

# Encountering Kālī

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

EDITED BY

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## CHAPTER 4

## Dominating Kālī

*Hindu Family Values and Tantric Power*

*Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder*

A few years ago, in 1991, we investigated the meanings that Oriya Hindus living in the temple town of Bhubaneswar attach to a particular Tantric icon of the goddess Kālī—the one in which the Goddess is depicted with her eyes bulging and tongue out, equipped with the weapons and emblems of all the male gods, grasping a bloody decapitated head, and with her foot placed squarely on the chest of a supine Śiva (fig. 4.1). In this earlier study, we were able to describe the systematic character of storytelling norms about the icon. Across storytellers, the elements of meaning form a “Guttman scale,” in which one can predict which meanings are narrated. Expert storytellers differ from novice storytellers in an orderly way; they elaborate on the significance of the scene depicted in the icon by adding particular modules of meanings, which we recorded and analyzed. We also discovered that the particular constellation of elements that forms the contemporary Oriya story is not found in its entirety in any Sanskrit or Oriya text.

In this chapter, we suggest that this unmistakably Tantric icon with its emphatic, extreme representation of female power has been almost completely assimilated into mainstream Hinduism as it is practiced today in the temple town of Bhubaneswar. More important, the meanings of the icon appear to have undergone radical reconstruction. Far from highlighting the potency of the female and her power to create and destroy with impunity,

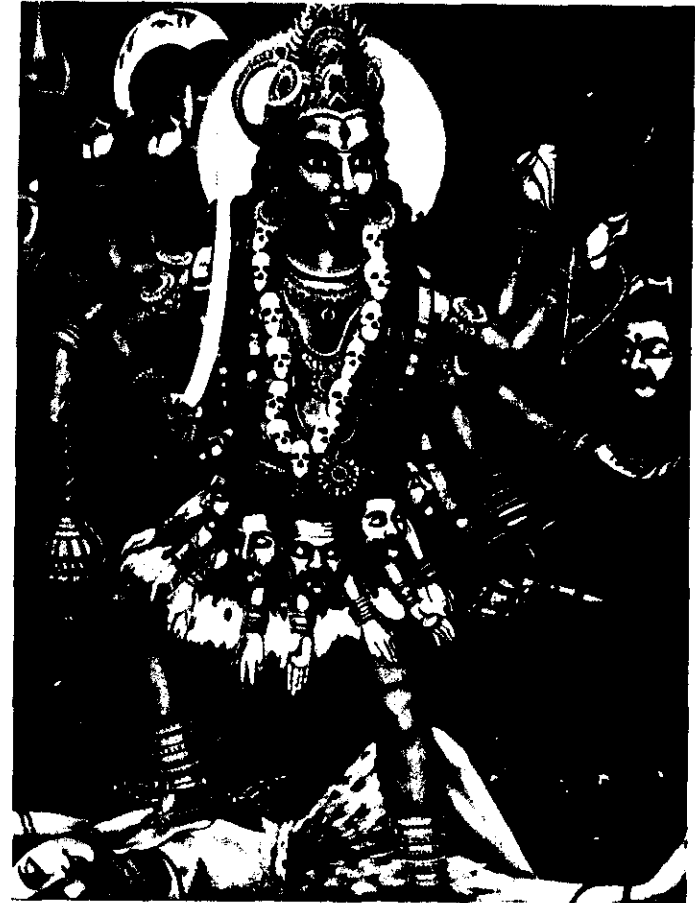


Figure 4.1 Calendar art depiction of Kālī as worshipped in Orissa, purchased in Bhubaneswar by Usha Menon.

the icon is used to uphold Hindu family values, especially those encouraging female self-control and self-restraint.

We further suggest that a particular Oriya text, dating back to the fifteenth century—the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*—provided the conceptual framework for a creative interpretation of this Tantric icon, an interpretation that has today become a powerful way of persuading listeners of the importance of respectful self-restraint in maintaining social relations and preserving harmony within the family.

In asserting that this is the predominant way of interpreting the icon today, it needs to be emphasized that a more “authentic” Tantric understand-

ing of the icon continues to have its adherents, few though they may admittedly be. And to demonstrate the creative distance that lies between these two interpretations, both will be presented: the one normative in the temple town; and the other a rather esoteric version propounded by only a couple of knowledgeable specialists.

Research for this study was done in the neighborhood around the Liṅgarāj temple in Bhubaneswar.<sup>1</sup> This medieval temple, dedicated to the god Śiva and dating back to the eleventh to twelfth centuries, is a fairly important pilgrimage site. Hindu pilgrims making their way to Jagannātha at Puri invariably stop and worship here before proceeding south.

For the Oriya Hindus who live here, this particular iconic representation of the Goddess has become a core cultural symbol—practically everyone recognizes this icon and identifies the Goddess correctly. Perhaps this is hardly surprising when one considers that on the main road leading to the Liṅgarāj temple, there is a small temple, the Kāpālī Mandir, dedicated to the Goddess, in which the object of worship is a granite representation of Kālī in precisely this divine posture.

However, only two men out of the ninety-two men and women who participated in the earlier study were able to identify the origin of the icon as Tantric; the rest simply said that this is the typical way Kālī is portrayed, her distinguishing mark (*lakṣaṇa*) being the protruding tongue displaying the emotion *lajjā* (shame) at having stepped on her husband, Śiva.

