that facilitate spiritual experiences and ultimately open

gateways to Kali.

In any of these global contexts, devotional sensoriums are readily analyzed through the integrative model I use in this project that follows devotees as they pass from their mundane realities, through separation, into liminal spaces of worship, through reaggregation and as they return to the mundane. The ubiquitous presence of devotional sensoriums in Kali worship and the applicability of this circular model to diverse global contexts allows for the analysis of Kali's de/territorialization, shedding light on the ways in which Kali worship (a global phenomenon) has been customized (a local phenomenon), taking on unique forms in each context, shaped by the social backgrounds of devotees and the culturally constituted vocabularies and frames of reference used to interpret experiences in worship.

The inherent complexity and plurality of devotional sensoriums naturally highlights the inherent complexity and plurality in Kali worship through processes of de/territorialization. I contend that in the locales where Kali worship is found, differences are evident not only in devotional sensoriums themselves but also in the interpretive frames used by devotees to make sense of sensory experiences. These interpretive frames are culturally specific. In other words, understandings of sense-scapes and the ways in which devotees interpret experiences of devotional sensoriums, vary from locale to locale. This cultural specificity thus allows for the identification of patterns in cross-cultural customization of Kali worship, which serve as indicators of various cultural characteristics (such as values, morales, attitudes, etc.) of that locale, or, at the very least, of the sub-culture of the temple.

Such patterns are illuminated in the ethnographic accounts of worship at Kali Mandir and Sharanya. These patterns hint at some of the cultural characteristics that may have influenced the ways in which Kali worship has been customized in different ways in California. Take, for
example, the centrality of pujaris in leading worship and guiding devotees through rituals at Kali Mandir. The role of pujaris as intermediaries in worship at Kali Mandir is sharply contrasted by the involvement of devotees in ritual processes at Sharanya, where the priestess, Chandra Maa, partakes in rites alongside the other devotees. Might these examples suggest an influence of Neo-Pagan egalitarianism at Sharanya as opposed to an influence of hierarchical orders of conservative Hinduism at Kali Mandir?

Consider the forms of dress found at each temple. At Sharanya, all devotees, including Chandra Maa and initiates, are asked to wear red during public pujas. At Kali Mandir the pujaris wear lungis that easily identify and set them apart from devotees, who are simply asked to dress in modest, clean clothes. This hierarchical aspect of worship at Kali Mandir is further pronounced by the emphasis on submission. Themes of submission are evident in the language used to describe devotion to Maa, much of which is related to surrender, and actions taken during worship, such as full body prostrations before Maa, Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. To a certain degree, devotees at Kali Mandir submit to the pujaris, trusting in their knowledge of ritual procedure and in their commitment to care for the awakened image of Maa. These examples can be interpreted as further indicators of hierarchical values. At Sharanya, on the other hand, we find egalitarianism and empowerment to be central values. During pujas, devotees are given voice by sharing names and intentions with one another. They are also given agency in worship, participating in rites such as the anointment of the Kali murti. These aspects of worship are indicative of Neo-Pagan egalitarian influences shaping the character of Kali worship at Sharanya.

The adherence to traditions of right-handed Tantra at Kali Mandir versus the practice of left-handed Tantra at Sharanya is also telling in that it begins to reveal conceptualizations of purity and taboo in each cultural milieu. Take, for example, the use of alcohol or tobacco products as
sacred substances in rituals at Sharanya and the restriction thereof at Kali Mandir, or the strict vegetarianism at Kali Mandir and banning of leather products on temple grounds. Each of these elements illustrate attitudes towards purity, towards that which is and is not considered sacred, at each temple. The vegetarianism at Kali Mandir reflects the form of vegetarianism found at conservative temples in West Bengal, such as Dakshineswar, while the use of tobacco and alcohol as sacred substances at Sharanya reflects practices of more esoteric Tantric groups, such as those found at Kamakhya. It is likely that cultural values of these traditions were influential in shaping the practices at Kali Mandir and Sharanya, respectively.

