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Pregnant Males, Barren Mothers, and Religious Transvestism

Transcending Gender in the Songs and Practices of "Heterodox" Bengali Lineages

Realizing the constructed nature of gender is often described as a twentieth-century Western phenomenon. Nevertheless, in several South Asian religious traditions, practitioners are instructed through songs and oral teachings to exchange and ultimately transcend gender identities. In this article I discuss the practices aimed at transcending gender identity among some contemporary Bengali lineages that have been defined as "heterodox" by nineteenth-century reformers. Several lineages in West Bengal and Bangladesh perform cross-dressing and meditative identification with the opposite sex. I discuss such practices using songs, riddles, and oral sources collected during fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2015. I then briefly trace the history of religious transvestism in South Asian literature, while contextualizing this practice within Vaishnava and Sufi traditions. Finally, I discuss how similar phenomena have been interpreted by modern and postmodern scholarship to conclude with a conceptual framework for interpreting "pregnant males" and "barren mothers" in light of contemporary gender theories, with reference to performativity and ritual liminality.

Keywords: *āropa*—Baul—cross-dressing—Fakir—gender-reversal—*sakhī*—Sufi—Vaishnava

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> “Before holding the feet of your *guru*, oh Panju
> hold the feet of your woman”
>
> —Bengali song by Panju Shah (1851–1914)

The twentieth-century “discovery” of the constructed nature of gender as a set of social, cultural, and bio-political factors constitutes one of the most important theoretical turning points in postmodern and postcolonial times, bearing methodological consequences in numerous disciplines.[1] Indeed, the concern for the constructed nature of gender has virtually ushered in a new interdisciplinary field of study. The term itself, borrowed from linguistic classifications, came to articulate a challenge against biological determinism and a response to the sex/gender split, since the psychoanalytical discovery that sexual identity is something learned postnatally (Repo 2016). The realization of the constructed nature of gender does not only pertain to post-1960s Western scientists and sociologists, for the ritual sphere of several religious traditions in South Asia assists the practitioner in realizing the artificiality of his/her gender-based identity, allowing a transgression of gender barriers. South Asian religious traditions have often included in their ritual practices specific teachings, diffused through songs and oral poetry, aimed to resist hegemonic constructions that govern sexuality and gendered behaviors, proposing an alternative ritual space where practitioners can express their humanity without reference to fixed gender categories.

In this article I discuss practices aimed at transcending gender identity, variously referred to as *liṅga*, *bhāb*, and *svabhāb*, among some contemporary Bengali lineages. Baul (*bāul*) musicians and religious practitioners are among such lineages and have been studied the most. They have reached global fame, not only through abundant literature but also through the genre of “world music” and show business more broadly construed. Besides those who recognize themselves as Bauls, several groups of religious practitioners in West Bengal and Bangladesh transmit and perform practices of cross-dressing and of meditative identification with the opposite sex. A number of songs and riddles transmitted among practitioners discuss the necessity for the male initiate to “become a woman,” which he enacts in a greater or lesser degree of outer visibility; that is, wearing female attire or inwardly visualizing himself as a woman. In the first part of this article I describe such practices using written sources as well as oral ones collected during my fieldwork, conducted between 2011 and 2015. I underline how the terminology of Bengali esoteric literature, borrowing from the semantic fields of theater and drama—particularly through the use of two specific Vaishnava aesthetic and emotional categories known as *rasa* and *bhāb*—establishes a parallelism between performative traditions of cross-dressers and religious traditions of meditative cross-dressing. In the second part, I contextualize this genre of songs and oral literature in the larger scenario of South Asian antinomian religious traditions. I further historicize them within the broader Vaishnava and Sufi literary canons. I show how, due to nineteenth-century reformist movements and religious institutionalization promoted by Bengali upper classes, the lineages that I discuss came to be categorized as "heterodox," "deviant," and "corrupted" sects (*apasampradāya*).[2] In the third section, I shift to the thorny issue of interpretation. South Asian phenomena concerning "religious transvestism" have been interpreted variously through the lenses of psychoanalysis, medical terminology, and the academic study of religion.[3] Given the variegated interpretive history of the practice, I ask what the ethical and epistemological problems are in trying to define transvestism in the South Asian religious context. What, for example, are the implications of using expressions such as "religious transvestism," "gynemimesis," "gender reversal," or other possible descriptive terminology?

In the concluding section of the article, I return to the local context of Bengali esoteric lineages[4] in order to suggest some interpretive frameworks for conceptualizing contemporary ideas about cross-gender practices that aid us in making sense out of Bengali conceptions concerning "pregnant males" and "barren mothers." First, I suggest that the practitioners' vocabulary of tropes drawn from the lexicon of performative arts is part of a specific kind of spiritual training that aims at revealing the performative nature of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987). Second, I argue that the politics of transgression, which have reduced heterodox lineages to illegitimacy, have obscured the more subtle subversive nature of the practitioners and their social strategies of opposition to the perceived violence of patriarchal gender constructs. The strategies of gender reversal transmitted among these groups cannot be reduced to the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984, Turner 1988), or the temporary suspension of gender-linked norms.[5] Rather, I believe they are indigenously understood as ritual spaces that provide a liminal state of "genderless" existence. As such, these gender strategies provide us with powerful vernacular voices for uncovering the performative character of gender (Butler 1988). The practitioner who emerges from the liminal experience achieves the status of *mānuṣ* ("human"). The simple but simultaneously arduous task of realizing oneself to be fully "human" requires the practitioner to transcend the constrictive identity dictated by the sex/gender paradigm, thereby allowing for the realization of the constructed nature of gender itself.

Much of the evidence presented in this paper derives from extensive and "hyper-participative" fieldwork.[6] In 2009, I spent several months in a rural area of West Bengal, where the teacher Sannyasi Das Baul introduced me to the methods and practices of learning how to sing Baul songs and play folk instruments. In the summer of 2011, I traveled in Bangladesh to conduct preliminary fieldwork with lineages of Fakirs (unorthodox Muslim singers and/or practitioners) residing in the western regions of the country. During and after my doctoral research, I spent most of my time in West Bengal to study the literary devices and oral exegeses of Baul songs. This long period of residence gave me ample opportunity to interact with diverse lineages, with whom I discussed esoteric practices and methods for understanding their enigmatic songs. The ethnographic data I use in this article is mostly drawn from numerous formal conversations recorded in the field, as well as countless informal ones resulting from ongoing interaction with knowledgeable members of Baul and Fakir communities. The recorded interviews and written notes constitute roughly four years of research in West Bengal, particularly in the districts of Birbhum, Bardhaman, and Nadia, districts in which large numbers of these marginalized religious practitioners live.

Inhabiting sexuality in a genderless state: An introduction to non-institutional bengali lineages

This article locates the phenomena under examination in the context of "heterodox" Bengali lineages. Finding a common term to define a cluster of heterogeneous and independent religious groups that are scattered throughout the historical region of Bengal is an extremely difficult task. Relying on the practitioners' definitions of belonging is no less problematic, since some devotees may call themselves "Baul," while others refer to themselves as "Fakir."[7] Still others prefer to define themselves using sectarian designations such as Vaishnava or Sufi. Scholars have proposed various overarching terms for such lineages, which are not organized around any centralized officiating body, sacred scripture, institution, or single charismatic figure. They nevertheless share performative occasions, corpora of songs, a distinct lexicon of linguistic jargon, and an entire system of beliefs and practices concerning the body and the universe. The most common taxonomies used by scholars to organize academic discourse around these lineages are *sahajiẏā* (followers of the *sahaja* path, the aim of which is to realize the *sahaja mānuṣ*—the simple, inborn, spontaneous human [see McDaniel 1989 and Cashin 1995]), *bastubādī* ("materialists," whose practice is centered around *bastu* [Jha 1999]), and *bartamān panthī* (followers of *bartamān*, that which can be experienced personally and directly [Openshaw 2004; Ferrari 2012]). Because practitioners do not recognize any of these terms as self-representational, they merely represent a scholarly attempt to formulate an inclusive category. I thus avoid such denominational identifiers and refer rather to "heterodox lineages" in general or simply to Baul and Fakir groups as widely used umbrella-names.

Members of these groups are mostly of low-caste origins and live in areas where the major religions are Hinduism and Islam. Some of the practitioners earn their livelihood as singers and itinerant performers, while others engage in different activities, such as agriculture, small businesses, or begging for their sustenance. What they all have in common is the fact that their practices and beliefs are strongly antinomian, marginalized by both the Hindu and the Muslim religious establishments. They do not base their tenets upon any sacred scripture, nor do they give importance to exterior forms of ritual (e.g. *pūjā*). Moreover, they reject any discrimination among human beings based on religion and caste (*jāti*). The only *jāti*s that are accepted and recognized are men and women. When a third *jāti* is referred to, this indicates a class of intersex or androgynous people (*napuṃsaka*).[8]

Responding to a Tantric system of beliefs (Brooks 1990, 55–72; Dimock 1966, 35–36), practitioners hold that the universe and the human body are reflections of each other, connected by thick webs of correspondences.[9] Just like the outside world, the body has rivers of fluids, it is traversed by winds, it has low tides and high tides, floods, and lunar phases. Every truth concerning the universe and its creation can be understood through the understanding of the body, which is regarded as the supreme temple and the supreme mosque. Cosmogony has a direct correspondence with ontogenesis: the conditions for the creation of the universe are the same conditions for human procreation. Consequently, the duality of the opposite principles (called *puruṣ* and *prakṛti*) that regulates the cosmos is exactly reflected microcosmically in the elemental pair of man and woman as expressed in their essences, which consist of the bodily substances responsible for reproduction; that is, semen (*bindu*, or simply *bīj*, seed) and uterine blood (*raja*). In the words of the poet-practitioner Duddu Shah, "*ye bastu jībaner kāraṇ, tāi bāul kare sādhan*" (Cakrabarti 1990, 202–03): the practice toward self-realization (*sādhan* or *sādhanā*) of Bauls revolves around that substance (*bastu*) which is the cause of life. Some distinctive practices of Bauls and Fakirs, in fact, deal with the control, manipulation, intake, and refinement of bodily secretions (Jha 1995).

Based on the above premise concerning Baul doctrine, the fact that sexual intercourse is given a crucial role in ritual practice should not be surprising because sex represents, in the microcosm of mankind, the act of the re-conjunction of the two cosmogonic principles mentioned above. The union of a practitioner couple thus represents the primordial union of the opposite pair *puruṣ-prakṛti*,[10] the unity that preceded the manifestation of the universe. In short, the highest goal of Baul *sādhanā* is an inversion of the process that leads to reproduction, for the process of creation leads to manifest multiplicity, while a reversal of the process (*ulṭa sādhanā*) recreates the union that precedes duality and is reached by the fusion of the two creative principles in their potential, firm, and blissful form. The natural process of reproduction is a process of fragmentation and descent, whereas the ritual process of reverse creation is gained by integrity (*akhaṇḍa*) and ascent (*ūrdhva*). While in the animal world of common men (*paśu*) fecundation is achieved through the secretion of the male seed in the female's womb, in the upside-down yogic world of Baul practitioners it is the female secretion that is absorbed and drawn upward into the body of the male (see Cakrabarti 1990, 17; Salomon 1991, 272–73).[11]

It should by now be clear why Bauls, Fakirs, and other affiliated lineages have been called *bastubādī* and *bartamān panthī*. First, their practices are centered around highly valued bodily substances (*bastu*). Second, they realize the ultimate truth "in *bartamān*" (in a present, embodied, and first-hand experience), as opposed to "in *anumān*" (through inference, indirect truth, hearsay). The body produces sexual fluids for procreation, periodically generated and discharged, regenerated and again discharged. Ending this cycle of production and destruction on earth, in the body (that is, in *bartamān*) is equal to ending the eternal cycle of life and death in *saṃsāra*, the larger universal wheel of birth, death, and rebirth to which all life is subjected.

MOTHERLY MEN AND STERILE FEMALES: THE INVERTED WORLD OF BENGALI ESOTERIC SONGS AND TEACHINGS

According to the ideal model of reverse creation described in the previous section, Baul and Fakir couples are not supposed to have children. Women practitioners (*sādhikā*s) are revered in their potential as mothers, but in practice they renounce the process of procreation[12] (Fakir 2005, 164). It is the man, instead, who absorbs the reproductive substances of both and becomes "pregnant" in a yogic manner. Hence, the oral literature of Bengali esoteric groups abounds with metaphors of barren women and sterile mothers, while accomplished, perfected male practitioners are said to be able to get pregnant and produce milk.[13]

The male practitioner (*sādhaka*) attempts to recreate female conditions for the development of a fetus within his body. This is referred to in Baul songs as "*puruṣer peṭe chele*," literally, a child in the belly of a man. According to Shakti Nath Jha, "The fetus is created by the union of semen and uterine blood, and then by the four elements. The practitioner knows how to hold [these …] in his body […]. He can produce a subtle body inside of his body and create, in the same way as women create. He creates a fetus without giving birth to a child" (Jha 1999, 341). The idea of a pregnant male and the creation of a golden embryo in the practitioner's body is well documented in the doctrines and iconography of Taoism,[14] and stories of male gods who give birth are not uncommon in the Vedic tradition (Doniger O'Flaherty 1980, 50). In the gigantic mythological repertoire of Hindu lore, though, we rarely find the motif of a pregnant male (Pattanaik 2002, 41–65).[15]

The idea of the pregnant *sādhaka* is well attested in ethnographic material about Bauls and Fakirs, however, in both West Bengal and Bangladesh (Jha 1999, 341). This *enfant à rebours* (Trottier 2000, 215) goes hand in hand with another paradoxical image, that of the trope of the barren mother. The ideal female consort (*sādhikā*) is metaphorically sterile[16] in the sense that, having abandoned any craving for procreation, she helps the male practitioner in ritual intercourse. While the common woman is referred to in several songs as the "tigress" or the "thief" (*ye haraṇ kare*, Openshaw 2004, 234) who steals the precious male substance to keep it in her body, the perfected *sādhikā* does not overwhelm the ritual partner with passion and collaborates for a fruitful *yugala sādhanā* (the practice of the union of the pair, which is ritualized sexual intercourse with seminal retention). She is a mother only in the potential sense. Her motherly compassion is devoted to the *sādhaka* so that he does not lose his "stuff" (*bastu*), which is believed to be a powerful source of longevity, vitality, and spiritual strength. Among certain lineages it is believed that such an accomplished consort would enter prematurely into menopause. Her inner characteristics as a metaphorically sterile mother get reflected in her physical qualities, causing a cessation of her ovulation cycle.[17]

Paradoxical images of pregnant males and infertile females are recurrent in the riddles and lyrics of older genres of spiritual songs.[18] This common terminology allows us to think of a fluid and mobile Tantric repertoire of literary topoi and an equally trans-sectarian mobility of yogic techniques and beliefs (Hatley 2007), diffused through space and time by the means of songs.