#### THE ESOTERIC VERSUS THE NORMATIVE

Not surprisingly, the two men who were aware of the Tantric meanings of the icon produced stories that diverged sharply from those narrated by the others. Both men were close to seventy years of age, both were married, both were the heads of large extended families, and both had been priests at Liṅgarāj for most of their adult lives. Both admitted to having attended some Tantric ceremonies, although neither claimed to be a true worshipper of the Goddess. One of their accounts, which broadly resembles the description of the Goddess in the *Mahanirvāṇa Tantra* (4.34),<sup>2</sup> is given below:

Q. *Do you recognize this picture?*

A. This is the Tantric depiction of Kālī. Kālī here is naked, she has thrown Śiva to the ground and is standing on him. She displays here absolute, overwhelming power. She is in a terrible rage—wearing her garland of skulls and in each arm a weapon of destruction: look, in this hand, the *triśūla* [trident], in this the *cakra* [disc], in this the sword, in this the sickle, in this the bow and arrow—this is how Kālī is shown in Tantric *pūjās* where the devotee is praying to the Goddess for perfect knowledge and awareness. All this kind of worship goes on in the Rama-

krishna Mission—the monks there are all Tāntrikas and they know all about it. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, both great sages, knew about such *śakti pūjās* and Tantric rites.

Q. *Can you tell me the story that is associated with this picture?*

A. In all these Tantric *pūjās*, the goal is to acquire perfect knowledge and ultimate power. The naked devotee worships Mother on a dark, moonless night in a cremation ground. The offerings are meat and alcohol. Ordinary people cannot participate in such worship—if they were even to witness it, they would go mad. I attended such worship once, but I am not a true worshipper, and I have no special knowledge of Tantric worship.

Q. *How would you describe Kālī's expression here?*

A. She is the image of fury.

Q. *You mean she is angry? She is in a rage?*

A. Yes . . . yes. You must understand that this is how she appears to her devotee—he has to have the strength of mind to withstand her fierceness—she is not mild or tender but cruel and demanding and frightening.

Q. *Do you think that she has put out her tongue in anger?*

A. Yes, she has put out her tongue in anger. Kālī is always angry, she is always creating and at the same time destroying life. Here you see her standing with her foot placed squarely on Śiva's chest—when the time comes for the universe to be destroyed entirely, no one will be spared, not even the gods; whether Viṣṇu or Śiva, everyone will be destroyed.

Q. *Some people say that she is feeling deeply ashamed at having stepped on her husband and that is why she has bitten her tongue. You don't agree?*

A. People have different views—people believe whatever makes them feel comfortable, and if they like to think that Kālī is ashamed, then let them. What I have told you is what the special devotees of Kālī believe. They believe that Mother is supreme; even Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva are her servants.

Q. *Have you seen this expression—that is, Kālī's here—in daily life?*

A. No, if one were to see this expression on an ordinary human being's face, he would have to be mad—to have lost all his senses. Kālī, in fact, is mad with rage but her rage has nothing that is remotely human about it; it is a divine rage, which only a human being who has completely lost his mind can duplicate.

Q. *Can you tell me why Śiva is lying on the ground?*

A. Kālī has thrown him to the ground, and she puts her foot on him to make clear that she is supreme.

Q. So you don't think that he is lying on the ground to subdue Kālī?

A. No, that is beyond Śiva's capacity. If Kālī becomes calm, it is because she wishes to, not because she is persuaded to be so. Even to her most faithful devotee, Kālī's actions sometimes don't make sense, but life itself often doesn't make sense, so what can one say?

Q. Who would you say is dominant in this picture—is it Kālī or Śiva?

A. Obviously, Kālī. But it is also important to realize that while Śakti is absolutely necessary for the creation and evolution of the universe, by itself even Śakti cannot achieve anything—Śakti has to combine with consciousness for the process of creation to take place, and so consciousness as symbolized by Śiva has a unique position. Just as it is only through the union of a man and a woman that a child can be conceived, so too, only when Śakti and Cit (consciousness) come together does creation occur.

For this narrator, the meaning of the icon centers unequivocally on the supreme and awesome power of the Goddess. His interpretation makes no concessions to commonly held notions about traditional hierarchy and social relations, and he explicitly denies the notion that Kālī bites her tongue to express the *lajjā* she feels when she realizes the degree to which she has forgotten herself and her duty toward her husband, Śiva.

A comparison between this understanding of the icon, known and shared by only two of our narrators, with the story that is far more commonly shared in this neighborhood enables one to appreciate the many divergences that separate these two interpretations. In sharp contrast to the Tantric narration, consider the most elaborate version of the story as it is typically told.

This particular narrator was a 74-year-old Brahman man, the father of three sons and two daughters. He used to run a small hotel near Bhubaneswar railway station, but he retired a few years ago, handing over his business to his second son. At the time of the interview, he lived with his wife, his son, and his son's family, spending his days keeping an eye on his grandchildren and going regularly to the Liṅgarāj Temple.