Values are also apparent in the ways in which each temple frames Kali worship. At Kali Mandir, devotion to Kali is presented through conservative Hindu norms, while at Sharanya, devotion to Kali is positioned within the syncretic path of Sha'can. At Kali Mandir, we find that tradition and the preservation thereof is highly valued, passed down by lineages of gurus that trace back to India. This value is further emphasized by the sole use of Sanskrit during pujas at Kali Mandir, in preservation of traditional forms of Kali worship. At Sharanya, on the other hand, the value of (r)evolutionary approaches to Goddess worship is evidenced in the syncretic path of Sha'can, perhaps influenced by the strong presence of interfaith interactions in San Francisco. The primary use of English at Sharanya further emphasizes this value as it makes worship more approachable to people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

These patterns in customization also shed light on the imagined communities associated with each of these temples. Benedict Anderson proposes in Imagined Communities that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.”

In a similar spirit, both Kali Mandir and Sharanya can be seen as parts of imagined communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.\footnote{Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, (New York: Verso, 1983), 6.}
communities, linking them not only to one another and to devotees of Kali globally via an imagined community of Kali worship, but to respective imagined communities based on specific characteristics of each temple established above. Kali Mandir, with its traditional Bengali forms of worship and high concentration of Hindu Indian devotees, is in this way linked to an imagined community of the Hindu Indian diaspora. Sharanya, on the other hand, can be seen as connected to global imagined communities of Neo-Pagan Goddess worship and eco-feminism.

These case studies reveal the tremendous plurality with which Kali can be approached and understood globally. Between and beyond the somewhat radical contrast between the ways in which devotion to Kali has been customized at Kali Mandir and Sharanya lies a spectrum of myriad approaches to the Goddess. It is important to remember that, while cultural patterns in devotion to Kali can be found in various locales, variations in interpretations of and meanings ascribed to Kali are also dependent on individual devotees. With countless approaches to Kali and just as many variations in devotional sensoriums it is evident that the gateways to the Goddess are infinite.

VI
Conclusions

A Goddess Beyond Borders

The further I delve into the study of Kali, the more I realize the open-ended nature of this project and its deep connection to broader questions regarding how spiritual experiences are articulated and understood throughout the world; the power of spirituality to create imagined communities of devotees that transcend boundaries of time and space; and the centrality of sensory experiences in so many religious traditions. This topic is also incredibly relevant in this
age of intensified global interconnections where religions from around the world can be encountered online and where ideas, images and practices related to spirituality easily flow across and between geographic borders.

Though not directly taken up in this paper, my research has illuminated this phenomenon in the form of Kali's presence on the internet. Readings from secondary sources, interactions with devotees and general curiosity have led me to encounter Maa in a number of online spaces. Kali is referenced and discussed in chat rooms and discussion forums in contexts ranging from the Hindu diaspora to neo-Shakti-Wicca. Further research reveals that entire websites have been created in dedication to the Goddess. These websites seem to act as virtual spaces of congregation where global communities gather around Kali. In these spaces devotees post poems, prayers, accounts of personal experiences with the Goddess and ritual guidelines. These sites are also home to galleries of artistic representations of Kali, in addition to pictures of personal altars, pilgrimage sites, and interactive online altars.

To a certain extent Sharanya and Kali Mandir also partake in this transcendence of borders through their websites. Both Sharanya and Kali Mandir have active websites which, beyond providing basic descriptions of their organizations and contact information, are home to a number of resources for individuals interested in the Goddess. Both websites have extensive online photo galleries filled with images of the Goddess and past rituals. Sharanya and Kali Mandir also frequently post video recordings of large rituals such as annual Kali Pujas. Furthermore, the websites are linked to blogs written by Chandra Maa at Sharanya, and by Swami Ambikananda, Swami Bhajanananda and Usha Harding at Kali Mandir. Chandra Maa of Sharanya has also established an online wisdom school, Kali Vidya, where interested devotees can further their

