The Transformational Body: Bául and Jhākri Approaches to Embodied Healing

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Thesis completed under the supervision of Dr. Geoffrey Samuel and Dr. Mark Allon

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work.

This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Jarrod Hyam
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Abstract

This interdisciplinary thesis integrates religious studies and ethnographic research in the analysis of psycho-physiological healing among Nepali traditional healers, including jhākris and mātās, and Bāul minstrels in West Bengal and Sikkim, India. Bāul singers draw influence from esoteric Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi Muslim traditions. Historically situating the complex system of cultural and religious confluence in the Sahajiyā milieu of Bengal, I explore morphological connections between the yogic cultures of the Buddhist and Nāth Siddhas or “perfected ones” of early medieval northern India and modern Bengali Bāul minstrels. Among the Bāuls, tantric-yoga practices, or sādhanā, are embodied healing modalities, as they focus on perfecting the body as a center of sacred powers.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted with Nepali jhākris and mātās located in the rural Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim, while fieldwork with Bāuls was conducted in rural West Bengal, India. Jhākris are traditional healers who integrate a unique hybrid of indigenous healing modalities with tantric Hindu and Buddhist traditions in their healing repertoires. Both of these groups stem from low-caste rural communities and are socioeconomically marginalized, operating outside of institutional religious contexts.

The thesis focuses on models of embodiment adopted by these practitioners and ritual healing practices connected to their embodied theories. I draw from medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman’s conception of health care systems to present culturally variant health care systems among research participants, accompanied by unique orientations towards bodily health and healing. The role of music to engender bodily transformation is also central to my analysis, and its application by practitioners in my ethnography illustrates a modality of sonic healing. The underlying argument is grounded in my hypothesis regarding “healing as a totality,” in which healing is understood as a dynamically interwoven process that integrates the various components of the human body and selfhood as well as sociopolitical critique and subversion.
1 Healing as a Totality: Healing and Embodied Practices

“Health” and “healing” stem from the Old English word *hāl*, referring to wholeness. This etymological connection is significant. When discussing the disruptions that occur in the process of inhabiting a lived body, metaphorical language is almost inevitable: one speaks of being psychologically “broken,” “fragmented,” “incomplete,” “scattered;” these terms imply a disruption in wholeness, of mind-body integrity and flourishing. “Dis-ease” literally refers to being away from or absent of ease; “ease” in turn refers to comfort and the alleviation of pain – and of sickness. Is health simply the absence of psycho-physiological pain and disease? I argue that it encompasses more, including a sense of thriving that accords with *hāl* as a process of organismal wholeness. As I discuss in Chapter One, references to embodied processes are inherently metaphorical. To become *whole* is a dynamic process, connected to the metaphors of movement and transition – a movement from fractionation and embodied disturbances that result in chronic pain and disease to new structures of equilibrium.

Margaret Trawick, in her prologue to *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family*, reflects on a different connotation of wholeness in the decentered trajectory of modern anthropological orientations, as ethnographic theory moves from the desire of immutable wholeness influenced by the structural theories of Lévi-Strauss to plurality and ambiguity:

> In modern ethnography, plurality and the absence of wholeness are facts to which we return again and again, both on the level of culture and on the level of the self – for instance, studies of pluralistic societies; studies of spirit-possession; on-the-ground studies of language. . .We may be able to come to terms with the fact that 'meaning' cannot be pinned down, is always sought but never apprehended, is never this and never that. . .always inherently elusive and always inherently ambiguous.¹

I also grapple with the complex ambiguities, pluralities, and contradictions that arose during ethnographic research in West Bengal and Sikkim, India. The absence of wholeness within the search for healing and wholeness as it manifests in spirit possession likewise occurred in my ethnography, discussed further in Chapter Five. The elusiveness of “pinned down” meaning is certainly a theme that recurred throughout fieldwork as well. The plurality of South Asian religious tradition influences, with the eschewing of a singular religious identity, also demonstrates labyrinthine ambiguities among practitioners in my ethnographic research.

Joseph Alter addresses the topic of wholeness in his ontological analysis of good health within the context of Āyurvedic medicine. Alter critiques the remedial bias found in cross-cultural conceptions of medicine and health, in which the entire medical enterprise aims to “fix” illness by medicalizing the human body, returning one to the ever-amorphous state of “good health.” Within this model, illness is typically reduced to a set of specific symptoms which is then alleviated with prescribed treatments. While this remedial aspect is important, he states that his concern is focused on “. . .expansion and perpetual growth rather than incremental enhancement, with metamorphosis rather than morphology, with the metaphysics of physiological fitness rather than with exercise and exertion per se.” Alter stresses the importance of “metaphysical fitness” and self-improvement as goals of Āyurvedic healing, rather than fixating on the alleviation of localized bodily symptoms per the remedial bias prevalent in modern Western biomedicine; the goal is instead that of transformation and ultimately immortality, which is achieved through the process of “reversing the course of time. . .in order to rejuvenate the body.” Alter expands on this point in his discussion of rasāyana, which he translates as “rejuvenation therapy” within the context of Āyurvedic medicine. This therapeutic method rests upon relational

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3 Ibid., S58.
models of the human body, in which embodiment is understood as being inherently connected with cosmic processes, such as lunar, solar, and calendrical cycles. The goal is bodily rejuvenation and ultimately a perfected body, which Alter terms “hyperfitness” and “self-perfection.” I further discuss rasāyana and cosmic embodiment in Section 2.2, “Rasa and Bodily Alchemy.”