Q. Do you recognize this picture?

A. Kālī.

Q. Can you describe the incident that is portrayed in this picture?

A. This is about the time when Mahiṣāsura became so powerful that he tortured everyone on earth and heaven. He had obtained a boon from the gods according to which no male could kill him. All the gods then went to Nārāyaṇa and they pondered on ways to destroy Mahiṣāsura. Each contributed the strength and energy of his consciousness—his *bindu*—and from that Durgā was created. But when Durgā was told that she had to kill Mahiṣāsura, she said that she needed weapons to

do so, and so all the gods gave her their weapons. Armed thus, Durgā went into battle. She fought bravely, but she found it impossible to kill the demon—he was too strong and clever. You see, the gods had forgotten to tell her that the boon Mahiṣāsura had obtained from Brahmā was that he would only die at the hands of a naked female. Durgā finally became desperate, and she appealed to Maṅgalā to suggest some way to kill Mahiṣāsura. Maṅgalā then told her that the only way was to take off her clothes, that the demon would only lose strength when confronted by a naked woman. So Durgā did as she was advised to. She stripped, and within seconds of seeing her, Mahiṣāsura's strength waned, and he died under her sword. After killing him, a terrible rage entered Durgā's mind, and she asked herself, "What kind of gods are these that give to demons such boons, and apart from that, what kind of gods are these that they do not have the honesty to tell me the truth before sending me into battle?" She decided that such a world with such gods did not deserve to survive and she took on the form of Kālī and went on a mad rampage, devouring every living creature that came in her way. Now, the gods were in a terrible quandary—they had all given her their weapons—they were helpless, without any weapons, while she had a weapon in each one of her ten arms: how could Kālī be checked and who would check her in her mad dance of destruction? Again, the gods all gathered and Nārāyaṇa decided that only Mahādeva (Śiva) could check Kālī, and so he advised the gods to appeal to him. Now, Śiva is an ascetic, a yogi who has no interest in what happens in the world. But when all the gods begged him to intervene, he agreed to do his best—he went and lay in her path. Kālī, absorbed in her dance of destruction, was unaware that Śiva lay in her path, and so she stepped on him all unknowing. When she put her foot on Śiva's chest, she bit her tongue, saying, "Oh! my husband!" There is in Mahādeva a *tejas*, a special quality of his body that penetrated hers, that made her look down, that made her see reason. She had been so angry that she had gone beyond reason, but once she recognized him, she became still and calm. This is the story about that time.

Q. How would you describe the expression on her face?

A. She had been extremely angry but when her foot fell on Mahādeva's chest—after all, he is her own husband—she bit her tongue and became still; gradually her anger went down.

Q. So is there still any anger in her expression?

A. Oh yes, in her eyes you can still see the light of anger shining.

Q. And her tongue? What is she feeling when she bites it?

A. What else but *lajjā*? *Lajjā* . . . because she did something unforgivable, she is feeling *lajjā*.

Q. So would you say that her expression is a blend of both anger and shame?

A. Yes, that is right.

Q. Have you ever seen this expression in daily life?

A. Is that possible? Can humans mimic gods? I don't think so.

Q. Is Kālī merely stepping on Śiva or is she actually dancing on him?

A. As I told you earlier on, Kālī was dancing when her foot fell on Śiva, but just a touch was enough for her to recognize that this was not just anyone lying under her foot, which is why she looked down and to her deep *lajjā* saw that she had stamped on her own husband's chest.

Q. So you were saying that Śiva was lying on the ground because . . . ?

A. He had been asked by all the gods to do something to cool Kālī down.

Q. He was, in a sense, trying to subdue her?

A. No, no, help her check herself, help her understand that what she was doing was wrong and harmful, even disgraceful.

Q. Who do you see as dominant in this picture—Kālī or Śiva?

A. Let me talk about this in terms of Śakti—Śakti is indivisible, Śiva has no *śakti* of his own, it is all Devi's, and who is Devi? She is Kālī, she is Durgā, she is Pārvatī. She is self-creating, self-generating; while he is born of her, he takes his strength from her. And yet, he does have something that is uniquely his—he is pure consciousness—if he is the fire, then she is the energy with which the fire burns, and so it is foolish to talk of him being stronger or her being stronger; they need each other, and we can't talk of one without talking of the other.

This more popular interpretation of Kālī's icon appears to elaborate somewhat ambivalent views regarding female power. At one level, the prevailing notion seems to be that female power is, in and of itself, essentially dangerous, since it is always in imminent danger of slipping out of control. At another level, there is the sense that men are often so treacherous and exploitative that women would be justified in destroying the world. But the main message appears to be that the world survives and the flow of life proceeds as it ought to when women regulate, control, and hold *lajjā* in their power, when they cultivate their capacity to experience *lajjā*, and when they display that emotion appropriately.

#### COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE KĀLĪ ICON

The story given above was the kind produced by our more competent informants. In all, we collected ninety-two stories told us by twenty-six men and sixty-six women. Obviously, not all of our informants were equally expert or equally familiar with the cultural norms necessary for interpreting the icon. However, for the majority of them (seventy-one out of ninety), it

symbolized the following: it is female power that energizes the world, but such power when unchecked has disastrous consequences; furthermore, such power can only be effectively checked and regulated from within oneself, through developing a sensitivity to the emotion of *lajjā*. According to these Oriya Hindus, to be full of *lajjā* is to be refined, to be civilized, to be a moral being. Clearly, the narrator of the first "Tantric" story, by explicitly rejecting these local values in his narration, was operating under the influence of a very different canon of storytelling, one that is not normative in the temple town of Bhubaneswar.

Before attempting to suggest how it is that an icon that invokes images of supreme female power is used today to exemplify the idea that respectful self-restraint and a heightened consciousness of one's social and domestic obligations are essential attributes of female virtue, we need to recapitulate some of the findings that emerged from our earlier study.