83 Examples of online communities dedicated to Kali Maa include: Jai Maa (http://www.jaimaa.org), Spiral Goddess (http://www.spiralgoddess.com/kali.html), and Mystics of Kali (http://www.weareferment.net/mystics.html).
knowledge of the tradition.84

Kali's online presence raises a number of questions. Can the internet itself be considered a liminal space? If so, can sacred spaces be created in liminal internet spaces? How would devotional sensoriums in these online spaces differ from those created and experienced in temple settings? While devotees do not experience face-to-face contact with one another, could a sense of communitas still potentially be established? Can computer screens act as portals to realms of the divine? These questions are all significant and prompt future research to be taken up not only with regards to Kali, but with the virtual presence of religion and spirituality more generally.

Reclaiming the Divine Feminine: Many Goddesses, Many Gateways

While the specificities in Kali's de/territorialization and localization are of great significance, whether on-site or online, it is also important to understand Kali and her devotees in a broader, universal perspective. The case studies presented in this paper point to Kali's universality by illustrating that She resonates with and meets spiritual needs of individuals from all over the world with diverse cultural backgrounds and religious upbringings. Kali weaves together global devotees in their shared connection to Her, no matter the specific form She takes or the practices used to invoke Her. This universality begs the question: What is it that draws individuals to Her, that urges individuals to devote their lives to Her? What is so enchanting about Kali?

I maintain that Kali's universal appeal is rooted in archetypal resonance.85 Kali can be understood as a manifestation of the Divine Feminine, and more specifically as a manifestation of the Great Mother archetype, which, as Carl Jung explains, is composed of two opposing

---

84 Kali Vidya Website: [http://www.kalividya.org](http://www.kalividya.org)
dimensions, namely, the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother. While the Good Mother characterizes “all that is benign, all that cherishes, sustains, furthers growth and fertility,” the Terrible Mother “connotes what devours, seduces, and poisons.”

Kali is the very embodiment of the two dual aspects of this archetype and reflects the transcendent nature of the Great Mother in the supreme realization that She transcends binaries of good and evil, pure and impure, birth and death. Kali is neither solely a benign, loving mother, nor solely a fierce warrior-goddess, but a unified whole that embodies all of these qualities and transcends them.

The reclamation and revolution of Goddess traditions worldwide, illustrated by temples such as Kali Mandir and Sharanya, for example, suggest that the impulse to express and the desire to reconnect to the Divine Feminine is undoubtedly global, and that this need can be met in many ways. The modern Hindu pantheon, of which Kali is a part, holds a number of Goddess figures including Parvati, Sita and Radha. These feminine representations of the divine bring cosmological and psychic balance to masculine representations of the divine in the form of Gods such as Shiva, Rama and Krishna. These Gods and Goddesses represent the masculine and feminine energies of the universe, Shiva and Shakti, which together bring balance and harmony to the cosmic order.

This wealth of archetypal imagery and balance of gender in representations of the divine is contrasted by western monotheistic religious traditions in which few, if any, female figures are offered as manifestations of the divine. In the US, the widespread influence of monotheistic traditions and the dominance of males within religious institutions has led to a gender imbalance in representations of the divine and a poverty of imagery and myth relating the divine as feminine.

This imbalance extends beyond the(a)ology to society in the form of patriarchal ideologies which

---

are still deeply entrenched in cultural thought and practice, and, perhaps even more obviously, to
the abuse of our planet, *Mother Earth*.

Is Kali’s presence in the West based on a fundamental need for feminine representations of
the divine? Is it the case that Kali, a Hindu Goddess, can meet this need for non-Hindu seekers
beyond India? Rachel McDermott, in her study of Kali’s presence in Western New Age and
feminist literature, illustrates how Kali has empowered some western women to reclaim the

Divine Feminine and their own divine femininity:

I found that this Hindu goddess was being viewed as a model: since she is a union of
opposites, combining within herself the poles of creation and destruction, love and fear,
modern women should also learn to recover and reclaim this wholeness in themselves.
Moreover, because Kali embodies those characteristics which patriarchy has repressed and
demonized – the potent, sexual, dark sides of women – claiming Kali is also a way of
owning female energy and empowerment.87