A number of esoteric songs that circulate among and across Bengali heterodox lineages cryptically describe the techniques for succeeding in *yugala sādhanā*. Those that I discuss in this article particularly require the male practitioner to "become a woman."[19] A well-known saying among Bauls and Fakirs is "*prakṛti haẏe karo prakṛti saṅga*,"[20] which means first become a woman and then unite with a woman. In this section, I will utilize some of the songs and verses that very explicitly prescribe this transformation. I will then discuss the reasons why the man is asked to "become a woman," as well as the techniques and practices by which he is supposed to "become a woman."

The proverb just mentioned is embedded in a song that bears the colophon (*bhaṇitā*) of the famous nineteenth-century poet Lalan Fakir. Here are a few verses extrapolated from the song: "The only lord (or husband) of the universe is Krishna and all the rest is feminine. Being a woman worship the woman. Only then will you receive protection from the *gopī* (cowgirl). If you do not act by taking shelter in the role of the *gopī* then the worship of the *guru* is not performed correctly."[21] The process of inner endeavor to acquire femininity is referred to by using a classic Vaishnavite term: *gopī bhāb* (Sanskrit *bhāva*), the emotional mood of the *gopī*, the milkmaid lover of Krishna, who is the only male of the universe, while everything else is female. To worship the *puruṣ*, the universal absolute as well as the inner and only father, the devotee has to perform a feminine role.[22] This enactment, named *āropa*, involving identification with and superimposition of feminine qualities, is interpreted with great malleability, according to the religious system of the exegetic masters of the Baul tradition. It can be physical, pertaining to the gross body, but also mental and meditative; it can be an artistic and aesthetic exercise of impersonation, a devotional exercise of uniting with the god/beloved as a particular character, or all these simultaneously. Such fluidity is relatable to the polysemy of the noun *bhāb*, which is a mode of being but also divine ecstasy, liquid emotion (see McDaniel 1995), a stage among the various emotional moods of the devotee in relation to the divine. It is a role to play, whether on the performance stage, during ritual, or on the stage of life in general. Pertaining to the semantic sphere of imitation and impersonation, in modern Bengali grammar the noun in its locative form is used as a postposition to introduce comparisons, meaning "similar to."

The same injunction is reported in one oral source collected by Carol Salomon and referred to as a revelation (*guru bāṇi*). As she reports, "become a woman to unite with a woman / day by day the waves of love will swell / but if you don't become a woman and have intercourse with one / know for certain you'll both go to hell" (Salomon 2017, notes to song 13).[23] In both Lalan's stanza and in this riddle of revelation, we are told what will happen if the *sādhaka* does not take on the role of a woman. The practice of sexual intercourse (*sādhan bhajan*) is not correct, and "they will both go to hell." In the esoteric language of the Bauls, hell (*narak*) stands for death and descent and is typically used as a metaphor for ejaculation. The "feminization" of the male devotee is thus a necessity for a successful *yugala sādhanā*.

In my fieldwork notes and recordings, I found several instances in which the idea of "becoming a woman" was reiterated, for during gatherings of teachers and disciples (*sādhu saṅga*) the necessity of acquiring *nārī bhāb* (the role, mood, inclination, or character of a woman) or *mātṛ bhāb* (the role of a mother) as a primary step toward spiritual realization was often underlined. An old *guru* and performer of verbal dueling (*kabigān*), Amulya Ratan Sarkar, who lives in an ex-refugee colony in the district of Nadia, expressed the concept very clearly during a crowded public performance. On the stage of a big village festival, he said: "Once you have assumed *nārī bhāb*, then go on to perform sexual union. Krishna is the *guru* giving initiation, the cowgirl Radha is the *guru* giving esoteric teachings.[24] Radha is the one who can teach you how to love. Krishna was not able to love Radha; otherwise, why the pain in separation (*biraha*)? Why all that suffering? Why did he need to cheat on her with other *gopī*s?"[25] The poet vigorously stressed the injunction of "becoming a woman." He also reiterated the well-established concept, among heterodox Vaishnava lineages, that Radha was Krishna's *guru* (see also Tyabji 1971, 24; Packert 2010, 81) and that a man needs to learn how to love from a woman.

The idea appears even more clearly in the Baul song recorded by Lisa Knight: "I'll die this time and become a woman / I'll swim in the ocean of a woman's love / I'll learn all the rules of love from women" (Knight 2011, 135). Amulya Ratan Sarkar interprets the relationship of Krishna to Radha from such easily accessible images as a sophisticated doctrinal concept that states men are indebted to women. The only way to repay this debt is through *sādhanā*, which allows one to become fully human (*mānuṣ*). In other words, the repayment of the debt implies transcending gender barriers. In the oral exegeses of the stories about Radha and Krishna provided by practitioners, it is said that Krishna is guilty of not having been able to love Radha properly. In order to repay his debt to her, he had to be born again as Caitanya, the simultaneous embodiment of both Radha and Krishna. The concept of the male debt (*ṛṇa*) to women is explained through local ontogenesis. It has to do with man's material debt for having taken three motherly substances. They are female orgasmic fluid, which is considered as a necessary component to conceive the embryo; uterine blood, as the nourishment of the fetus; and breast milk, which nourishes the newborn (Jha 1999, 341). The female body is considered to be rich, complete, and full of nourishment, generously produced for others to consume. While female seed is discharged only once every lunar month, millions of male seeds are wasted every time the unperfected male body is subjected to ejaculation (Lorea 2014, 14).

This view is in striking opposition to the Occidental language of biology in relation to the egg and the sperm (Martin 1991, 485–501), recurrently portraying the female eggs as passive, degenerating, wasteful, and moribund, while exalting male sperm as active, constantly regenerated, and vital. Similarly challenging the patriarchal bias of Indian doctrines of liberation, the debt that the male practitioner has to repay to the woman constitutes the subversion of the Vedic Hindu concept of debt to be repaid to the ancestors through the production of a male child.[26] Ancient Hindu scriptures consider reproduction—especially the production of male progeny—as part of high-caste Hindu *dharma*, a duty to satisfy the ancestors, while heterodox low-caste Bengali practitioners discourage procreation. At times it is even forbidden.

"Becoming a woman" is the subject of a song that I have heard or read in at least four variants, testifying widespread circulation. The first line, which is also the refrain of the song, is *āmār man sājo prakṛti* (My mind, dress up as a woman), or in other versions, *āge man sājo prakṛti* (First, mind, dress up as a woman). The composition is variously attributed to Lalan Fakir (especially among Bangladeshi practitioners), Rupcand, Svarup Khyapa, or Sanatan Gosain (mostly in West Bengal), based on the version cited. The oldest printed version of the song that I could find appeared in Upendranath Bhattacarya's collection of Baul songs (1957, 363–64). The colophon bears the name of the composer Rupcand. The initial verses are virtually identical with all of the others: "My mind, play the role of a woman (or dress up/disguise as a woman) / Adopt the nature of a woman, then do *sādhana*. / The erotic love in your body will ascend and go upstream."[27] The song goes on to describe the ascending movement from the bottommost *cakra* (focal point of the subtle body) using sophisticated yogic terminology.

The same verses appear in a more recent collection of Lalan Fakir's songs (Mannan 2009, 335). From the third stanza onward the song changes its main theme, where we read, "There is a Vedic practice: first you have to leave that behind / if you want to perform this *sādhanā*, first consider the *guru* to be your own husband (or master)."[28] The composer clearly remarks that the practice is not for those who are interested in Vedic rituals and authoritative scriptures. The Fakirs' *sādhanā* is only for those who accept that the only hierarchical relationship of subservience is the one between the teacher and the disciple. In fact, the relationship between any other human being, between a man and a woman, or between husband and wife, should be strictly non-hierarchical.[29] A beautiful version of this song performed by Lakshman Das Baul was recorded in 1970 and is found on the album *Indian Street Music: The Bauls of Bengal* (1970). Other versions performed by Nityananda Ray, a disciple of the Bhaba Pagla lineage, and by the renowned musician and teacher Kalacand Darbesh, are available on YouTube (see respectively Inreco Bengali Folk 2016; Bangla Geeti 2018).

One last example equally floating between the realms of orality, writing, print, and recordings is represented by a song of the eccentric Sufi poet-saint Abdul Rahman Chishti (d. 2004). His lyrics, probably composed in the last decades of the twentieth century, are widely known among the Fakirs of Kushtia district in western Bangladesh, where the saint-poet used to live after his extensive travels on foot. Similar to some of the previous examples, the song, recorded and transcribed by Zakaria (2004, 164), largely employs Vaishnavite vocabulary, where Radha is the perfect lover/devotee. She is the ideal model one has to exemplify to obtain the love of Krishna. The use of Vaishnavite terminology (that is, inhabiting the *bhāb* of Radha) in a Sufi context and in a predominantly Muslim environment will not surprise scholars who are familiar with Bengali heterodox lineages and their orature.

How can you experience Krishna's love,
unless you become Radha yourself?
Men, women and hermaphrodites,
Do they know the true way of worshiping Krishna?
How is real love to be obtained?
Understand the esoteric teachings and acquire the *Brahma liṅga*.

One whose radiant *rādhā bhāb* arose in the mind,
he/she can experience the love of Krishna.
The passionate love of Krishna, with an emotional state of ascetic detachment.
The mind drowns in its sublime Krishna-essence.

One who has awareness about his/her own sexual identity,
can hardly experience the love of Krishna.
Rahman says, I did not get it:
my *Brahma liṅga* was not brought under control.[30]

The translation I propose does not do justice to the multilayered and polysemic expressions used in the original language. One key expression that needs to be paraphrased in order to understand the doctrinal teaching of the song is the notion of *brahma liṅga*. It is a complex and "thick" metaphor if we consider that Brahma means both the God of Creation, and the absolute, universal soul, *brahman*. Moreover, in the jargon used by Bauls and Fakirs, *brahma* stands for semen. *Liṅga* means the sexual organ, penis, but also sex (e.g. *strīliṅga* meaning female) and gender, in grammar. According to the explanation provided by some practitioners, the *sādhaka* is recommended to enter the performance of *sādhanā* with a genderless gender.[31] In other songs the same concept is conveyed in a slightly different manner, with the expression *brahma astra*, the weapon of Brahma, the instrument that is used for (pro)creation.[32] The song employs the image of the *napuṃsaka*, a hermaphrodite, a person of composite gender who is unable to procreate.[33] It is common in many Fakir songs for the first-person narrator to humbly confess his ineptitude in the final verses. Rahman failed because he could not tame his erotic passion, which is a necessary step to experience "Krishna-love."

"To become a woman": gender transformation and the worship of femininity

The idea of gender transformation, particularly from male to female, is very much present in the oral literature of Bengali esoteric lineages. But why is the *sādhaka* compelled to take on a feminine role? How is the transformative practice of "becoming a woman" justified?

There are at least three reasons that need to be discussed in order to unravel the ubiquitous command of obtaining *nārī bhāb*. First, women are considered to be superior to men (see also Openshaw 2004, 147). Among Bauls and Fakirs, women are perceived as more perfected and complete beings. It would be naive, though, to assume that this translates as a better position in society for all Baul women, since the negotiation between the theoretical superiority of women and their actual social empowerment depends more on issues of class, caste, and social expectations from non-Baul neighbors and relatives than on Baul doctrinal tenets.[34] Women are born as women because they performed good *sādhanā* in their previous lives. This also partially explains why bodily *sādhanā* is mostly prescribed only for males—gender reversal is very rarely prescribed for women, although a few lineages do support female-to-male cross-dressing.[35] As I have mentioned, the reason for women's superiority is very "material," in the *bastu* sense of the word described above. In a philosophy that values the body and its products, women are judged as higher creatures because they produce more substances than men: breast milk, menstrual blood, and orgasmic fluid, all considered to be extremely nourishing and powerful substances. The *guru*s of the lineages teach how and when the ritual consumption of these substances should occur.

What makes women worthy of worship is also their potential motherhood. Women bear resemblance to the universal feminine creative force (*ādi śakti*) due to their capacity to be mothers. Bauls and Fakirs refer to all women, even little girls and sexual partners, as mothers (*mā*). This is particularly interesting in light of the mainstream scholarly literature on Indian women ascetics. While several scholars of asceticism have assumed that the "motherization" of women by addressing female renunciants as *mā* is a way of dewomanizing and desexualizing them (for example, Khandelwal 2004), in the Bengali esoteric context "the implication of the term *mā* is not the desexualization of women but, rather, recognition of the sexual potency inherent in all women that gives them the potential to create and to become mothers" (Knight 2011, 74).

Further justification to emulate the woman is due to the fact that institutions invented by society do not delude women. As explained in a song of Lalan Fakir, while men have to wear a sacred thread in order to show that they belong to the Brahmin caste, and Muslim men have to undergo circumcision in order to establish their "Muslimness," women are just all part of the same *jāti* (caste), and thus are closer to the *sahaja* ideal.[36] The tremendous reverence for the feminine principle of which every woman is an incarnation led the scholar Shakti Nath Jha to refer to the Baul universe as *nārīkendrik*, literally woman-centric (Jha 1999, 12). In sum, the first principle underlying "mental gynemimesis" is the imitation of woman as an ideal model to inspire inner transformation, a concept that I discuss later in the context of the literary history of *āropa* (meditative superimposition).

A second reason for emulating women is linked to the idea that the absolute godhead is perceived to be androgynous, since both Bauls and Fakirs believe that Caitanya and the prophet Mohammad were themselves androgynous (Salomon 1991). Following this logic, the perfected human being (*mānuṣ*) must thus also be androgynous. The practitioner should therefore strive to maintain a balance of both *puruṣ* and *prakṛti*. A man should strive for that balance by acquiring an "extra amount" of femininity. This inner balance (which also corresponds to the yogic balance between the left and right halves of the subtle body) allows the practicing couple to become equal (*samān*), an absolutely crucial requirement for their *sādhanā* to be successful. The couple should be of "equal mind" by synchronizing their heartbeats, pulses, and breath during sexual union. This equanimity is possible only if one is not conscious of gender distinctions. As Rahman Chishti put it in the song discussed previously, "One who has awareness of his/her own sexual identity / Can hardly experience the love of Krishna." The lover and the beloved must become completely identical. Breaking down gender barriers is another reason that is invoked to explain the practice of "becoming a woman."