An analysis and Guttman scaling of the narrations suggested that the stories produced by our ninety-two informants could be decomposed into twenty-five elements of meaning, which could be grouped into three modules, each telling an internally consistent, self-sufficient mini-story (table 4.1).<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, the simplest story provided the background for a more detailed version at a higher level of complexity, and this version in turn set the stage for the most detailed interpretation of the icon, at the highest level of complexity.

The first module, "Kālī's *Lajjā* as the Antidote to Her Anger," involves eleven elements of meaning, in which narrators talk about Kālī and Śiva, their marital relationship, and the received hierarchy of domestic relationships in which the husband is superior to his wife. They mentioned that Kālī experienced acute *lajjā* at having been so outrageous and disrespectful as to step on her husband (displayed by her biting of the tongue), thereby restraining herself and cooling her anger by holding it in. The dominant theme of this first module of eleven meanings is therefore Kālī's *lajjā* as an antidote to her anger.

The second module, "The Destructive Nature of Female Anger," involves nine elements of meaning, in which narrators elaborate on the magnitude and destructive nature of the Goddess's anger. They describe the Goddess as a tremendously powerful force, created by the male gods to kill demons, in particular, a demon named Mahiṣāsura, and recount that after destroying Mahiṣāsura, she went on a murderous rampage, indiscriminately destroying everything that came in her way, threatening the very survival of the world. In order to bring her back to her nurturing sensibilities, the gods enlisted Śiva to lie in her path deliberately so that she would step on him and experience *lajjā*. The dominant theme of this second module of nine meanings is therefore the destructive nature of female anger.

The third module, "Men Humiliate Women and So Cause Their Anger,"

TABLE 4.1 The Twenty-Five Elements of Meaning and Their Origin

<i>Elements of Meaning</i>	<i>Is This an Element Found in the Sanskrit Purāṇas?</i>	<i>Is This Element Found in the Oriya Candī Purāṇa?</i>
<i>Module 1. Kālī's Lajjā as the Antidote to Her Anger</i>		
1. That is the goddess Kālī.	Yes	Yes
2. All goddesses are one, incarnations of the Great Goddess.	Yes	Yes
3. That is the god Śiva.	Yes	Yes
4. Śiva is Kālī's husband.	?	Yes
5. Kālī stepped on Śiva accidentally.	No	No
6. Males are superior to women in social status.	Yes	Yes
7. Kālī is more dominant and powerful than Śiva.	No	Yes
8. Kālī's expression is one of anger.	No	Yes
9. Kālī's expression is one of shame.	No	No
10. Kālī exercises self-control/self-restraint.	No	Yes
11. To "bite the tongue" is an expression of Kālī's shame.	No	No
<i>Module 2. The Destructive Nature of Female Anger</i>		
12. There once was a demon called Mahiṣāsura.	Yes	Yes
13. Durgā was created by the male gods to help them fight the demon.	Yes	Yes
14. In her rage the Great Goddess transformed herself into Kālī.	No	Yes
15. Rage is a loss in the capacity to discriminate/a loss of awareness of one's surroundings.	?	?
16. As Kālī, the Great Goddess threatened the survival of the world.	Yes	Yes
17. Kālī destroys the world with her dance.	No	Yes
18. Śiva lay in Kālī's path at the request of the male gods and/or mortal men.	No	No
19. Śiva lay in Kālī's path deliberately.	No	No
20. When she stepped on Śiva, Kālī became calm/still/statuesque.	No	No

TABLE 4.1 (continued)

<i>Elements of Meaning</i>	<i>Is This an Element Found in the Sanskrit Purāṇas?</i>	<i>Is This Element Found in the Oriya Candī Purāṇa?</i>
<i>Module 3. Men Humiliate Women and So Cause Their Anger</i>		
21. A boon was given by the male gods to the demon that he could never be killed except by a naked woman.	No	Yes
22. When the male gods were challenged by the demon, they were helpless and could not defend themselves.	Yes	Yes
23. Durgā was helpless against the demon until she stripped naked.	No	Yes
24. Durgā felt humiliated at having to strip.	No	Yes
25. Durgā's humiliation was followed by uncontrollable rage.	No	Yes

involves five elements of meaning in which the narrator explains the source of Kālī's anger. These elements of meaning link Kālī's rage to a boon given by the gods to Mahiṣāsura and to the ultimate humiliation experienced by the Goddess when she had to take off her clothes and stand naked before the demon in order to rescue the male gods from the powers they themselves had bestowed on him. The dominant theme of this third module of five meanings is therefore that men humiliate women, and that this humiliation is the cause of their anger.

Three levels of cultural knowledge can thus be discerned. The result is a nested hierarchy in which a small group of cultural experts tell the most complex story, drawing upon meanings from all three modules, while a somewhat larger group tell a less elaborate version, often using only meanings from modules 1 and 2, and the majority tell the simplest tale, involving meanings from module 1 alone.<sup>4</sup>

While the most detailed story that is told in the temple town about the Goddess and the buffalo demon fascinates listeners because of its vivid detail and provocative imagery, the less suggestive, less detailed story contained in the eleven meanings of module 1 has equal, if not greater, significance—at least from the perspective of this chapter. Its significance lies in the fact that this set of meanings is the one that is known and recognized by most people. The most common meaning of the icon, the one that has the widest currency, elaborates the view that Kālī's ability to experience *lajjā* is

the most effective antidote to her destructive anger. For more than three-quarters of the narrators (and this includes the expert, the less expert, and the least expert), this icon of Kālī exemplifies the need to cultivate and experience *lajjā*. They describe *lajjā* as a highly refining emotion characterized by respectful self-restraint and deference, essential for the maintenance of social order. Furthermore, local understanding has it that women more than men need to develop their capacity to experience *lajjā* because they rather than men embody natural power, power that if not contained and if not controlled from within could spill into socially destructive emotions. And it is in this, the most common meaning, that we find the interpretation appears to have traveled the furthest from its beginnings. This creative distance exists whether the icon is seen as a Tantric symbol that elaborates meanings about uncontrolled female power or as an illustration of a contemporary local story with Purāṇic roots that tells about the buffalo demon's death at the hands of the Goddess, the dharmic consequence of overweening arrogance.