Similar feminist narratives are found at Sharanya in its efforts to “resacralize the

Feminine/Female and unpathologize the Masculine/Male.”88 This is further illustrated by Chandra

in an article titled “A Walk on the Wild Side:”

Through the ancient traditions of Goddess worship still practiced today in Hindu South
Asia and especially as made relevant for those without otherwise religious or cultural
access to the Divine Female and Divine Feminine in ways that are empowering for actual
women, the Sha’can tradition offers a glimpse through Kali worship and the practices of
Shakta Tantra at possibilities for the Feminine and female that lie outside of limiting
constructs. Certainly, patriarchy plays a role in religions everywhere, and religions of
Goddess are no exception. Yet, within Hindu Shakta Tantra conjured in conjunction with
ecofeminist spirituality, we are finding expanded notions of divinity and (r)evolutionary
potentials for engagement in the world that promote healing and peace in response to
patriarchy and its agendas.89

87 Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Encountering Kali: in the Margins, at the Center, in the West*,
Kali Mandir, though not explicitly feminist in their presentation of Kali worship, also serves as a means by which to introduce individuals to worship of the Divine Feminine. Their website states that it is a mission of the temple to “remove misconceptions” about Goddess worship by “propagating a spiritual culture that forms a bridge between East and West.” The differing approaches taken by Kali Mandir and Sharanya in bringing Kali to a Western population of devotees allows for individuals with diverse backgrounds to come to the Goddess for diverse reasons.

The metaphor of many gateways is meant to shed light on the many approaches that can be taken in satisfying the need for a representation of the Divine Feminine which, I argue, is desperately needed, particularly in the West. I suggest that Kali is but one of the many figures that can meet this need for individuals around the world. Just as are there many gateways to Kali, there are many gateways to reclamation of the Divine Feminine.

Now, more than ever, we find ourselves at a point in history in which the limitations of time and space are readily transcended, allowing ideologies, images, people, goods and capital to flow with relative ease throughout the world. This state of interconnection poses the opportunity for us, as individuals, to step outside of ourselves, to welcome the unfamiliar and seek out the unknown. It is my hope that this encounter with Kali challenges misconceptions of modern Goddess worship, that it illuminates the sacredness and significance of the Divine Feminine on a global level and, ultimately, that it nurtures a sense of Her universal presence.

References Cited


Petersen, Nicole C.. “Gateways to the Goddess: Sensory Experiences and Affective States in Devotion to Kali.” Term Paper, Ethnographic Research Methods, Professor Geurts, 2014.


Glossary

Adharmic: In Hinduism, referring to anything opposed to the dharma, the natural world order, or divine law.

Amavasya: Sanskrit. Literally, “new moon night.” New moon rituals are commonly practiced by Kali worshipers.

Bija: Sanskrit. Literally, “seed.” Refers here to the “seed syllables” within mantras. Perhaps the most well known seed syllable is OM.

Communitas: Latin. Literally, “unstructured community.” Term used by Victor Turner to described a relatively structureless social group, characterized by the equity and solidarity brought on by the homogenizing qualities of liminal spaces in ritual processes.

Darshan: Sanskrit. Literally, “auspicious viewing.” A form of worship paramount to Hinduism which centers around the exchange of vision between the devotee and an image through which a specific deity is channeled.

Devi: Sanskrit. The embodiment of the feminine energy of the divine in Hinduism. A goddess.

Deva-Mahatmya: Sanskrit. Literally, “Glory to the Goddess.” Written in the 5th-6th century CE. The first Hindu religious text to elevate Devi, to the status of the highest divine power. Here, Kali makes a famous appearance in battle as an embodiment of Durga's wrath.

Devotional sensoriums: Fluid networks of interconnected sensory stimulations, created and experienced by devotees in liminal spaces, which function as gateways to the goddess.