The embodiment of *nāri bhāb* is used as a technique to accomplish a fruitful *yugala sādhanā*. According to practitioners, if a *sādhaka* imagines himself to be a woman, then he will not feel an overwhelming erotic attraction for the woman who is his sexual partner. Curbing erotic attraction facilitates the control of passion, which is said to be an important step to transform *kām* (desire) into *prem* (love), the highest goal for esoteric practitioners. *Kām* is not merely erotic desire because it also stands for any type of craving for selfish satisfaction. *Prem*, on the other hand, is love without selfish motivation, devoid of egotistic desire. The two are strongly connected and they are not considered to be qualitatively different. The attributes that qualify *prem* are firmness and wholeness (*niṣṭha*, *sthir*, *akhaṇḍa*), while the adjectives that accompany *kām* are unstable, divisive, and splitting. *Kām* leads to separation. Because of it the "seed" gets split and produces children. It is associated with the householder and with the continuity of patrilineal progeny. *Prem*, however, does not disrupt the self or the love of the couple. Instead, it binds and maintains the practicing couple as a whole (Openshaw 2004, 174–75), as part of "a general ethos of reversion [...] the process of creation and multiplication is arrested and reversed, so that instead of the two becoming three [...] they become one" (ibid. 179).

How is a male practitioner supposed to acquire femininity? A number of practices for "feminization" are prescribed by the *guru*s in order to achieve the sought after *nārī bhāb*. The main concept to be considered in this context is *āropa*, a crucial Vaishnava concept that refers to imitation and identification with an ideal model. Identifying with and imitating the ideal model ultimately leads to ontological transformation. Through the superimposition of actions and characteristics associated with the ideal model, which is the *sakhī* (cowgirl friends of Radha, Krishna's consort), the male practitioner is supposed to *become* that which he is performing.

The concept of *āropa* in the sphere of gender identity finds interesting echoes in contemporary theories of sex and gender. Judith Butler's cogent idea is that gender ought not to be considered as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender should be thought of as an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a "stylized repetition of acts" (1988, 520). Rather than existing as a fundamental truth, gender is thus something that is performed. From Butler's perspective, the *sādhaka* practicing *āropa* "performs gender" by visualizing himself as a woman interiorly, although some lineages also recommend exterior attributes to support the inner practice. Many Bauls sport long hair, wear necklaces, chop vegetables, and sweep the floor (Jha 1999, 349) as an exercise in *āropa*. Practitioners may take the theatrical imitation of the ideal character quite literally and thus wear symbols of womanhood. Some even wear a red dot on the forehead and place vermillion in the part of their hair, a mark of a married woman (Openshaw 2010, 201). Some wear red nail polish

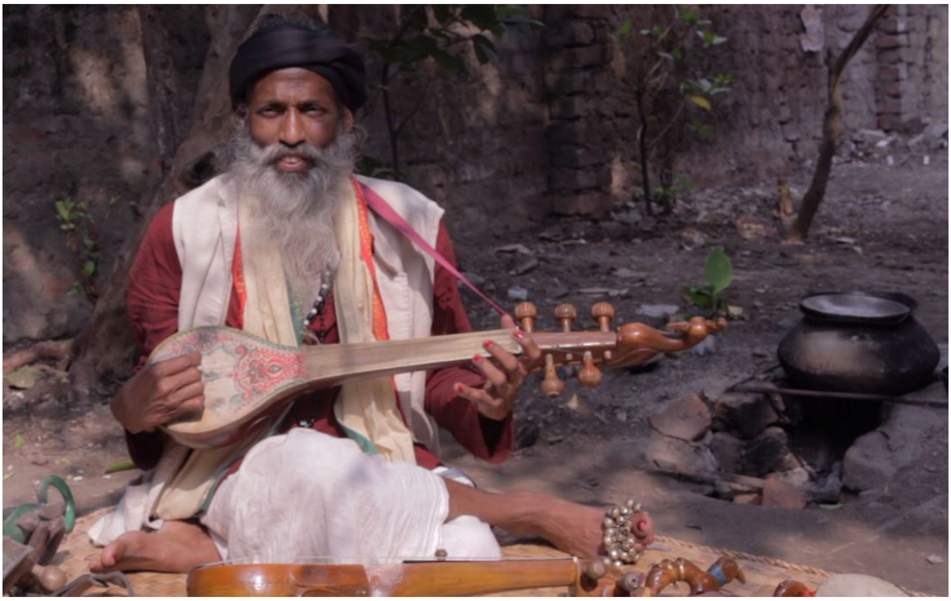

Figure 1. Golam Fakir. 2015. Photo by Sandra C. S. Marques.

on their toenails and fingernails, while some paint the soles of their feet with red *āltā* (red lac dye).

Although there are significant differences, *āropa* is a technique shared with more orthodox Vaishnavas. Bauls and Fakirs "practice feminization" through the intake of female bodily substances, especially menstrual blood and breast milk (Jha 1995, 96–97, 102; 1999, 343–44). Techniques to achieve *nārī bhāb* also involve the practitioner's sexuality. Sexual intercourse with seminal retention (*basturakṣā*) is said to decrease testosterone and can ultimately lead to stopping the production of semen. Oral sex is highly recommended to acquire the *bhāb* of the partner of the opposite sex (Jha 1999, 350). For the man to reject masculinity and empathize with feminine sexuality, intercourse with the woman on top (*biparit rati*, inverse love) is suggested. When all these techniques bear fruitful results, some practitioners proudly announce that they can feel the physical effects of the superimposition of femininity. Some *sādhaka*s experience a reduction of body hair and some are known to have grown breasts (Haberman 1988, 92; Openshaw 2004, 230).

The pervasive idea that devotion and perfection are associated with femininity, and that this has to be sought in different ways, is not only peculiar of Bengal. A brief history of the ideas and practices of religious transvestism in South Asia here will help to contextualize the phenomenon that I am discussing in the Bengali sphere.

Cross-dressing saints and cross-gender poetry: historicizing baul and fakir sexual transformations

In the context of religious cross-dressing, the biography of a famous Indian saint first comes to mind. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1835–86) spent a long period of his life dressed in women's clothes, wearing jewelry, and completely identifying with a *gopī* (Gupta 1904, 276). Eyewitness accounts attest to blood emerging monthly from his pubic region, which suggests menstruation (Sil 1991, 35–36). Although Ramakrishna's ecstatic devotion and transformation into a woman find resonance in the ideas of Bengali heterodox lineages, there are significant differences. Women notoriously repulsed Ramakrishna, since he considered all of them to be mothers. His aversion to women was so strong that he viewed sexual intercourse as "raping one's own mother" (Kripal 1995, 78). But Bauls and Fakirs seek shelter from their female consort, visualizing them as their *śikṣā guru* (initiating teacher). For these esoteric lineages, the female consort embodies both figures, the loving mother as well as the sexual partner. Ramakrishna's idea of *āropa* was adopted from the orthodox Vaishnava view that states identification with a cowherd girl (*sakhī*) is aimed at serving and witnessing from a distance the divine love between Radha and Krishna. For Bauls and Fakirs, though, every woman is Radha and every man is Krishna (although his "devotional body" should be female).

The *āropa* ideal of literally becoming one of Radha's intimate friends and servants, a *sakhī*, is at least as old as the doctrinal elaboration of Gaudiya Vaishnavism systematized by Caitanya's followers, the so-called Gosvamis of Vrindavan (see also Holdrege 2015). The practice of transformation into a *gopī* is described in the sixteenth-century writings of Rupa and Jiva Gosvami as a fundamental element of *rāgānugā bhakti*. The devotee identifies with one of the characters of Vraj and enacts the cosmic drama of the eternal love-play set in the celestial Vrindavana. This enactment is referred to with theatrical terminology. The devotee, in this sense, "plays the role" of a *gopī* to the extent that the play becomes more real than life itself. In fact, Haberman (1988, 68, 75) compares the meditative techniques of *rāgānugā bhakti* to Stanislaski's methodology, aimed at training actors so that they identify with their characters through complete imitation in everyday physical actions. The extent of this identification is left very open in the early writings of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, yet it is said that one should imitate the ideally divine characters with both the perfected body (*siddha rūpa*) and the physical body (*sādhaka rūpa* [Haberman 1988, 86–93]). Rupa and Jiva Gosvami left two options available: "the *bhāb* that consists of direct enjoyment (*sākṣād upabhoga*) and the *bhāb* that consists of vicarious enjoyment (*anumodana*). The first is for the *nāẏikā*s. The second is for the *sakhī*s" (see Gosvami 2007, *anuccheda* 365). The first option is the one adopted by Vaishnava Sahajiyas. In their writings, the term *sākṣāt* is used in a very similar way to the term *bartamān* that I have already discussed concerning contemporary lineages. The use of the term *nāẏikā* here is remarkable. *Nāẏikā*, meaning a heroine, a female character and especially a lover, is a term widely used in both Sanskrit classifications and vernacular literature on aesthetics, poetry, drama, dance, and erotica, where she is the vector of *rasa*, specifically of *śṛṅgāra rasa*, the sentiment of sensual love (see Cattoni 2014, 317–18). Among Sahajiyas ritualized sexual intercourse starting with the worship of the female consort's body is called *nāẏikā sādhanā*. Recognizing the *nāẏikā* as a heroine, main actress, or dancer, once again connects this religious tradition to theatrical vocabulary in the Indic tradition. This first option was discarded by upper-caste Bengali Vaishnavas, and most writers after Rupa accepted only the metaphorical and mental enactment of the *gopī* as a viable option. Nevertheless, a number of Vaishnava practitioners

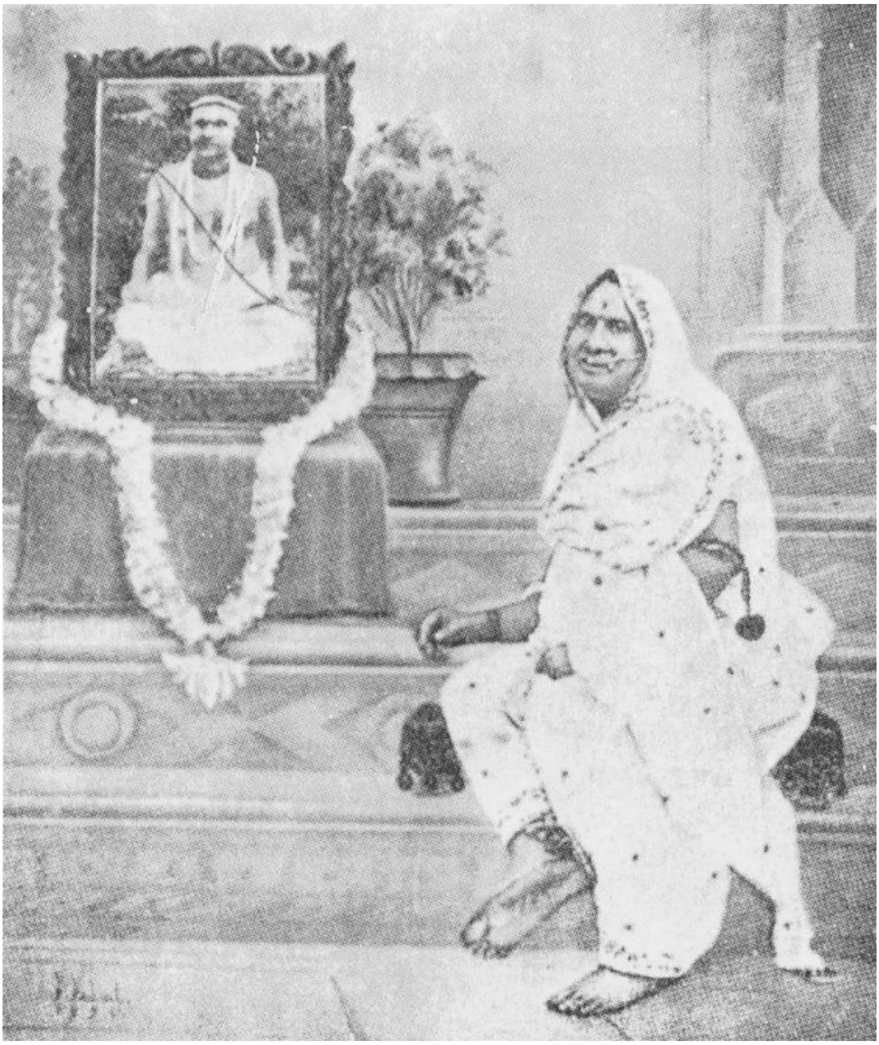

Figure 2. Lalitā Sakhī Mā of Virndavana.
Photo credit: https://sriradhakund.wordpress.com/tag/lalita-sakhi-dasi/

"perform" their roles as *gopī*s both symbolically and externally.[37] Many devotees dress up as young women in order to feel more intimate with Krishna. While more consistent groups of devotees are sanctioned as heresies (e.g. *sakhī-bekhī*s), marginal cases are still reluctantly accepted by the orthodoxy. A famous example was Lalita Sakhi Ma (born 1873), alias Jai Gopal, the revered devotee who after initiation spent his whole life dressed as a *gopī* (see Figure 2).

That embodied femininity is a very respected virtue for Bengali Vaishnavas is evident if we imagine their holy founder, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu, is considered a reincarnation of Radha and Krishna together, in the same body. In one pastime narrated in Vṛndāvan Dās's sixteenth-century hagiography *Caitanya Bhagavata* (*madhya khāṇḍa* 18, see Dās 2007, 201–05), Caitanya and some of his intimate friends dressed up as women for a dramatic performance. Caitanya disguised himself as the goddess Lakshmi and was so convincing that everybody believed that none other than the goddess herself was present. At the end of the play, they worshiped him as an embodiment of the *devī* (Great Goddess). It is further written that Caitanya bestowed his mercy on all of the devotees by allowing them to suckle milk from his breasts.

Following the emotional mood (*bhāb*) of the exemplary female cowherds who serve and accompany Radha, some religious cross-dressers in Bengal and other parts of India (Das 2008) are known as *sakhī-bekhī*s or *sakhī-bhāvaka*s. They typically perform gynemimesis in order to reinforce their identity as *sakhī*s and attain the esteemed spiritual emotion called *sakhī bhāb*. This is interpreted as a demonstration of devotion, but it is not in any way related to the Western notion of transvestism in the sense of sexual deviation from heterosexual hegemonic constructions of sexuality. For example, a poster on a wall in Barisal District, Bangladesh, advertising an annual festive gathering promoted by a Vaishnava devotee, shows the picture of a man dressed in a fine red sari. His name is definitely masculine, Acharya Prabhupada Niranjan Das, but in the poster he is said to be in his "*gopī beś*," in the role—and in the clothes—of a *gopī* (see Figure 3).