#### THE CAṆḌĪ PURĀṆA: GIVING NEW MEANING TO A TANTRIC ICON

The question then arises, how did this quite unmistakably Tantric icon of the Goddess get to be used in contemporary Oriya Hindu discourse to uphold family values, especially those encouraging and advocating female self-control and restraint? We suggest that the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*,<sup>5</sup> a popular Oriya text on the Goddess and her various salvific activities, made possible this creative leap. This religious work is attributed to Sāralā Dāsa,<sup>6</sup> a devotee of the Goddess who is thought to have lived around the fifteenth century. We believe that by examining the various versions of the story of Mahiṣāsura's death as they occur in the "Devī-Māhātmya" section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*,<sup>7</sup> the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*,<sup>8</sup> and the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*, it is possible to trace its contours as they shifted over time till the story achieved its present form.

That the Oriya Hindus of the temple town have assimilated and integrated the icon almost completely into their everyday practice of Hinduism can be deduced from the ready confidence with which twenty-six of our informants, spread evenly across the various levels of cultural competence, claimed authority for their stories by citing the Purāṇas as the source of their knowledge, especially the two Sanskrit Purāṇas—the *Mārkaṇḍeya* and *Devībhāgavata Purāṇas*—and the Oriya *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*.

In tracing the transformations and elaborations that have occurred in the story about the encounter between the Goddess and the buffalo demon, we begin with the account in the "Devī-Māhātmya." Here, the battle between the Goddess and the demon is dealt with fairly straightforwardly—the gods led by Indra are put to flight by the demon, and they seek refuge with Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. Anger at this defeat at the hands of a demon,

however powerful, causes energy to emerge from all the assembled gods, energy that coalesces to form the Goddess, who then rides off to do battle armed with their weapons and emblems. The demon, although a brave warrior, is no match for the Goddess and is soon decapitated by her. Mahiṣāsura appears in this story, but there is no boon, no humiliation of the Goddess, and her energy is not transformed into destructive rage.

The retelling of this story in the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* has several new themes. The most relevant to our study are the following. Mahiṣāsura obtains a boon from Brahmā that makes him invulnerable to death, except at the hands of a female. He then becomes completely enamored of the Goddess, and when she rebuffs him unequivocally, he grows angry and attacks her. However, she never strips naked, there is no indiscriminate destructive rage, Śiva does not appear, and he is not needed to rescue the world.

Some of the most salient elements of the story—the idea that Durgā was helpless against the demon until she stripped naked, or that Kālī stepped on Śiva accidentally, or that Kālī's expression is one of *lajjā*—do not appear in either the "Devī-Māhātmya" or the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*. However, several key elements of the contemporary Oriya story seem to have been extant in the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*,<sup>9</sup> although no text includes them all. In this Oriya text, the demon receives a boon that he can only be killed by a naked female, the Goddess strips naked, she becomes enraged at this humiliation, and she goes on a rampage, indiscriminately destroying everything in her path.

For instance, in chapter 4 of the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*, entitled "Mahiṣāsura's Penance and Boon," the demon receives the boon that he can only be killed by a naked female:

Mahiṣāsura to Brahmā:

"This boon that I crave from thee  
That I shall be slain neither by Nārāyaṇa,  
Nor killed by Viṣṇu's *sudarśan cakra*,  
And by vanquishing Śiva, let me attain my soul's desire  
And let me also not die at the hands of any man."

And Brahmā replied:

"So be it. Let all you desire come true.  
But remember, no one born into this world  
Can remain immortal forever,  
No! Not even the gods!  
For they must also die one day,  
Mark my words, you too shall die,  
And you shall die at the hands of a woman."

And then Mahiṣāsura said:

"If that be so, grant me another boon,  
That I shall not die even at the hands of a woman  
Till I have beheld her naked breasts, her bare *yoni* [genitals]."



Brahmā:

"So be it! So be it!"

And as sunset approached, he granted the boon and disappeared.

Another key element—the Goddess's disrobing—can be found in chapter 29 of the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*—"Maḥiṣāsura's Killing." In this chapter, the Goddess learns of the boon, that the only way to destroy the demon is to take off her clothes:

When Maḥiṣāsura withstood the full fury of the Devī's onslaught,  
She sought Sarvamaṅgalā's advice.  
Sarovamaṅgalā:

"Do not be despondent, Devī,  
Hear the secret of Maḥiṣāsura's invulnerability,  
After 80,000 years of penance, he sought a boon from Brahmā,  
That no man could kill him,  
That Viṣṇu would not be able to equal him in battle,  
That only a woman could kill him.  
But as he was sitting, after eating, his minister advised him,  
That Viṣṇu could also take the female form.  
Whereupon Maḥiṣāsura had asked,  
'What shall I do? What boon should I ask to protect myself from an apparent woman?'  
The minister said that such things have been known to happen [done by Viṣṇu].  
Having thought it over, Maḥiṣāsura sought another boon  
From Brahmā, who was willing to grant him all the boons he asked before sunset.  
Maḥiṣāsura then asked Brahmā, 'Grant me the boon that the woman who defeats me in battle,  
Can only kill me after I have beheld her naked breasts, her bare *yoni*.'  
Such is the strength of the one you now fight," said Maṅgalā.  
'Until you show him your breasts and your *yoni*, Maḥiṣāsura shall not die!  
Unless you abandon your present state, unveil your naked form!  
Let Maḥiṣāsura see your *yoni*!  
Let him desire you!  
Till you do that, you cannot kill him."