Diksha: Sanskrit. Literally, “preparation of consecration for a religious ceremony.” Often a form of initiation into a particular lineage by a guru in which the student receives diksha.

Durga: A manifestation of Devi in the Hindu pantheon. Like Kali, Durga is often depicted as a fierce warrior goddess in early Puranic literature. Durgā, in her most popular form, is known as the slayer of the buffalo demon, Mahisasura, has 8 arms which hold the weapons of the major Hindu deities, and rides a lion.

Garbhagrha: Sanskrit. Literally, “womb-room.” In Hindu temple architecture, especially in northern India, a small sanctuary in the center of a structure which houses the main image of the deity is worshiped.


**Lingam:** Sanskrit. Literally, “Mark,” “sign, or “inference.” Representation of the Hindu deity Shiva, symbolic of God's masculine energy and potential. Often represented alongside the yoni, a symbol of the feminine principle, Shakti.

**Mala:** Sanskrit. Literally, “wreath,” or “garland.”

**Mahabhuta:** Sanskrit. Literally, “great element.” The great or gross elements in Hindu philosophical thought are space, air, earth, fire and water.

**Mahavidya:** Sanskrit. Literally, “great wisdoms.” The ten aspects of Devi in Hinduism: Kali, Tara, Tripura Sundari, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi and Kamala.

**Mantra:** Sanskrit. Literally, “sacred utterance,” or “supreme sound.” A group of words and/or syllables believed to hold inherent psychological and spiritual power.

**Marga:** Sanskrit. Literally, “path.” Refers to a path to enlightenment.

**Mother Goddess:** A female deity symbolic of fertility, growth, creativity, and birth. Symbolism invoking the Mother Goddess is found in cultures worldwide due to the universal human reality of and relatability to motherhood.

**Mudra:** Literally, “gesture,” “mark,” or “seal.” Symbolic gestures of the hand, each of which has a specific meaning.

**Murti:** In Hinduism, an image expressing the spirit of a particular deity. As a vehicle through which divine spirit is can be accessed by devotees, it is central to Hindu worship.

**prakriti:** Sanskrit. Literally, “source.” In Indian philosophical thought, the fundamental and eternal state of nature. Composed of three gunas, or cosmic factors, which comprise all things found in the natural material world. Liberation in this context involves the extraction of the self from prakriti.

**Prasad:** Sanskrit. Literally, “gracious gift.” In Hinduism, a religious offering of material food, consumed by worshipers. Considered to have been blessed by the deity to which it was offered.

**Puja:** Sanskrit. Literally, “reverence,” “honor,” “adoration,” “homage.” Rituals performed in Hinduism.

**Pujari:** Priest at a Hindu temple responsible for conducting puja and arati, temple rituals, and caring for the temple murti.

**Purana:** Sanskrit. Literally, “ancient.” A collection of popular myths and legends written in poetic narrative. Composed in Sanskrit between the 5th and 10th centuries CE.
**Purnima:** Sanskrit. Literally, “full moon night.” Full moon rituals are commonly practiced by Kali worshipers.

**Shaktism:** Worship of the divine feminine goddess, Shakti. A major sect of Hinduism, particularly popular in Bengal and Assam.

**Shakti:** Sanskrit. Literally, “power,” or “energy.” A principle representing the feminine aspect of the divine in Hinduism.

**Shiva:** Sanskrit. Literally, “Auspicious One.” One of the main Hindu deities. Kali sometimes acts as his female consort.

**Vedas:** Veda is the Sanskrit word for knowledge. The Vedas were composed in Sanskrit between 1500 and 800 BCE. The four major texts are the Rigveda (hymns and mantras), Samaveda (song), Yajurveda (ritual and ceremonial guidelines), and Atharvaveda (spells and charms).

**Vedic Period:** 1500 - 800 BCE. Period in India during which the Sanskrit Vedic texts were composed.

**Yoni:** Sanskrit. Literally, “source,” “womb,” or “vagina.” A common symbol found in Hindu iconography in reference to the goddess. Often depicted with a lingam, the male phallic symbol associated with Shiva.