These instances of gynemimesis are different from the meditative transcendence of gender observed among Bauls and Fakirs. Here the devotee is not "becoming woman in order to unite with a woman." The connotations of *āropa* as prescribed

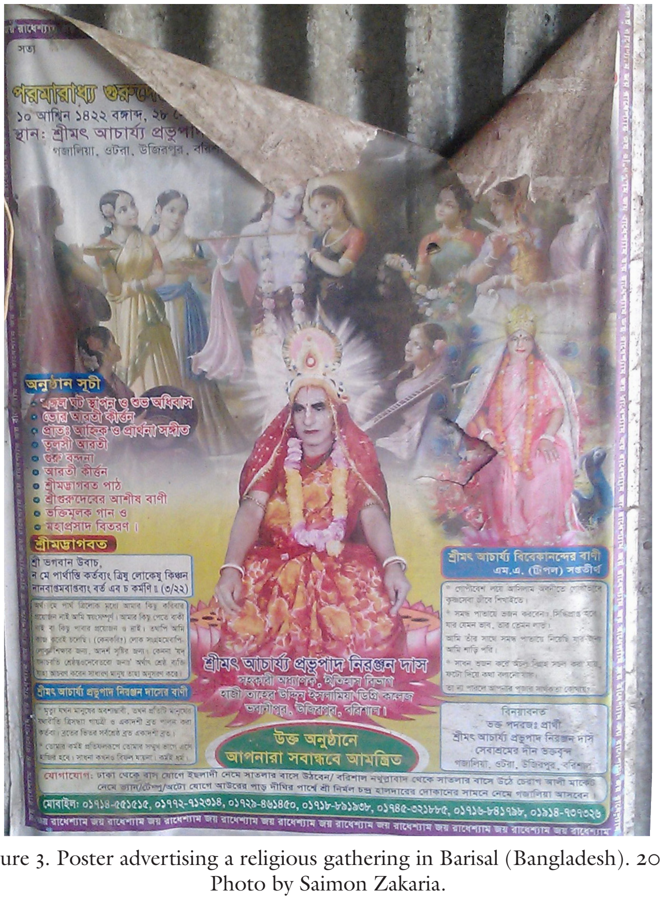
সত্য
পরমারাধ্য গুরুদে
১০ আশ্বিন ১৪২২ বঙ্গাব্দ, ২৮
স্থান: শ্রীমৎ আচার্য্য প্রভুপা
গজালিয়া, ওটরা, উজিরপুর, বরি
অনুষ্ঠান সূচী
মঙ্গল ঘট স্থাপন ও শুভ অধিবাস
ভোর আরতী কীর্ত্তন
প্রাতঃ আহ্নিক ও প্রার্থনা সঙ্গীত
তুলসী আরতী
গুরু বন্দনা
আরতী কীর্ত্তন
শ্রীমদ্ভাগবত পাঠ
শ্রীগুরুদেবের আশীষ বাণী
ভক্তিমূলক গান ও
মহাপ্রসাদ বিতরণ।
শ্রীমদ্ভাগবত
শ্রী ভগবান উবাচ,
ন মে পার্থাস্তি কর্তব্যং ত্রিষু লোকেষু কিঞ্চন
নানবাপ্তমবাপ্তব্যং বর্ত এব চ কর্মণি ॥ (৩/২২)
শ্রীমৎ আচার্য্য প্রভুপাদ নিরঞ্জন দাসের বাণী
শ্রীমৎ আচার্য্য প্রভুপাদ নিরঞ্জন দাস
সহকারী অধ্যাপক, ইতিহাস বিভাগ
হাজী তাহের উদ্দিন ইসলামিয়া ডিগ্রি কলেজ
ভবানীপুর, উজিরপুর, বরিশাল।
উক্ত অনুষ্ঠানে
আপনারা সবান্ধবে আমন্ত্রিত
শ্রীমৎ আচার্য্য বিবেকানন্দের বাণী
এম.এ. (ট্রিপল) সপ্ততীর্থ
বিনয়াবনত
ভক্ত পদরজঃ প্রার্থী
শ্রীমৎ আচার্য্য প্রভুপাদ নিরঞ্জন দাস
সেবাশ্রমের দীন ভক্তবৃন্দ
গজালিয়া, ওটরা, উজিরপুর, বরিশাল
মোবাইল: ০১৭১৪-৫৫১৫১৫, ০১৭৭২-৭১২৩১৪, ০১৭২৯-৪৬১৪৫০, ০১৭১৮-৮৯১৯৩৮, ০১৭৪৫-৩২১৮৮৫, ০১৭১৬-৮৪১৭৯৮, ০১৯১৪-৭৩৭৩২৬
জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম জয় রাধেশ্যাম

Figure 3. Poster advertising a religious gathering in Barisal (Bangladesh). 2016.
Photo by Saimon Zakaria.

for Vaishnavas and Bauls respectively are radically different in the performative sense. For Gaudiya Vaishnavas, *āropa* is mainly the imitation of a character of the cosmic drama in Vrindavana through one's devotional self (see Dimock 1966, 164; Haberman 1988, 61–93, Sarbadhikary 2015, 81–84). For Bauls, it is aimed at experiencing *kṛṣṇa prem*, divine love, in the present, personally and bodily (*bartamāne*) with the help of a ritual consort. In order to trace back this specific type of *āropa*, elaborated in terms of gender crossing, we have to look at more recent sources in Bengali. On one hand, we can find this practice described in Vaishnava Sahajiya lyrics from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, traces of a similar idea are widespread in so-called Islamic yoga texts (Cashin 1995), or Muslim yoga literature (Haq 1975), from the same time period.

The lexicon utilized in old Sahajiya poems and songs is strikingly similar to the ones employed in contemporary performed lyrics. At times we find identical expressions or even entire verses. Drawing from the collection *Rāgātmika Pader Byākhyā* of Manindra Mohan Bose (1932a), we find the following lines attributed to Candidas: "Being a woman with the manners of a man unite in embrace with a woman."[38] Similarly in the seventeenth-century *Āmṛtaratnābalī* of Mukunda Das (see Hayes 2000, 2006), we read about "the person who can get to know how to behave like a woman with the manners of a man" (in Bose 1932a, 42).[39] From Manindra Mohan Bose's compendium of Sahajiya literature, more examples can be provided, such as "in union with a woman, if a man becomes a woman, he is purified" (in Bose 1932b, 28). Again, in another verse attributed to Candidas, we read, "having abandoned his male body, he becomes the *prakṛti svarūpa* [the real, essential form]. Know therefore the *svarūpa* of Rādhā [...] When one becomes *prakṛti* by union with *prakṛti* it is not by means of his masculine body" (ibid., 52).

Two texts from a nineteenth-century Sahajiya practitioner's notebook[40] analyzed by Delmonico and Sarkar (2015) testify to the practice of exchanging gender identity between ritual partners in order to attain an androgynous enjoyment. The sexual practice described in the songs of the saint-composer Sanatan, reported in one of the notebooks, aims at the attainment of *duhābhāb*, the combined disposition of both genders. Taking shelter in each other's nature, each one complementing the other, the consorted practitioners recover a primordial, transgendered unity by uniting with each other. Sanatan's songs teach how to enjoy *sṛṅgār sādhanā*, the practice of sensual love, and how to experience Krishna directly, in person, and in the present (*bartamān*; *sākṣāt*): "Listen oh devotees, you will practice the *rasa* of sensual love / placing the sex organ in her genitals both will remain as one / acquiring the emotional mood (or disposition) of both you will both remain joint / never make friction between your genitals / [...] you will get the *rasa* as sweet as honey of the erotic love in *bartamān* / through honey-like sensual love you acquire first-hand witness of the divine love of Krishna."[41]

The same notebook also contains a prose text by Taraniraman, who, according to the editors, may have been a pre-Caitanya Sahajiya practitioner and composer. The text states the following: "Now I narrate the truths about the *sādhanā* of fully becoming a human (*mānuṣ*). By tasting it, the aches of the heart go away... by placing your *svabhāb* in her place / take her own *svabhāb* with care /

… accepting her to be yourself, be of pure mind.[42] Thinking her to be the hero (*nāẏaka*, male character or lover), the king of *rasa*, put yourself in her place, and become the beautiful one."[43] Here it is remarkable how the practice of exchanging and transcending individual gender identity (*svabhāb*) is expressed again with the use of signifiers from the aesthetic and performative vocabulary. The female consort is imagined as the hero, the main character of the play (or dance), who dispenses the emotional state (*rasa*) to the participants.

The second genre of Bengali literature that can be considered as an antecedent of Baul and Fakir songs, preparing the terrain with literary topoi, motifs, and aesthetic devices, is found in pre-modern Bengali Sufi literature (see Sharif 1969), later defined as Muslim yogic literature (Haq 1975). Here we find reference to the practice of transcending gender in order to unite fully and equally with a ritual consort, refining sexual desire and experiencing the *rasa* of pure love. As a very explicit example, dated from the late-seventeenth or early-eighteenth century, I quote from the *Tālib Nāmā* of Shekh Cand: "First, for the purpose of fulfilling woman's desires, your hands will stroke her breasts, heating the coolness. Inflaming yourself, you will then become a woman, your organ will be cooled, your mind overjoyed [...] man becomes woman for the purpose of fulfilling the *rasa*. The other becomes the self, the two become one [...] the ebb and flow of the tide pull equally, then make love, your strength is utmost" (Sharif 1969, 70–71, translation by Cashin, 1995, 173). A later text titled the Ocean of Knowledge (*Jñān Sāgar*) composed as a manual "for the Yogis and the Fakirs" by Ali Raja (alias Kanu Fakir, 1759–1837), presents the same idea of transformation into a woman in the context of the practice of "reverse love-making" (*ulṭa prīti*) that leads to pure love (*śuddha prem*). Ali Raja writes that, "taking the form of a woman, he served that dancing girl [or actress, *naṭī*: the female consort]. Nobody could tell if he was man or woman" (Sharif 1969, 439). Later in the poem, Ali Raja explains the doctrine of the "upside-down path" (*ulṭa panth*) by presenting a series of paradoxical pairs, such as "the father is called the mother and the creatress is called the creator [...] / Woman is called man and the man is the desirable woman (*kāminī*)" (ibid., 509).

Such evidence as presented above certainly provides us with a sense of the literary influences that had an impact upon contemporary esoteric songs like those that I have presented in the first section. Is it surprising that similar ideas, framed with Tantric and Vaishnava vocabularies, became widespread in a prevalently Muslim area, such as East Bengal? Is this due to a later superimposition of Muslim registers and terminologies, on the top of an underlying system of beliefs that was and remains fundamentally Tantric?[44] Was this facilitated by a constitutive affinity between Vaishnavism and Sufism at the popular level? A number of scholars have dealt with the challenge of giving answers to these problematic questions about what Roy (1983) called the "syncretism tradition" of Bengal (see also Capwell 1988, Burman 1996, Ray 2008), or what others discuss as "mutual translatability" (Stewart 2001). Still others have focused on the issue of conversion versus assimilation (e.g. Eaton 1993, Ernst 2005). Keeping my focus on phenomena associated with religious transvestism and gender reversals in Bengali minor religions, I partially contribute to this debate by demonstrating that practices of "androgynization" constituted a perfect and fertile terrain for mutual communication across Sufi and Vaishnava environments.

ANDROGYNOUS SUFIS AND "CASTRATED" DISCIPLES: THE TRANS-SECTARIAN CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS TRANSGENDERNESS

Sufi philosophies and their aesthetic canon are not at all extraneous to the mystic concept of "becoming a woman." Androgyny among non-conformist antinomian Sufis is not a rare phenomenon. Indeed, cross-dressed individuals can easily be spotted at some of the major Sufi centers in South Asia.[45] An emblematic case from Bangladesh can be observed at a Sufi shrine (*mājār*) in Sylhet (see Figures 4a and 4b). The *mājār* preserves the tomb of Kadrich Shah/Kanya Shah, a Sufi practitioner who used to wear a twelve-meter-long red sari, earrings, bangles, and female ornaments. He is known as Kanya Shah (*kanyā* meaning a bride, or young daughter). Nowadays only women are allowed to enter the room where he used to meditate.

The idea of a Sufi as God's bride is far from being a transgressive notion, for it is part of an accepted literary canon in Sufi poetry, where cross-genderness is seen as an appropriate vocabulary to express divine love. The concept has found strong articulation in Hindavi, Urdu, and other vernacular languages, as Annemarie Schimmel analyzed in depth (2003). A literary convention that is common to both Sufi poetry and medieval *bhakti* poetry is the *virahinī* voice adopted by the poet, which is the loving and yearning voice of a young woman tormented by the absence of her lover and separation (*viraha*) from him (Asani 1994, 214–19). Similar to the Vaishnava context, in the Sufi milieu the personification of the devotee/lover in the feminine mode can assume very physical traits. The most famous story of religious transvestism in the Sufi context within the South Asia framework is most probably that of Musa Sada Suhag (d. 1449), "the eternal bride," to which I now turn because of its echoes in the contemporary lyrics of the Fakirs of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

According to the sources and hagiographies studied by Anjum (2015b), Sheikh Musa once visited the shrine of Nizamuddin Awliya in Delhi before leaving for Hajj. At the shrine, he noticed some courtesans and prostitutes singing and dancing out of devotion in the courtyard. He condemned the incident, considering it inappropriate for such women to enter the sacred shrine and dance unabashedly. Then Musa went to Mecca for pilgrimage and before visiting the sacred place of the Prophet in Medina, he heard a voice saying the following: "How dare you go to visit the prophet when Nizamuddin Awliya is displeased with you?" He recalled his condemnation of the courtesans, then rushed back to Delhi, thinking about a way to seek pardon from the Chishti saint. Thereupon, he recalled the story of Amir Khusrow dancing for Nizamuddin, his spiritual teacher, dressed in women's clothes to gladden him. Thus, following the footsteps of Khusrow, Musa decided to put on feminine attire and glass bangles, after which he danced before the saint's tomb to win back his favor. While dancing, he fell into a state of ecstasy and achieved spiritual enlightenment. From then on, he decided never to take off his

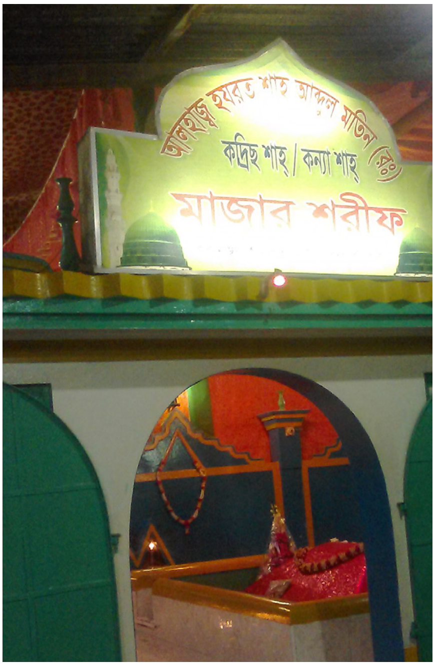

Figure 4a. Sufi shrine of Kanyā Śāh, in Sylhet (Bangladesh). 2016. Photo by Saimon Zakaria.