Durgā, dismayed by Maṅgalā's words, heeding her advice,  
Took the form of Cāmuṇḍī,  
Discarding her clothes, unbinding her hair, wearing but a strip of cloth around her waist,  
Exposing her thighs, her *yoni*, her breasts,  
A sight at which even the 330,000,000 gods in heaven quailed,  
Maḥiṣāsura, beholding this form, stared in wonder with both his eyes,  
Thus did he attain the vision of Devī's *yoni*, not beheld even by the gods.  
.....  
Thus did Maḥiṣāsura remain, gazing at Durgā in wonder,

So on the banks of the river Tarini,  
Maḥiṣāsura gazed at Devī, in a trance.  
And then, Devī, taking the opportunity,  
Pierced his chest with the trident.  
Looking up at her, looking at her *yoni*,  
With no help left, Maḥiṣāsura lay in a trance,  
Seeing the demon fallen and as still as in death,  
Durgā Devī was satisfied and killed Maḥiṣāsura.

Finally, Sāralā Dāsa elaborates on the Goddess's rage at being betrayed by the gods, her sense of outrage at having to strip naked so as to kill the demon. In the same chapter as the one excerpted from above, in the section entitled, "After Maḥiṣāsura's Death, as Kālī," he writes:

The gods in heaven were overjoyed and decided to go to Durgā  
With offerings [*arghya*] in their hands;  
They wanted to propitiate Devī.  
In humility and joy, they came to the mountain of Ratnagiri,  
Bedecked in colorful clothes, with their armies, bearing precious metals,  
And there they beheld Devī, lying and resting, naked, without any clothes.  
Overcome with *lajjā*, they could not draw near her.  
Seeing the gods, Mahādevī exclaimed in rage,

"There shall be no male gods left in heaven, none shall remain unslain today!  
You give the *asuras* such boons that they destroy the three worlds!  
Would I have had to disrobe myself if there had not been such gods in heaven?"

Seeing Durgā's anger, all the gods fled to the heavens, in fear,  
And Devī, taking on the form of Kālī, bestrode the three worlds.  
Mahakālī, Mahābetālī, Suneha Svarūpa  
Assuming this terrible form, holding a skull in one hand,  
The sword in another, with open hair tossing wildly, as Cāmuṇḍī.  
Even the gods could not look upon this terrible form,  
Glowing in such fiery radiance.  
All the gods then hid,  
Except Śiva, who could not flee.

But the solution that Sāralā Dāsa provides to the quandary in which the gods find themselves is suggestively different from that which the narrators of the temple town find suitable today. Far from the Goddess being the wife of Śiva and her husband's servant, the marriage between Śiva and the Goddess is yet to take place. Rather, Śiva worships the Goddess, accepting her as his particular deity (*iṣṭadevatā*) without reservation. Soothed by his worship and enchanted by the seductive power of his dancing, the Goddess offers Śiva the boon of his choice, and he asks her to be his wife. And since a boon once offered cannot be retracted, she accepts his proposal; her domestica-

tion saves the world from destruction. The *Caṇḍī Purāṇa* describes this interchange between Śiva and the Goddess in the following way:

The long-haired one with the top-knot [*jaṭā*],  
Could not flee, he broke into dance, and thought:

"Let her see this dance, let terrible Devī do whatever she desires  
Kill me or preserve me, perhaps she will be beguiled, attracted."

He danced on, wondering what would happen.  
The greatest of the gods, the fearless lord of the universe,  
Essence of the world, strength of the demons,  
Fascinating the gods with his dance  
Beating his *nabālakṣhā damaru* [Śiva's drum] in the air,  
Gazing at Devī with his fifteen eyes.  
She, who lives in the cremation grounds, the holder of the trident,  
Stared at him dance, fascinated, and said:

"Remember your gods, Jaṭiā!  
How dared you give such boons to demons!  
That they destroy the very earth!  
Only by swallowing such gods can I quench my thirst for vengeance,  
I shall eat you as well."

As Cāmūṇḍī, bestriding the three worlds!  
Sadāśiva, folding his hands in prayer,  
Looked up at her and said:

"You are my *iṣṭadevatā*, Śakambhari,  
Durgā Devī is my savior, Devī of my clan,  
Durgā alone dispels my sorrows."

And so he sang her praises.  
As Paśupati bowed in such humility, Devī felt a calm descend upon her,  
She said:

"You gods are without wisdom,  
Why do you grant such boons to demons without any reason?  
Who, then, can slay or destroy them?  
Because of you, I had to lose my honor, and you put my might to the test.  
Today, we will know your greatness,  
Who will protect you? Tell me, Īśvara.  
I will kill you and all the other gods as well,  
So that there are no gods left in heaven.  
Remember your family gods, your father, your mother,  
Remember your friends!"