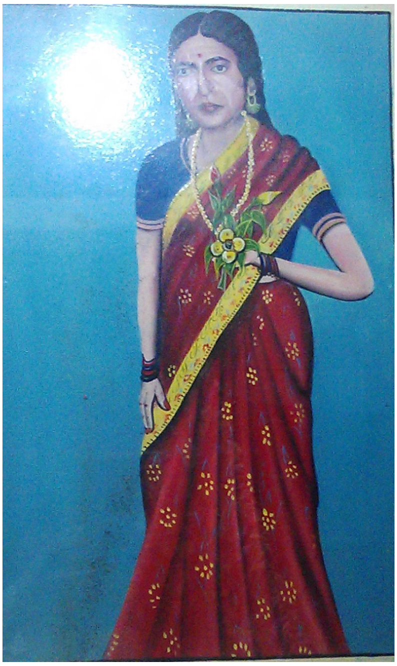

Figure 4b. Portrait of Kanyā Śāh displayed on the wall of the shrine, in Sylhet (Bangladesh). 2016. Photo by Saimon Zakaria.

female clothing (see Figure 5). Followers of this lineage replicate the deeds of the founder by dressing up as brides to express their devotion.

The shrine of Musa Sada Suhag is adjacent to the temple of Bahucara Mata in Gujarat, close to Ahmedabad, which is the temple sacred to and populated by *hijrā*s, a community of "neither men nor women" (Nanda 1990) who practice male-to-female cross-dressing. This led some scholars to suppose that Musa's lineage is the result of a "contamination" or "vulgarization" of Sufi practices influenced by the nearby Hindu cult and carried on by "half-convert religious communities" (Ahmad 1964, 161). Both images of the "male bride" and of the transvestite *hijrā* populate the oral narratives of Bengali lineages.

In a song by Lalan Fakir[46] in which the poet instructs the disciple to "become a woman,"[47] the Sada Suhagi fakirs are invoked as comparisons to inspire Bengali practitioners. Although the followers of the Lalan Fakir lineage do not cross-dress and their feminization is mostly a mental exercise that allows them to keep sexual arousal under control, as well as a physical condition acquired through the absorption of a female consort's substances, the Sada Suhagi devotees are given sympathy and respect in his song: "Long hair, bearded faces, / bangles and saris / where did this lineage come from? […] You have to become a woman like the Sada Suhagis: / Lalan says, Mind, then you'll reach / the bottom of the ocean of love."[48]

Although some scholars have tended to exclude any connection between religious cross-dressing and other communities of cross-dressers,[49] I wish to show that modern Baul and Fakir practitioners know these traditions and aesthetically communicate with them. Dramatically separating these realities from one another

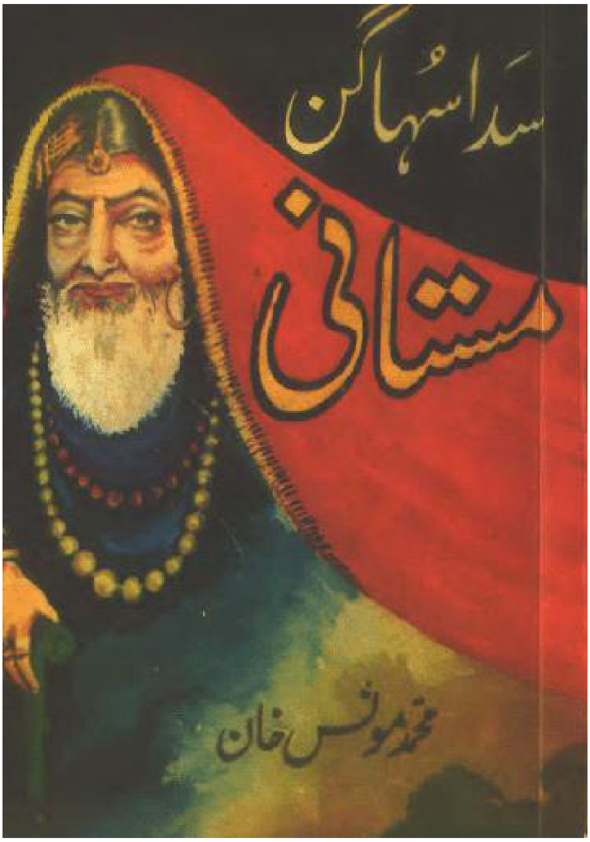

Figure 5. Image of Sheykh Musa "Sadā Suhāg," from the book cover of the Urdu novel *Sadā Suhāgan Mastānī* by Mohammad Moonas Khan Azeemi.

has been the result of the disciplinary boundaries that have been created for the study of such things as religion, performance, literature, and ethnology, which became compartmentalized over the years, especially within the context of Bengali studies. Heterodox Bengali lineages are aware of the outfit and the habits of such communities and they employ their own lexicon to convey similar spiritual meanings, as Lalan's song explicitly demonstrates. Further evidence can be provided by quoting a controversial proverb (*prabād*) of the Kartabhaja lineage, one of the lineages ostracized as being "deviant." They have a common saying that goes as follows: *nārī hijre puruṣ khojā / haiyā nara-nārīr sādhan bhajan*[50] (The woman being [like] a *hijrā* and the man [like] a eunuch / male-female *sādhanā* can be practiced [see Bhattacharya 1957, 69]). Salomon reports a slightly different version of the same proverb (2017, notes to song 13): "The woman should be a *hijrā*, the man a eunuch, and then they will be Kartābhajā" (or, then they will be "worshipers of the master").[51] The proverb is also inscribed in one of the songs of the sacred corpus of the Kartabhajas known as the *Bhāber Gīt* (Cām̐d 2012, 837) and relates the accomplishment of those who achieve the status of *sahaja mānuṣ*. "Observe with godly eyes: *mānuṣ* is at times a man and at times a woman / having found the end of *mānuṣ*, the woman becomes a *hijrā* and the man a eunuch. / The religious practice of the *mānuṣ* is so straightforward."[52]

*Hijrā*s are widely believed to be hermaphrodites by birth. Several members of the community, though, are born as men and decide later in life to join the community; they undergo ritual castration and spend their lives dressing and behaving like women, their ritual and performative occupation being mainly singing and giving blessings during weddings and ceremonies for newborn babies (Nanda 1990). In the Kartabhaja saying, the *hijrā* metaphor is prescribed for women. They should superimpose (*āropa*) on themselves the *svabhāb* of a man who behaves and dresses up as women—one who, born as a man, becomes consciously barren—while men should imagine themselves as "*liṅga*-less," castrated, with no attraction for women, and without the possibility to fecundate and procreate. While more common prescriptions in the oral literature instructed disciples to exchange their gender and complement each other, in the irreverent sayings of the Kartabhajas both should disguise themselves as in-between, gender variant, half-masculine and half-feminine, in order to perform transgenderness and to ultimately learn how to "do without gender."

Among other elements of affinity, discussed at length by several scholars (for example, Nicholas 1969, Eaton 1993), the idea of "becoming a woman" for attaining a superior devotional state appeared as a perfect element of common ground and mutual influence between Vaishnava and Sufi traditions across the Bengali region. This and many other translatable parallelisms (for example, the *guru/murśid* similarity; the comparable renunciation ceremony of *bhek* and *khilāfat*, etc.) contributed to amalgamating the lineages and strengthening a fluid grassroots network of practitioners, of singing as well as of bodily *sādhanā*. Such spiritual communities share a number of performative occasions, sacred geographies, and lineage genealogies. Religious radicalism in both Islam and Hinduism is increasingly silencing these heterodox voices. Persecution, interreligious violence, and even murder are only the most explicit outcomes of the ongoing attempts to either Hinduize or Islamicize them. By striking out polemically at heterodoxy, the legitimacy of Bauls and Fakirs is challenged at best or silenced altogether at worst.

Gender reversal, "gender culture" and the politics of transgression

> The Oriental transvestite does not copy Woman but signifies her [...].
> The sign shifts from the great female role to the fifty-year-old pater familias:
> he is the same man, but where does the metaphor begin? Barthes (1982, 53)

The relatively fluid, flexible, and negotiable notion of gender in South Asian devotional religions has been interpreted by scholars in numerous ways. Different interpreters have resorted to various theories in order to grasp the significance of religious practices that challenge the fixity of gendered belonging.

Attempts have been made to apply a psychoanalytic reading, but these inevitably ended up ascribing cross-dressing behaviors to repressed homoeroticism or to some kind of sexual perversion. A famous case is the thesis advanced by Jeffrey Kripal (1995), in which the author psychoanalyzed the mysticism of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and concluded that it must have been the result of child abuse and strong homoerotic tendencies.[53] In modern Western society, the behavior of a man imitating a woman in dress and appearance was named "gynemimesis," defined as a "syndrome" since at least 1984.[54] It is part of a medical lexicon and is defined in the *Health Dictionary* as "a pathological condition or a psychological disorder of gender-transposition."

Androgynous behavior among South Asian mystics has been defined with the use of expressions such as "psychic transvestism" (Bullough and Bullough 1993) or "transgender behavior" (Kugle 2007). Other scholars, such as Tanvir Anjum (2015a), argue that these terms are associated with transsexuality and with a psychological condition characterized by sexual perversion, for they denote fetishistic purposes and should thus be considered outdated and derogatory. Sabrina Ramet (1996) employs the term "gender reversal" in her volume on the cultural history of gender crossing, arguing that the other terms carry a heavy baggage of medicalized connotations. Alternative terms such as "gender reversal" or "cross-dressing" do seem more neutral, non-judgmental, and less problematic, but what if the expressions that are indigenously employed are not neutral? What if the terms used by practitioners are intentionally problematic? What if the insiders' vocabulary is transgressive by design and deliberately disturbing? A verse like the Kartabhaja proverb, "The woman being like a *hijrā* and the man like a eunuch," is not neutral: it is explicitly paradoxical and openly irreverent. Due to the lack of more adequate definitions, referring to phenomena of "religious transvestism" seems to be ethically and epistemologically legitimate for practitioners who seek for a literal *trans*formation in the clothes, whether mentally or physically, of an individual of the opposite sex.

In order to understand what is at stake when practitioners leave aside masculinity to acquire femininity, it is imperative to locate gender reversal within the context of a precise "gender culture" (Ramet 1996), which has been defined as a society's understanding of that set of values, mores, and assumptions that establish behaviors linked to a specific gender among a number of codified genders. Looking at constructions of gender and sexuality in South Asia within numerous sources (for example, doctrinal texts, *śāstrik* literature, classic medical texts, mythology, folk tales, secondary literature on traditions of transvestism in dance, theater, and performance), it clearly emerges that until British colonialism and the impact of Victorian morality, with its fervent scientific obsession with sexual deviance (Foucault 1981, 63–67), men dressed up as women, whether androgynous saints or professional eunuchs, were not described in terms of immorality and transgression. Rather than obscene, cross-dressing was perceived to be a phenomenon that had a certain place in society. It was tolerated, at times exalted and even patronized, but at other times ridiculed. Even so, it was most often regulated and included in ad hoc social taxonomies. Looking at male practitioners imbibed in the mood (*bhāb)* or even in the clothes (*beś*) of a *gopī* from a point of view that aspires to be universally applicable—whether medical, psychoanalytical, or Christian—fails to recognize their positionality within the local gender culture and does not take into account the politics of "shame" and "obscenity" as imported notions of an interiorized form of colonialism.[55]

In the reservoir of Indian legends and myths, several gods and heroes undergo a change of sex. In a trans-sectarian story of Shiva that connects him to the Krishna cult, found in several variants (for example, Hawley 1981, 111; Pattanaik 2002, 78), Shiva, the *puruṣa* par excellence, becomes Gopeshvara, the lord of *gopī*s, and joins the enamored milkmaids in their dance circle around their beloved Krishna, establishing a mythological foundation for the male practitioners who strive to attain a feminine "devotional body" (see Figure 6). In the Vaishnava context of poetry and iconography, Radha and Krishna practice cross-dressing, a reversal that reinforces the symbol of male and female being two aspects of substantially the same, interchangeable reality. As visually represented in some beautiful paintings (see Figure 7), Radha and Krishna, in their intimate pastimes as lovers, used to exchange their clothes. Thus Radha is at times represented in yellow attire, holding a flute, while Krishna is depicted wearing his lover's red sari and ornaments. When Krishna and Radha switch their roles, the poet Bihari describes their lovemaking with Radha taking the lead and occupying the active position (Jha and Mathura 1973). In a well-known song performed by Bauls in West Bengal, Radha reproaches Krishna for all the sorrow that she has to bear. She challenges him by saying "*banamālī go*, *parajaname haio rādhā*" (Oh gardener of the forest, reborn as Radha in your next life)![56] The song attracts the sympathy of transsexual and transvestite circles, who can easily identify with the deeds of the mythological heroes (Pattanaik 2002, 4). The song was used as the first cut on the soundtrack for the contemporary Bengali movie *Ār ekṭi premer*

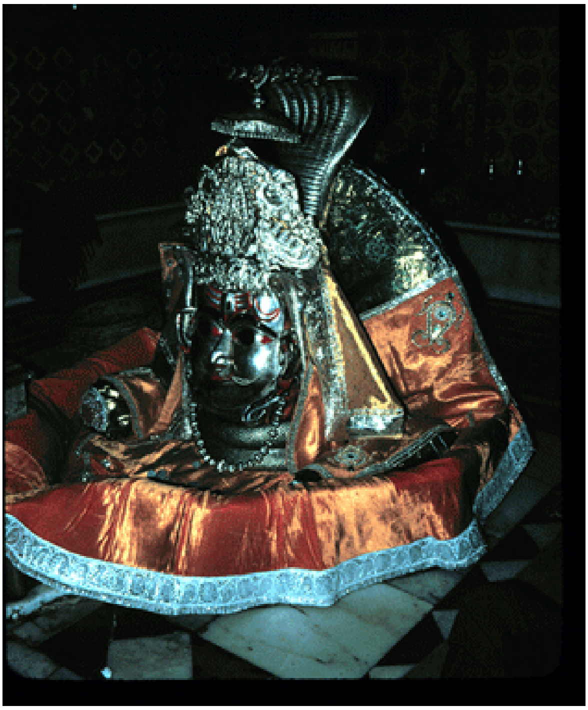

Figure 6. Śiva worshipped as Gopeśvara in Vrindavana.
Credit: http://www.srigaurangashram.in/gopeshwar.html

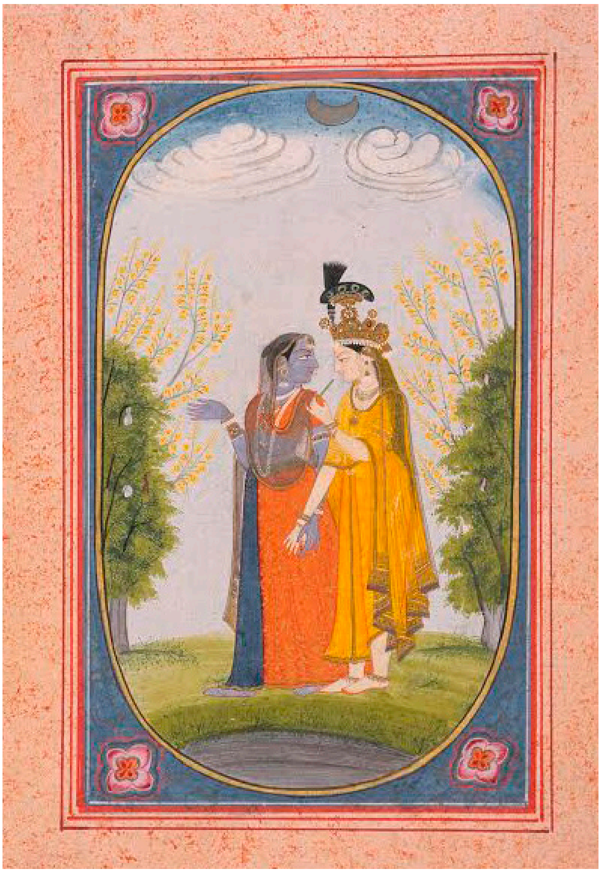

Figure 7. Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa dressed in each other's clothes. Kangra, ca. 1800.
Credit: http://collections.lacma.org/node/246008

galpa (Just Another Love Story), a film about a transgender cinematographer documenting the life-story of the cross-dressed theater performer Chapal Bhaduri.[57]

Male-to-female cross-dressed performers of dance and theater populate a number of traditions in India.[58] Some of these traditions were ostracized and banned until they ultimately disappeared (that is, *devadāsī*, [Krishnan 2009]), while some still receive relatively small institutional support (that is, Gotipua dancers of Orissa [Schnepel 2011]). Many professional male dancers who dressed as women were active in prestigious courts throughout the region. They were not merely employed for lack of female performers or as surrogates aimed at preserving the honor of modest women, for they were sought after as a category *per se*.[59] In pre-Islamic texts, male prostitutes and dancers who serviced men are represented in descriptive, nonjudgmental terms, as normally present in court and in daily life, evidence of the affluence and splendor of urban culture (Vanita and Kidwai 2000, 27). In the Mughal period, some accounts mention organized troupes of cross-dressed dancers in detailed and positive terms (Morcom 2013, 93–94). In colonial sources from the nineteenth century there is very little mention of male dancers, and certainly no description of them in admiring, erotic terms. While erotic male-to-female cross-dressed performers (*kothi*s) enjoyed high status in urban court culture, with the end of court-based patronage *kothi*s have become invisible in modern legitimate culture. Female impersonators are found only in regional or vernacular theater, having disappeared from high profile, urban traditions (Morcom 2013, 95). It is not the aim of this article to portray a single, monolithic regime of gender in precolonial South Asia to be starkly contrasted with the colonial one. Furthermore, available sources give little support to those who posit a romantically affirmative view of a "special spiritual or social role for third-gender people" (Zwilling and Sweet 2000, 124), since the lesser or greater honored social position accorded to those diverging from the dichotomous heterosexual norm in precolonial times is still a matter of debate. However, the British image of the "effeminate Indian" articulated by the colonizer and internalized by Indian intellectuals and reformers surely contributed to a new perception of the cross-dresser as an immoral and obscene figure. Moreover, with new ideals of hyper-masculinity propagated during Indian nationalism, gynomimesis in Indian performative traditions—at least in high culture—slowly declined (Krishnan 2009).

To what extent and in which ways these traditions of transvestism—the performative tradition of male dancers and actors (*nāẏak*) impersonating women (*nāẏikā*), and the religious *sādhanā* of "becoming a woman"—are connected, remains open to discussion, and more historical as well as textual and ethnographic information is welcome in order to avoid a phenomenological flattening of apparently similar dynamics. The connections that I wish to underline in this paper, however, can be articulated by citing a few points of intersection. First, the *āropa* practice of "acting" as a *gopī* and the whole Vaishnava idea of "playing the role" of a character of the cosmic "drama" of Vrindavana are formulated through the extensive lexical use of the semantic fields of drama, dance, and theater (for example, in Sahajiya texts the consorted practitioners are called *nāẏaka* and *nāẏikā*, like the hero and the heroine of a play). As a second point of intersection that can be considered for future research, many Bauls and Fakirs that I have met and that other ethnographers have written about received training in their youth as folk theater actors of *yātrā* and *pālā*, involving cross-dressing and instruction in how to represent a female character in the above-mentioned genres.[60] Indian performers traditionally undergo training in the transcendence of gender that enables them to perform a variety of roles, for instance in the *abhinaẏa* form of classical dance (Shah 1998). Another point of intersection that I discuss in more detail below involves the notion of transgression with regard to the two-gender theory, the binary social system propagated by the dominant culture.

Anna Morcom pointed out that *kothi* transvestite performers represent a parody of the dimorphic social structure of two genders. She argues that this performance tradition automatically reinforces and corroborates the structure itself and can be seen therefore as very conformist (2013, 99). Similarly, Butler's description of drag and performativity reveals that, "in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency" (Butler 1990, 137). Instead, seeing *kothi* performers as transgressive and, in particular, as out of place, appears to be a predominantly modern phenomenon, emerging from the influence of Western ideas on local conceptions concerning gender, homophobia, and sex-gender frameworks, which impacted the representation of *kothi*s. There is enough evidence to suppose that religious communities of cross-dressers, such as the aforementioned *sakhī bekhī*s, started to be judged harshly and were increasingly marginalized after the diffusion of colonial values concerning shame and modesty, of what is sexually proper or improper.[61] Persecution and condemnation of Sahajiya groups and of what I have been referring to as "heterodox" Bengali lineages started to emerge hand in hand with colonialism and with the structures of power that supported the formation of a newly codified orthodoxy.[62]

In the reformed and institutionalized nineteenth-century version of the Vaishnava tradition promoted by Bhaktivinoda Thakura and continued by Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati (Sardella 2013) groups of practitioners such as Bauls, Fakirs, Kartabhajas, *sakhī bhekī*, and other lineages were newly defined as impure and "deviant" Vaishnava sects (that is, *apasampradāya*s). This relatively recent view is now, with the global diffusion of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, also known as the Hare Krishna movement), translated in dozens of languages and assumed to be the only proper Vaishnava perspective to define the lineages about which I write here.[63] In the double vise-grip of colonial morality and religious reformation, minor religions in rural Bengal have been pushed more and more underground (Stewart 1990; Urban 1998).[64]

As a result of the zealous institutionalization of Bengali Vaishnava devotion and the global proselytism of the Hare Krishna movement, Sahajiya lineages and "heterodox" Bengali practitioners came to be viewed as corrupted and specious sects, with the reputation of being sexual perverts and libertines under the cover of a spiritual camouflage.[65] In the concluding section of this article, I argue that while characteristics of transgression and scandalous behavior were recently superimposed onto heterodox Bengali lineages, the practitioner's strategies of transgression and subversion of patriarchal norms are much more subtle. They require us to understand subversion through the lenses of performativity and liminality.

Practicing freedom from gender-sex constraints: performativity, liminality, and the emic vocabulary of subversion

According to the perspectives that I have presented in the previous section, before the nineteenth century cross-dressing and gender reversals in both performative and religious spaces were not perceived as either outrageous or subversive types of behavior. What makes Baul and Fakir practices of psychosomatic transvestism transgressive has to be understood vis-à-vis the hegemonic subordination of women within binary-gender culture and the ethos of patrilineal householder structures.

While I agree with previous explanations of Baul transgender practices as subaltern strategies of opposition, I propose to read the Baul and Fakir practice of "becoming a woman" from the lenses of performativity and liminality in order to step beyond the Bakhtinian idea of carnivalesque reversals. In so doing, I intend to unfold an indigenous strategy of questioning the ideology of hierarchical heterosexuality. In the case of Bengali heterodox practitioners it is the lexical repertoire used by the insiders that allows us to arrange this reflection in terms of subversiveness. The language of Baul songs is referred to as *ulṭa bhāṣā*, the upside-down language of paradoxical images and cryptic tropes. Their lovemaking is called *ūrdhva rati*, the "upstream love," love against the current. The *sādhanā* of Bauls and Fakirs is referred to as *ulṭa sādhanā*, a reverse practice, where *ulṭa* can be read in a layered fashion as "reverse," since it goes against the descending movement of instinctive (pro)creation and the reiteration of the life and death cycle; as "upside-down," since it conceives of bodily substances moving in an upward motion; and as "subversive," since its antinomian implications disregard the social norms of both Hinduism and Islam. The reversals cherished by heterodox practitioners are based on substances considered impure and polluting according to normative standards. Bauls and Fakirs, however, divinize and cherish them (for example, the appearance of menstrual blood is referred to in some songs as the arrival of *nabi*, the Prophet; Jha 1999, 472). Whereas in Indian folklore the man-to-woman transformation is usually the result of a curse or an unpleasant side effect,[66] Bauls strive for an inner transformation that allows male practitioners to become women. Sexual intercourse with a woman in the dominant position is highly recommended, while in traditional scriptures it is said to produce lesbian daughters and other "evil consequences."[67] That the construction of sexuality occurring in the Baul-Fakir environment goes against the dominant patriarchal system of gender roles and gender culture is evident from the fact that *yugala sādhanā* does not culminate with male orgasm and ejaculation, whereas it can end when the female practitioner reaches satisfaction and produces *rasa* (Jha 1999, 329). In the domain of child bearing and family planning, it is worth mentioning that among Bauls—contrary to the general trend of non-Baul families in rural areas, where a wife is not usually involved in the decision-making process regarding family planning (see R. L. Carroll 1967; Stoeckel and Chaudhury 1973)—it is believed that if the woman does not wish the physical union and is not sexually satisfied, the child will be born handicapped or deformed.[68] The position of the woman is that of being ideally superior, more complete, and naturally rich with nourishing substances. In the alternative social structure of Bauls and Fakirs, the necessity of gender equality (being *samān*) for the success of *yugala sādhanā* stands in opposition to the patriarchal model of their surrounding neighbors. Bauls support "independence of women and sex without procreation of children: these concepts destroy the idea of patriarchal and male-dominated society and families" (Jha 1999, 302). This is often theoretically translated into support for education and the economic independence of women. In reality, however, the concrete uplifting and empowerment of Baul and Fakir women are rarely possible in practice because of the social marginalization and impoverished conditions to which their families are frequently subjected.

Practices of religious transvestism among Bengali esoteric practitioners cannot be ascribed merely to a ritual and carnivalesque reversal of gender norms that works as a temporary release valve or a festive transgression that ultimately reinforces the dominant structure (Bakhtin 1984, Turner 1988). Instead, the reverse/subversive (*ulṭa*) strategy of resisting hegemonic constructions of gender and sexuality in the Baul sphere has its most radical outcome in the theoretical prohibition of contributing offspring to society. In the dominant society, a woman attracts the male substance into her body, thus creating new life within herself. What then ensues from this process is "the perpetuation of birth, death, and patrilineages" (Openshaw 2010, 200). But the outcome of reverse conception is that the man ultimately becomes like the woman, attracting her substance into himself, and creating a new being within his body. This inner conception does not result in offspring. As such, it does not perpetuate the ethics of lineage continuation, which is the goal of patrilineality. Cultural infertility and childlessness as a strategy of social protest is not achieved through renunciation and forced celibacy, but by going back to "the place from which one is born."[69] In so doing, antinomian groups of religious practitioners not only resist dominant patriarchal models of marital life, family structure, and socioeconomic patterns, but they also address their silent revolt against the classical Hindu renunciation traditions of *sannyāsī*s and celibate "*sadhu* society" (Openshaw 2004, 125–28), which rejects the slippery stream of family life (*saṃsāra*) in favor of the path of abstinence. As opposed to the main institutions of lonely asceticism, Bengali heterodox lineages officiate ceremonies of renunciation for consorted couples (*yugal sannyās*).[70] The objective of the practitioner is to become a *sādhu* without abstracting oneself from *saṃsāra*, in other words, by embracing all aspects of life through the transcendence of dichotomies like pure and impure or liberation and *saṃsāra*. This is the ideal of the *saṃsāre sannyāsī*, the one who is a renouncer within worldly life, as taught among the disciples of Bhaba Pagla (Lorea 2016, 93; 113).

Conceptual frameworks of performativity and liminality can help to understand the implicit social protest against the politics of gender that underlies Baul and Fakir songs and teachings. The practices of transcending and going beyond the limitations of one particular gender identity, transmitted among heterodox Bengali lineages, are performative as well as transformative. The *sādhanā* "stage," or the *sādhanā* "playground," of Baul ritual activity can be seen as a liminal space for gender transformation. It is useful to adopt the Turnerian concept of liminality (Turner 1967) here to reconcile and bring closer together the spheres of theater and *sādhanā*, which have never really been separate, as I demonstrated in the previous sections. Apart from being a space within which to enact femininity, the theater of *sādhanā* can be seen as a liminal space where social constructions of masculinity can be questioned and temporarily rejected. In the ritual "battlefield" of sexual intercourse (*sādhaner raṇ* or *sādhan samare*), practitioners impersonate neither men nor women, floating in a neutral or fluid gender state, resulting in the emergence of a genderless *mānuṣ* who is simply human. Such a fully and naturally "human" condition is not bestowed at birth but rather has to be realized through spiritual discipline and practice under a *guru*. The male devotees suspend the values of autonomy, independence, mastery, and assertiveness that the patriarchal social order demands of them, finding an alternative space to perform values of dependence, reciprocity, servitude, and humbleness, which are normatively associated with femininity (Kugle 2010).