Prostrating himself at her feet in fear, and then rising,  
Śiva said:

"You are cruel,  
You are my family god,  
You are my father, you are my mother,

You alone are my friend.  
I have no one but you in this world.  
Whether I live or die, it is as you desire."

Saying this, he danced and danced.  
Seeing the dance that had fascinated the gods,  
Durgā Devī was pleased and said:

"Ask, Jaṭiā, ask your boon, ask what your heart desires,  
I shall grant you that boon.  
I am pleased with you, ask your boon."

Īśvara replied:

"Promise, Devī, promise that you will grant me any boon that I crave!"  
"I promise, I promise!" exclaimed Devī,  
"Ask what you desire."

Thus she kept asking what he desired,  
Īśvara then asked her to become his wife.  
Kātyāyanī then agreed, and he embraced her and took her to his bosom.

Perhaps because Sāralā Dāsa was himself a Śākta, a worshipper of the Goddess who unquestioningly accepted the supremacy of the female principle, he has no difficulty in portraying Śiva as the devoted servant of the Goddess. In terms of divine hierarchy, Śiva ranks way below Devī and apparently has no hesitation in acknowledging his lowly position, in accepting her as his personal deity, and in seeking to engage her attention through entertaining her (see Patricia Dold's central thesis in this volume regarding Śiva adopting the position of the inferior when he approaches the Goddess).

However, the contemporary Oriya story weighs the relationship between Kālī and Śiva quite differently. It presumes upon the marital relationship between the Goddess and Śiva. It is awareness of that unequal domestic relationship that compels Kālī to bite her tongue and hold in her anger. In the current version, the domestication of Kālī is complete; not only is she Śiva's wife, but she experiences herself as his wife. The image of Kālī stepping on Śiva, the idea that she is experiencing *lajjā* when she bites her tongue, the notion that *lajjā* is a refining emotion essential for the maintaining of social order—all these elements of meaning are absent from the "Devī-Māhātmya," the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*. But these are the core elements of the contemporary story, the most common perception of the icon today.

On examining the twenty-five elements of meaning described earlier (table 4.1),<sup>10</sup> we find that only eight of these meanings can be traced to the Sanskrit Purāṇas. Eighteen of these elements of meaning can be found in the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*, and these include the eight present in the "Devī-Māhātmya" and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* versions. But six elements of

meaning—those having to do either with the ruse the gods and Śiva plotted, or with Kālī's sense of *lajjā* at having stepped on Śiva accidentally—are particular to the story as it is told today in the temple town of Bhubaneswar. And of these six elements, the three that describe Kālī's experience of *lajjā* are part of module 1 and, therefore, the most widely known.

#### THE POWER OF THE ICON

This icon, although of heterodox origin, appears to exercise a powerful hold over the Oriya imagination because it provides ways to discuss, organize, and better understand several issues important to Oriya Hindu culture: the disjunction between a male-dominated social order and the potential power of women, the nature of male-female relations, the role played by self-control and self-restraint in effectively regulating destructive power, and the ways in which a human being evolves morally. And so although the icon challenges the received hierarchy of the patriarchal Oriya Hindu world, the narrative experts choose not to reject it outright. Rather, they reconstruct its meaning, integrating elements from the *Devībhāgavata Purāna* and the *Caṇḍī Purāna* with substantive original contributions of their own to create a new and compelling narrative.

Two of the most striking features of the icon that the narrators feel the need to explain are the Goddess's nakedness and her stepping on Śiva's chest. The *Caṇḍī Purāna*, by modifying the classical Purānic idea of the boon and by making the conditions for the demon's death even more stringent, provides them with a satisfying explanation for the first feature, the Goddess's nakedness: Mahiṣāsura can only be killed by a *naked* female. With respect to the second feature, narrators resort to their own ingenuity. They explain her stepping on Śiva as a mistake, the result of a ruse planned by Śiva and the other gods to enable her to hold in her anger and become calm. Thus, the Goddess's nakedness and her stepping on her husband, her personal god, become parts of the logic of the story and are used to make sense of the sequence of narrated events.

And the final crowning element in the contemporary story—the idea that Kālī's protruding tongue is the distinguishing mark of her *lajjā*—appears to be an entirely local creation,<sup>11</sup> although the germ for this idea of *lajjā* can be found in the *Caṇḍī Purāna*. Inappropriate behavior, any kind of overstepping of the bounds of propriety, invariably results in the experience of *lajjā*. When the obsequious and grateful gods intrude on the Goddess resting after her exertions, bearing gifts, ready to praise and worship her, they, rather than she, are overcome with *lajjā* at seeing her naked, and they withdraw, painfully conscious of having encroached, of having forgotten their rightful place in the hierarchy of the heavens.

#### RECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES: THE ROLE PLAYED BY LOCAL "EXPERTS"

We have no way of assessing the creative historical role played by local experts in synthesizing or transforming local narrative norms. R. G. D'Andrade has suggested that cultural experts both know a great deal about their own particular domains and—more important—are adept at integrating esoteric knowledge with meanings and understandings that are more commonly shared.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is what the narrative experts in the temple town have done: they have appropriated the Tantric icon, an item of esoteric knowledge, and reinterpreted it to suit the more commonly shared moral requirements of their world. In so doing, they have fashioned a narrative that harmonizes with notions of male superiority inherent in the patriarchal Oriya Hindu social order, while acknowledging simultaneously that female power when self-contained and self-regulated is the supreme force in the world.

It is possible that social recognition of the "expertise" of experts gives them a special authority to introduce new elements of meanings into their narratives and generate fresh interpretations of cultural symbols, which then become normative. Sāralā Dāsa was clearly such an expert. A Śākta with a powerfully persuasive pen, he not only reinvented the story about the Goddess and the buffalo demon in the *Caṇḍī Purāna* but also reinterpreted the *Rāmāyaṇa*, calling his version *Bilaṅkā Rāmāyaṇa*. Today, these two religious works have great mass appeal, being the most widely read of such texts in the temple town of Bhubaneswar.

What merits reiteration is that the story in its entirety, with its complete logical sequence of events, is not widely known. The final element that has to do with Kālī's realization of the transgression she has committed is known by most people, but it has, as we have shown, nothing to do with any textual version or with the original Tantric meaning of the icon. The experts who tell the most detailed stories build up to this climax—Kālī's biting of her tongue when she realizes the seriousness of her transgression—using elements from the various texts as well as contributing original ideas of their own. But their listeners appear to remember only this last crucial detail, and that is what they repeat when asked to recount the story. Hardly any of the details, and almost none of the events that preceded this climax, survive in their accounts.

We believe that this is perhaps the historical process that produced the story told today in the neighborhood of the Liṅgarāj temple. Sāralā Dāsa pointed the way and a later generation of experts integrated the image of Kālī in the Tantric icon, the boon, and the battle (as described in the *Caṇḍī Purāna*), together with socially meaningful details, to create a powerful new narrative, one that resonated with ordinary, everyday experience.

Thus, it seems plausible to suggest that this contemporary way of telling

the story of Kālī represents a local Brahmanical synthesis of a Tantric icon with the moral requirements of a patriarchal social world. In trying to integrate the images of female power invoked by the Tantric icon with the idea that *lajjā*—respectful restraint, deference—is an essential attribute of female virtue, the local imagination has invented a new and different story, one that has only the most tenuous links to classical Purāṇic versions of Goddess narratives.

#### NOTES

1. For more on this community, see Manamohan Mahapatra, *Traditional Structure and Change in an Orissan Temple* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1981); Susan Seymour, "Household Structures and Status and Expressions of Affect in India," *Ethos* 11 (1983): 263–77; Richard A. Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); and Richard A. Shweder, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Joan G. Miller, "Culture and Moral Development," in *Cultural Psychology: Essays in Human Development*, ed. James Stigler, Gilbert Herdt, and Richard A. Shweder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 130–204.

2. This particular Tantric text describes Kālī as black-skinned because she encompasses everything in the universe: "just as all colors disappear in black, so all names and forms disappear in her." She is also said to be naked, clothed in space alone, because Mahāśakti is unlimited; to have a red, lolling tongue representing the passion and creativity of nature; and to stand on a pale, lifeless corpse of Śiva, whom she awakens in her capacity as giver and destroyer of life.

3. See Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder, "Kālī's Tongue: Cultural Psychology and the Power of 'Shame' in Orissa, India," in *Emotion and Culture: Empirical Studies of Mutual Influence*, ed. Shinobu Kitayama and Hazel Markus (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1994), pp. 241–84.

4. There were also a few who knew a little about storytelling norms as they related to this icon.

5. Sāralā Dāsa, *Caṇḍī Purāṇa* (Cuttack: Dharma Grantha, n.d.). Usha Menon has translated the excerpts of the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa* presented in this chapter.

6. Sāralā Dāsa is the name taken by Siddheśvar Pariḍā, a Śākta who lived out his days as the Goddess's servant at the temple dedicated to the goddess Sāralā at Chatia in Cuttack district in Orissa. Two other texts are attributed to him—the *Adhbhuta Rāmāyana* and the *Bilankā Rāmāyana*. As a Śākta, Sāralā Dāsa's work elaborates a highly female-oriented perspective. For instance, in the *Bilankā Rāmāyana*, Sītā becomes Mahādevī, the Great Goddess, and kills the thousand-headed Rāvaṇa, while Rāma stands by in the shadows and watches.

7. This text has recently been translated by Thomas B. Coburn in *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devī-Māhātmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

8. See Cheever Mackenzie Brown, *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

9. In searching for an Oriya text that tells the story about Kālī's icon that is cur-

rent today in the temple town, we have conducted several exhaustive enquiries. Professor K. C. Sahoo, formerly of Utkal University, one of the two living authorities on Sāralā Dāsa and his work, told Usha Menon quite categorically in June 1995 that neither Sāralā Dāsa nor, to the best of his knowledge, any other Oriya litterateur had ever written any story about this particular representation of Kālī that included all the elements found in the story then told orally in the temple town.

10. Element 15, which refers to local perception about the nature of rage, can hardly be attributed to any of the concerned texts and so is ignored in the present discussion.

11. We should perhaps qualify this by saying that the contemporary story that speaks of Kālī's shame is current over a much larger area than just the town of Bhubaneswar. We know, for instance, that almost identical stories about the icon are told in the rest of coastal Orissa, eastern Madhya Pradesh, eastern Bihar, Bengal, and Assam. But we can speak with authority only with respect to the temple town, because our research has been limited to this region.

12. See R. G. D'Andrade, "Some Propositions about the Relations between Culture and Human Cognition," in *Cultural Psychology: Essays in Comparative Human Development*, ed. James Stigler, Gilbert Herdt, and Richard A. Shweder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 65–129.