Disguising oneself mentally and/or outwardly as a woman, the male practitioner not only steps beyond gender boundaries, but he also finds a privileged position to cross the line between life and death. Comparative studies on ritual mourning and lamentation have shown that it is often women who are the specialized officials of rituals that engage with life-to-death passages, due to their capacity to give life. The ability to give life thus also allows them to trespass along the border between pre/non-life to life (Suter 2008). Similarly, religious transvestism allows Bengali esoteric practitioners to disrupt gender barriers, and simultaneously to unsettle the neat lines that define life, death, and immortality.[71] A practitioner who, having become a "woman," has learned how to stop the cycle of generating and destroying semen, is called *amar* (immortal, without death).[72] When a couple of practitioners become accomplished in their consorted practice, they are called *jyānta marā*: dead while alive.[73]

In the theater of *sādhanā*, esoteric practitioners can stage the protest against societal norms that shape gender roles, families, and conjugal relationships. In this sense, not only are genders and gender roles socially created through the stylized repetition of performative acts, as Butler (1988) has argued, but also, through the ritual repetition of *sādhanā* acts played by heterodox religious practitioners, performance has the power to deconstruct gender. The ritual performance of transgender identities creates a genderless *mānuṣ*—the realized practitioner—that is ideally neither masculine nor feminine but is, at the same time, a sexually active being. Bengali oral traditions of males impregnated through yoga and barren mothers represent, if read in this perspective, a powerful vernacular, non-Western path to realize that "all gender is drag" (Butler 1993, 85). After ritually deconstructing socially molded sexual identities and gender roles, what is left is a simple human (*sahaja mānuṣ*) and his/her freedom to do without gender.

NOTES

1. This work was supported by the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, which provided office facilities and funding from September 2016 to July 2017. I am thankful to my colleagues at IIAS for their valuable feedback. I also wish to express my gratitude toward colleagues, practitioners, and informants, who helped in developing and improving this article with their precious suggestions, particularly Fakir Hriday Sai, Keith Cantù, Saymon Zakaria, and the anonymous reviewers for this journal.

2. The newly defined "heterodox" sects were described as indecent, obscene, immoral, and filthy (see Lorea 2016, 31–36). These included a number of religious groups ("*āola bāola karttābhajā neṛā darveśa saim̐ / sahajiẏā sakhī-bhābakī smārtta jāt-gosāim̐ / atibaṛī cūṛādhārī gauṛāṅga nāgarī / totā kahe e teror saṅga nāhi kari*" [Cakrabarti 1986, 6] according to a riddle attributed to Tota Ramdas) systematized as blasphemous Vaishnavas by Srila Bhaktivinoda Thakura (1838–1914) and his associates. On this matter, see also Sardella (2013, 61, 87). Therefore, when I refer to "heterodox Bengali lineages" in this article I do not intend to use the term in a diminishing or judgmental sense and I do not assume the unquestionable existence of one supposedly original orthodoxy: I simply indicate the groups that, because of particular historical and political reasons, came to be listed and condemned as heterodox.

3. The acceptance of the term "transvestism" in mainstream North American and European culture derives from its classification as a psychoanalytically diagnosed type of sexual paraphilia (the desire of wearing clothes that by gender-linked norms belong to the opposite sex in order to derive sexual satisfaction). Numerous anthropologists, though, have liberated the term from these connotations and have used it to describe practices of cross-dressing that serve religious and ritual purposes in certain societies (e.g. D'Anglure 1986). Scholars have

since then employed the expression "religious" or "ritual transvestism" in the latter acceptance (e.g. Puttick 1997, 192; Rashkin 2008, 113). Similarly, my usage of the expression does not imply a correspondence between cross-dressing and transgender sexuality.

4. Although it is problematic to apply the attribute "esoteric" in places other than Western esotericisms, I am here referring to lineages of Bengal that proclaim themselves to be the holders of a secret (*guhya*, *gupta*, or *gopan*) doctrine and a secret set of techniques for achieving mystical realization, which they access through stages of initiation. The attribute "esoteric" and its opposition to the term "exoteric" is reflected in the practitioners' emic opposition between *bahiraṅga* and *antaraṅga*, the outer aspect, or the profile to be kept in public, as opposed to the insiders' view on discipline and behavior (see Openshaw 2004, 88–91; 2010, 155; Lorea 2016, 56–60).

5. Several Bengali scholars have chosen to interpret Baul rituals and literature as "carnivalesque" (Rabbani 2012; Dasgupta 2013).

6. I borrow the term from the anthropological fieldwork experience of Rudrani Fakir (2005, 19), a researcher as well as practitioner of a lineage of Fakirs of Bangladesh.

7. The term *bāul* came to be associated with a practitioner from a Hindu background, while the term *phakir* (fakir) is now associated with a practitioner from a prevalently Muslim social milieu. This distinction is relatively recent and has to do with religious radicalization in South Asia. It was not uncommon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for non-Muslim poet-saints to call themselves *fakir*s (e.g. Ramprasad Sen, ca. 1718–75) and for practitioners of Muslim origins to call themselves *bāul* (e.g. Duddu Shah, 1841–1911).

8. Some practitioners clearly state that there are three human *jāti*s: men, women, and *napuṃsaka* (hermaphrodite), or a person of the "third gender" (personal collection of fieldwork recordings, Sandra C. S. Marques, Nadia, West Bengal, 16 December 2014). The three-sex model was an important feature of the ancient Indian worldview, which is still being drawn upon in the present, according to Zwilling and Sweet (2000, 99).

9. A recurrent saying among Bauls is *yā āche brahmāṇḍe tā āche e dehabhāṇḍe* (whatever is in the universe is also present in the vessel of the human body). This has been conventionally described by Baul scholars, including myself, in Tantric terms, as the conceptual identity between macrocosm and microcosm. Analyzing premodern texts of the Nath Siddhas, David Gordon White proposed instead to rethink the microcosmic yogic body and rephrase it as "macranthropy" (2011, 79–90), since the Nath yogi's body contains and potentially absorbs the universe. Without underestimating the influence of Nath ideas and jargon on the Baul tradition, I avoid applying the same concept in this context, since the Baul body is perceived heuristically, as an instrument that brings one to understand the cosmos. Knowing the components, the fluids, the cycles, and the mechanisms of the body (*dehatattva*) leads to the knowledge of the universe (*brahmajñān*).

10. This terminology derives from the dualism of the consciousness principle (*puruṣa*) and the material principle (*prakṛti*) in the Samkhya tradition that emerged in the early centuries of the common era. With the development of Tantric religious systems, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* were identified with the male and female principle, a polarity utilized for the interpretation of ultimate reality (Jacobsen 1996, 57–81). *Prakṛti* became feminized, and material nature came to be perceived as maternal nature (Brown 1986, 65–66). With the emergence of Shaktism, *prakṛti* became associated with the active female principle identified with the Great Goddess. In popular theology, *prakṛti*, *śakti*, and Radha all came to represent this same principle (Jacobsen 1996, 71). In modern Bengali, the term means primarily physical nature, but in sectorial religious language the term preserves the feminine interpretation. In the *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary* (Biswas 2000, 671), *prakṛti* is defined as "nature; behaviour, habit, instinct; natural qualities, nature; the external world, nature; the power that creates and regulates the world, Nature; the primordial female energy." When I use the term "nature" in this article (for example, "feminine nature" as a tentative translation of *nārī bhāb/svabhāb*), I refer to those characteristics that are culturally described and interpreted as given by nature, taking into consideration the reciprocal influences between culture and biology in the discourse on sex and gender (see Martin 1991, Oudshoorn 1994, 6–11).

11. It is very difficult to talk about *sādhanā* in generic terms, since there is no single and universally valid set of practices applied by all lineages. The ascending stages of practice and the techniques utilized according to each stage can vary depending on the particularities of each lineage, the *guru*'s situational instructions addressed to a particular disciple, and the *sādhanā* stage where the disciple is positioned (these are generally four: *sthūla*, *prabarta*, *sādhak*, and *siddha* [see Dimock 1966, 222–25]). Total retention of semen is achieved at a high stage of practice, while "beginners" are often instructed to perform sexual *sādhanā* during the woman's menstrual period, so that if ejaculation accidentally occurs this does not lead to a pregnancy. In this case, semen can be either discharged externally and then ingested together with uterine blood, or, according to the *guru*'s directions, the disciple can practice his skills in drawing it back into the bladder through the so-called "arrow of suction/absorption" (*śoṣaṇ bāṇ*). On the yogic practice of urethral suction (*vajrolī mudrā*) see James Mallinson (2013). A general saying states that it is acceptable to lose semen twelve times per year, although some lineages believe that loss of semen has only a detrimental effect and therefore has to be completely avoided, at least until mastering the control of production and discharge (a state called *suṭal*; see also Jha 1999, 351).

12. The actual situation is far more complex and varied than the ideal model suggests. Baul and Fakir couples can have one or more children, whether by choice or by "mistake" (Knight 2011, 48–52). Certain lineages do not require women to renounce procreation. For example, Bhaba Pagla's community of disciples that I studied (Lorea 2016) regard as a crime the male practitioner's refusal to give a child to a female consort who wants one, and in this case the fathers still maintain their status as *brahmacārya*s (a celibate spiritual practitioner, or one who preserves his *brahma*, a code word for semen among Bauls). Other lineages require the practitioners to have one child at the initial stage of their spiritual training, so that the teacher can make sure that later "childlessness" is the result of correct practice, rather than being due to impotence or infertility.

13. Distancing myself from feminist psychoanalytical keys, purportedly intended to unfold a supposedly universal male psyche—which could lead to simplistic interpretations of this phenomenon as a sanctified "womb envy" (Horney 1967)—I attempt to localize and contextualize such practices here.

14. According to D. G. White (1996, 53), India's fascination with alchemy and its developments into inner alchemical processes on bodily elements probably originated as a result of early contacts with China. The Taoist alchemical tradition may have reached India through maritime routes as early as the second century CE. The influences of Taoism on Tantrism and Yoga have been discussed by Needham (1983, 257–88). For the specific context of Baul practices, see Bhattacarya (1957, 523–28).

15. An exception from the Mahabharata may be represented by the story of King Yuvanashva, who drank a magic potion that the gods prepared for his childless wife that he mistakenly took to quench his thirst. In doing so, the king became pregnant. See Pattanaik (2008).

16. The image of the barren woman is particularly recurrent in the corpus of songs of the Kartabhajas (see Urban 2001), a group of practitioners who trace their spiritual lineages back to Aul Cand. Their main center is located in the Nadia district of West Bengal. In their songs the barren woman is elevated to the position of a helms-woman in the turbulent river of human existence: "She rows the boat, hoists the sail, sits at the helm and tows it to the landing place" (Banerjee 1995, 48). The author of this quote questionably interpreted these images as a glorification of the downtrodden, the ill, and the deformed, as the Kartabhaja religion was particularly popular among these devotees (ibid.).

17. It is believed that female Fakir practitioners acquire such control of their bodily cycles and mechanisms that they can voluntarily enter menopause or postpone it according to their desire (Fakir 2005, 11–12).

18. Often quoted as an ancestor of contemporary Baul songs (Kvaerne 1977, 8; Capwell 1986, 33, 83–85; Jha 2009, 11), the genre of Tantric Buddhist songs known as *caryāpada* (originating in the eleventh century, according to Kvaerne [1977, 5–7]) offers similar inventories of metaphors: "The ox has calved but the cow is barren… The song of the noble Dhendhana is

understood by few" (ibid., 202–03). An almost identical vocabulary of tropes can be spotted in the later tradition of the songs of the Sant poets: an enigmatic poem ascribed to Kabir describes a city "where bulls get pregnant, cows are barren/and calves give milk three times a day" (Mehrotra 2011, note 120). On the "upside-down language" of Kabir see Hess (1983).

19. That fruitful *sādhanā* requires both the man and the woman to become "neutral" in terms of gender, thus equal (*samān*), is evident in numerous song texts, as I discuss in the next sections. In the available sources testifying similar practices I could not find any explicit injunction addressed toward the female practitioner, in which she is recommended to "become a man." While songs addressed to the female practitioner do exist and are alive in the performance tradition, songs on the transcendence of gender identity seem to be addressed either to the couple (for them to "exchange" their identity (*svabhāva*)) or to the male *sādhaka* alone. At this point in research, I am persuaded to believe that the former kind of song (that is, on the equality of the couple and the bilateral necessity for crossing gender boundaries) was more common in the past, while more recent songs concentrate on the male practice of acquiring femininity. It has been suspected that traditional "feminine culture" among Fakirs has been lost and that a considerable part of women lineages, teachers, and song compositions is simply a "missing doctrine (*tattva*)" (Fakir 2005, 187).

20. Also reported in Openshaw (2004, 181), and in Jha (1999, 348). For the translation of the word *prakṛti* see note 9.

21. "*ek kṛṣṇa jagater pati ār sab prakṛti / prakṛti haẏe karo prakṛti bhajan tabei habe gopīnir śaraṇ / nā hale gopīr bhābāśraẏkaraṇ habe nā gurur bhajane mati*" (Mannan 2009, 283–84).

22. Several songs bearing Lalan Fakir's name (but most probably composed by somebody else; see Salomon 1991 on this matter) discuss the necessity of "becoming a woman." For example: "*prabarter kāj āge sāro / meẏe haẏe meẏe dharo ... meẏe haẏe meẏer beśe bhakti sādhan karo base*" (Mannan 2009, 260–61), meaning, first accomplish the activities of the *prabarta* (initial) stage [of *sādhanā*] / being female take a female companion... being female, disguised as (or, in the role of) a female, perform the *sādhanā* of love. Another song attributed to Lalan (ibid. 417–18) instructs the practitioner to get over his sexual identity: "*liṅga thākle se ki puruṣ haẏ*," meaning, if gender awareness remains, how can one be a man? The same verse can also be understood as the following: is a man such for the fact of having a penis?

23. "*prakṛti haiẏā karo prakṛti saṅga / dine dine bāṛe tār prem taraṅga / prakṛti nā haẏe ye kare prakṛti sambhāṣaṇ / niścaẏ jānibe dohe narake gaman.*"

24. *Dīkṣā guru* is the person from which a new disciple is given the initiatory *mantra*. He (normally a man) takes a father-like role, giving the disciple a new birth within the rank of the lineage. The *śikṣā guru* teaches esoteric practices and techniques for control and refinement of the body, the breath, and the mind. He/she is responsible for the disciple's progression on the spiritual path (see also Openshaw 2004, 141–51). At a certain stage of the male disciple's *sādhanā*, the *śikṣā guru* is his own female consort (and vice versa), to whom he has to surrender, since only through her grace can he be successful in the practice of seminal retention (*basturakṣā*).

25. Personal collection of field recordings, Badkulla (West Bengal), June 12, 2012.

26. For an overview on the theology of debt in ancient India see Malamoud (1980) and Hiltebeitel (2011, 185–86). The male-centered Brahminical idea of debt is diametrically opposed to the Baul and Fakir concept of being indebted toward the woman for her motherly compassion and nourishing substances that give and sustain new life.

27. "*āmār man sājo prakṛti / prakṛtir svabhāb dharo, sādhan karo, ūrdhva habe deher rati.*" In my translation, "nature" is a tentative and generic rendition of *svabhāb* ("own being"), which denotes an inherent disposition, one's true essence, essential nature. In early philosophical texts it was used in a sense similar to *prakṛti* meaning material culture, although in some texts *prakṛti* was used to categorize gender (for example, *tṛtīẏāprakṛti* as "people of the third sex," found in classic Ayurvedic literature, the *Caraka Saṃhitā*; in treatises dealing with erotica, *Kāmaśāstra*; and dramaturgy, *Nāṭyaśāstra* [see Zwilling and Sweet 2000]). Womanhood in Baul songs seems to be referred to as a *svabhāva* and a *jāti*. It is something

acquired by birth, a condition of nature. Nevertheless, such innate qualities can be emulated and acquired. Thus, in songs addressed to male disciples womanhood is a *bhāb*, a category of enacted being (for example, *nārī bhāb*), and a set of behavioral norms (for example, *prakṛti ācār* [see note 39]), suggesting that gender is not only viewed as determined by birth, biological, and psychological characteristics, but also by a series of social and cultural conventions regulating gendered conduct.

28. "*baidik ek sādhan āche tāre rākho āge piche / sei sādhan karte gele guru hāẏe nijpati.*"

29. Bauls do not refer to their wives as *strī*, the conventional term for a wife in the dominant culture, but simply as *mā* (mother) or as a companion in life (*saṅginī* or the gender-neutral *sadhu-saṅgī*), stressing the equality between partners (being *samān*). Baul ethics recommend to behave with any person as if she was a member of the family, "one's own" (*āpan*).

30. *rādhā nā hale nije*
kṛṣṇa prem jānā yāẏ kise.
nar-nārī napuṃsuk [sic] *jane*
se ki kṛṣṇa bhajan jāne.
akaitab prem habe kyāne
lenā brahma liṅga marma bujhe.

rādhā bhāb kānti yār mane udaẏ
kṛṣṇa prem tāhāri haẏ
kṛṣṇa anurāg bairāgya bhāb
man majeche tār Kṛṣṇa rase.

liṅga jñān āche yār
kṛṣṇa prem duḥsādhya tār
rahmān bale halo nā āmār
brahma liṅga elo nā baśe.

31. On the genderlessness of the source of creation as described by Rig Vedic poets and later in the Brahmanas and Samhitas, see Zwilling and Sweet (2000, 101).

32. For instance in the song *sādhan samare yeo nā ebāre* ascribed to Bhaba Pagla (Lorea 2016, 264).

33. Literally a "non male," the term came to be adopted as the technical term for the third grammatical gender, as well as for the third sex: "it seems that from its earliest recorded uses *napuṃsaka* was a polysemous term, carrying connotations of lack of procreative/generative ability, androgyny, hermaphroditism and castration" (Zwilling and Sweet 2000, 104).

34. For a deeper analysis of the compromises and negotiations in Baul women's everyday lives, see Knight (2011).

35. One example is the Patuli lineage in Bardhaman district, where female adepts wear *dhoti*s, an unstitched cloth that men traditionally wear (Jha 1999, 348).

36. I am referring to the well-known song *sab loke kaẏ lālan kī jāt e saṃsāre* (Everybody asks, which caste is Lalon's, in this world?).

37. See also the Vaishnava visualization practice of *mañjarī sādhanā* (meditative identification with a young maiden that assists and serves Radha and Krishna's love), described in Delmonico and Sarkar (2015) and in Sarbadhikary (2015).

38. "*prakṛti haiẏā puruṣ ācār / karibe nārīr saṅga.*"

39. "*prakṛti ācār puruṣ bebhār ye janā jānite pare.*"

40. Parts of the manuscript were copied in 1852, but the texts could be much older and are difficult to date.

41. "*Sādhibe sṛṅgār rasa śuna sarba bhakta / liṅge liṅga die duhe rabe ekahukto / Duhe duhābhābi hae jaṛita rahibe / liṅge liṅga ghariṣaṇ kabhu nā karibe / […] madhur sṛṅgār bartamān habe rasa / madhur sṛṅgār haẏ sākṣāte śrīkṛṣṇa.*"

42. The authors provide an English translation as follows: “putting his disposition (*svabhāva*, here, penis) in her place. Take her own disposition (*svabhāva*, here, vagina) carefully” (Delmonico and Sarkar 2015, 170–71). I am uneasy with the translation of *svabhāb* as a code word for penis or vagina since the literal translation of *svabhāb* as one’s “own nature” (see note 26 above) makes perfect sense in the context of exchanging gendered roles during ritualized sexual *sādhanā*.

43. The original Bengali text is given in Delmonico and Sarkar (2015, 171).

44. Religious practitioners from areas of Muslim majority not only define themselves as Muslim but also as “more real” Muslim, as opposed to orthodox (*niṣṭhābān*) Muslims, considered to be those punctiliously observant of the scriptural law, i.e. Sharī’at. On the idea of a multiplicity of legitimate, local, practiced Islams, as opposed to a monolithic, single, and pristine “Islam,” see Ahmed (2016).

45. Particularly at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh and at the shrine of Madhu Lal Hosayn in Lahor (see Anjum 2015a, 2015b).

46. I am very grateful to my friend and colleague Keith Cantù for suggesting this song to me for analysis.

47. “What a weird show, the fakir ways of the Sada Suhagini saints!” (*ājab raṅ fakiri sādā sohāginī sāim̊*,), in Wakil Ahmad (2002, 186, 510). The song with annotated comments by Carol Salomon has been published in the recent volume edited by Cantù and Zakaria (see Salomon 2017, 86–87).

48. “*sarbakeśī mukhe dāṛi / parane tār cuṛi sāṛi / kothā haite elo e siṛi […] sādā sohāginīr bhābe / prakṛti haite habe / Lālan kaẏ man pābi tabe / bhāb sumudre thāi*.”

49. Haberman, for instance, in the context of Vaishnava cross-dressers (*sakhī bekhi*) states that, “this group must be distinguished from other groups of men in India who dress as women for any variety of reasons, many not religious” (1988, 193), implying both performative and erotic reasons.

50. Several oral exegeses of this enigmatic verse have been collected by Urban (1998, 233).

51. “*meẏe habe hijrā, puruṣi habe khojā, tabe habe kartābhajā*.”

52. “*tumi dibya cakṣe dekh ceẏe / mānuṣ kakhan puruṣ kakhan meẏe / mānuṣer anta peẏe / nārī-hijre puruṣ khojā / mānuṣ bhajan ati sojā*.”

53. Several articles have been written in response to Kripal’s reductionist arguments (for instance, Larson 1998); a book by Swami Tyagananda systematically deconstructs Kripal’s translations and misinterpretations (Tyagananda and Vrajaprana 2010).

54. It is defined as a syndrome of female impersonation in a natal male who is able to relate sexually and erotically with men. They may be hormonally but not surgically sexually reassigned. The term was first suggested by John Money and Margaret Lamacz (1984).

55. Sukanya Chakrabarti summarized this in very convincing terms while discussing the *bhadra* (polite, educated) qualification of the *bhadralok* self and social being: “The colonizer’s patronizing approach towards the colonized, their assumed responsibility to ‘educate’ the ‘uneducated’, to ‘purify’ the barbaric Other can all be considered as the processes of educating the latter in matters of shame and respectability, obscenity and politeness” (Chakrabarti 2016, 33).

56. Some recordings of this song are available on YouTube (see Elomelo Eleven 2017).

57. The movie starred the filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh, an icon of the Indian LGBT community, as its main actor. See *Ār ekṭi premer galpa* (Just another love story), which was released in 2010 and directed by Kaushik Ganguly.

58. According to Zwilling and Sweet (2000, 120), people of the “third sex” (*napuṃsaka* or *tṛtīẏāprakṛti*) were associated with transvestism and dancing both in later Vedic ritual texts and in the epics.

59. As Hansen explains, gynemimetic performers “were desired in their own right, as men who embodied the feminine” (2002, 164).

60. Although biographies of Baul masters and practitioners are scarce and hard to find, scattered information on Baul personal lives where training in folk theater is mentioned can be found in different sources. For instance, the father of Hanssen's main informant Tara (see Hanssen 2006) used to play female roles. The saint-composer Bhaba Pagla was in his youth a talented actor of *yātrā* (Bandyopadhyay 1985, 60). Jha reports short biographies of Baul and Fakir composers who used to perform as folk theater actors (i.e. Shashanka Shekhar Das Bairagya, 1911–2006; Jha 2009, 493). During my fieldwork, several practitioners living in Birbhum said that they started performing as folk theater actors and that their *guru*s were known for representing women characters (e.g. Gopinath Das Baul played the role of female characters in folk theater; see Lorea 2016, 59). Saimon Zakaria, indefatigable researcher of Bengali folklore for the Bangla Academy in Dhaka, informed me that some Sufi *sādhaka*s in Bangladesh used to be professional female impersonators in *yātrā* theater (personal communication).

61. Tantric communities in general suffered from extreme misrepresentation in the works of British orientalists, although the nuanced reception and representation of Tantric systems was far from being simplistically and straightforwardly denigrating (the fascinating work of Sir John Woodroffe alias Arthur Avalon rehabilitated with dedication and romanticism ideas on Tantra held by Western orientalists, repulsed by its antinomian, secretive, and erotic reputation; see Taylor 2001). The Victorian interest in sexuality and its aberration, as well as the fetishization of the exotic Orient often resulted in vehement condemnation of Tantric religiosity as the most corrupted and degenerate aspect of Hinduism (for example, Monier-Williams 1878, 122–26). Bengali intellectuals, such as Benoytosh Bhattacharya, assimilated and propagated this vision through their works to the extent that the term *tāntrik* is now synonymous with suspiciously sexy, dangerous, and occult oriented in vernacular understanding (see Urban 2003). This vision is confirmed by my informants and interlocutors, who refuse to identify their beliefs and practices with anything *tāntrik*.

62. Derogatory descriptions of the religious groups of ritual cross-dressers *sakhī bhekī* appear very explicitly in the work of the British orientalist H. H. Wilson (1846, 111) and are reiterated with very similar adjectives and undertones by later Hindu reformers (see Bhandarkar 1913, 86).

63. A more recent and explicit stance against religious transvestism was pronounced by Srila Prabhupada, the founder of the ISKCON movement in the United States. He disseminated his own interpretation of Vaishnava doctrine internationally. He wrote, "there are so many *apasampradāya*s, thirteen at least in the counting by Bhaktivinoda Thakura: *āula*, *bāula*, *kartābhajā*, *neṛā*, *darabeśa*, *sāim̐*, *sahajiẏā*, *sakhībekhi*... This *sakhībekhi* [...] They are passing as Caitanya Mahāprabhu's sampradāẏa. But they're the worst, rejected. The *sakhībekhi*, dressing like... to cheat Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa is after the *gopī*s, so they have dressed like *gopī*, and Kṛṣṇa does not know that he's a rascal man. (laughter) Just see. This is their intelligence, … I have become a *sakhī*. Kṛṣṇa will embrace me and kiss me. So Kṛṣṇa is so fool. (laughs) These rascals are doing that" (Prabhupada 1977).

64. Stewart suggested that practices like those of the *sakhī bhāvaka*s were available and open to the public. They became increasingly encrypted during Muslim dominance and ultimately, with the growth of British colonial power, "the Sahajiẏās begun to feel the pressure to become more invisible than ever" (Stewart 1990, 28). Urban agrees and confirms in his study on the Kartabhajas' use of secret language that the Sahajiya schools faced increasing persecution throughout the colonial period: "progressively forced underground […] the Sahajiẏās developed new and more ingenious methods for concealing their practices from the eyes of the outside world" (Urban 1998, 228).

65. A recent short film titled *Sakhi* by the Bengali director Arindam Ray reinforces this rhetoric, showing a group of *sakhī bheki*s molesting and sodomizing a new initiate (Ray 2016).

66. In Indian mythology and folklore, tales of sexual transformation are so recurrent that scholars of folklore have traced the motif of sex change as a particularly Indian theme. Norman Brown (1927) analyzed the recurrent strategies that are used in myths and folk tales to transform men into women and vice versa. He shows that although switching gender and changing sexual identity is a comparatively frequent event in Indian myths and folk tales, the

transformation from man to woman is generally undesirable, unexpected, and unwelcome by the male character.

67. Medical and doctrinal texts reveal a great deal of information on dominant ideas concerning sexuality. For example, women should not sit on top of men during copulation, and men are not supposed to perform oral sex, since undesirable progeny would be born out of their union. If a daughter is conceived from a man having sexual intercourse with a woman in the dominant position, she will be born as a lesbian (Sweet and Zwilling 1993, 597). If a man has oral sex with a woman before intercourse and a son is conceived, he will be prone to enjoy oral sex with other men (Das 2008, loc. 1399 of 12804, Kindle).

68. On Baul and Fakir beliefs and practices about conception and contraception, see particularly Lorea (2014).

69. A common saying among my informants is "*yekhāne janma sekhāne maraṇ*," meaning one dies in the place where he was born. A verse of the composer Bhaba Pagla makes a very clear connection between physiological and sexual "death": "*mūlādhār ādhāre janma mṛtyu kāraṇ*," meaning the vessel in the *cakra* at the base of the spinal cord, in which sexual energy dwells, is the cause of both life and death.

70. More in-depth discussion on this topic can be found in Openshaw's article on joint renunciation (2007).

71. The idea of the double trespassing of gender boundaries as well as life/death boundaries through religious transvestism has been underlined in an article on the Sumerian practice of male priests (*gala*) who dressed up as women to perform ritual mourning (Bachvarova 2008). Transgender behavior, according to the author, "allowed men to tap into the conciliatory powers of women and enabled the breaching of the other natural barrier, that between living and dead" (ibid., 19).

72. See, for instance, the song *mama sādhan samare amar haiẏā* (Having become immortal in the battle-field of *sādhanā*). A recorded version has been performed by Hemonti Shukla (see Various Artists 2010, track 12).

73. The expression is used in numerous songs. A famous example is *ogo jyānte marā prem sādhan kī pārbe torā?* (Can you do the *sādhanā* of love being dead while alive?), attributed to Lalan Fakir (two versions of the song are transcribed in Ahmad 2002, 226, 229).

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