Joseph Alter’s ontological approach to transformative healing accords strongly with my analysis of embodied healing, which underlies the guiding research questions presented below in this introduction. I critique biomedical models of bodily physiology that assume sharp distinctions between mind and body; following Alter’s discussion of cross-cultural remedial biases, such biomedical approaches often equate health with the alleviation of symptoms, achievable through uniform practices such as the prescribing of allopathic medicines. My conception of embodied healing rests upon foundational assumptions about the transformative capability of healing: the human body cannot be separated from ecological and cosmic processes; embodied healing is thus a metaphysical process, one that potentially leads to soteriological liberation – the ultimate form of healing as a totality. Alter’s final point regarding reversing the course of time to achieve bodily immortality – what is often described as a perfected body – Skt. siddhi deha – will be discussed in my analysis of embodiment in Chapter One.

Within the context of South Asian religious traditions, ritual healing, often occurring in rural village-based settings, is woven into the pragmatic dimension of religious practice. Ivette Vargas-O’Bryan, whose research focuses on illness described in Tibetan Buddhist biographies, argues that one analytical lens with which to approach the ever-amorphous notion of South Asian “religion” should center on the multidimensional and interdisciplinary study of illness and healing. Religious practices applied among Bāul minstrels in rural West Bengal and traditional Nepali healers, known as jhākris and

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4 Ibid., S55.
mātās, in the Darjeeling Hills and rural southeast Sikkim regions, illustrate a unique intersection in the convergence of healing and South Asian religious praxis.

Both of these groups are composed of iconoclastic individuals who operate on the margins of South Asian religious communities, outside the fold of institutionalized religious structures. Teachings are transmitted orally rather than textually, and thus textual studies as a source of primary research are quite limited. Though heterogeneous and decentralized, there are still central markers that create commonalities for those who self-identify as Bāuls or jhākris, which I further explore in Chapters Four and Five. Among Bāul practitioners, esoteric teachings are concealed within highly cryptic songs, revealed orally and secretly through a guru-student lineage, and a proper interpretation results from the direct and applied experiences of a competent guru. Scriptures texts or śāstras are not acceptable as sources of teachings, as texts are considered to be hearsay and inferential – anumān, a term to be further discussed below in Chapter 4.9. I nonetheless apply textual studies to a limited number of tantric yoga-related sources, discussed further below in section 7, to illustrate the systems of bodily schemata and yogic praxis that were textually codified by heterodox yogic practitioners in early medieval India; I argue that these codified systems of practice influenced the oral corpus of esoteric bodily teachings transmitted in contemporary Bāul songs.

Mātās also learn directly from one-on-one oral transmissions of teachings from a guru, as detailed in the ethnographic descriptions in Chapter Five. One salient feature shared among Bāuls, jhākris and mātās is the absence of relying on doctrinal texts. The esoteric transmission of bodily theories (Skt. dehatattva) and sexual praxis (Ben. yugal sādhanā) is conveyed among Bāul performers almost entirely through encrypted songs. Bāul musical performances have a range of functions: they can represent more commodified, commercial endeavors, discussed in Chapter Four; they are deeply expressive performances inspired by bhakti devotionalism; and they also serve to transmit the vast
corpus of tantric-inspired bodily theory and esoteric praxis. Due to the centrality of orally transmitted teachings among both groups, oral exegesis given by practitioners themselves is paramount to understand how their healing practices are applied on the ground. This is one major reason why ethnographic fieldwork is central to my dissertation research.

In West Bengal, Bāuls and Nepali traditional healers are situated in rural, socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, often in villages distanced from urban centers. They exemplify a pragmatic eclecticism, drawing upon influences from disparate religious traditions to synthesize a unique orientation.

Attempting to define who the Bāuls are as a delimited, singular group proves to be especially problematic. According to one etymological theory, the word “Bāul” may derive from Skt. vātula, “wind-madness,” corresponding with the eccentric behavior and madness associated with Bāuls. They are known as wandering minstrels who sing at major festivals or melās, and can be seen performing music throughout scattered villages in rural Bengal, sometimes singing on trains to collect alms. As opposed to a sampradāya as a cohesive tradition or transmitted lineage, the Bāuls are highly eclectic, heterogeneous and idiosyncratic. Anthropologist Jeanne Openshaw refers to Bāuls within the larger category of bartamān-panthī, and describes their eschewing of religious identity thus: bartamān-panthīs are “...an anti-identity identity, an anti-group group, which is why those in bartamān often simply call themselves humans (mānus).”6 Openshaw refers to “Bāuls” in quotation marks to emphasize the difficulty in delimiting them as a singular group. However, as previously stated, there are distinct ways in which individuals identify as “Bāul” and related Sufi fakir performers; one example is that of guru-bād, initiation and training by a guru, enabling the disciple to unravel the coded meanings concealed in Bāul songs and potentially to engage in esoteric bodily training. The intention

6 Jeanne Openshaw, Seeking Bāuls of Bengal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 244.
behind my historical analysis in Chapters Two and Three is to sketch the complex interweaving of yogic cultures that influenced the tantric-yogic esoteric bodily praxis applied by Bāul practitioners, and the unique orientation toward embodiment is another marker with which individuals self-identify as Bāul.

They are confined to Bengal, in what is now West Bengal, India and Bangladesh. Bāuls are deeply influenced by Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Sufism, incorporating the esoteric, direct mystical insight of *Ma'rifa*. Thus Carol Salomon comments, “The Bāuls, like the Sufis, assert that the Prophet taught two types of doctrines, one exoteric (zāhir), recorded in the Qurʾān and meant for the general public, and the other esoteric (bātin), only hinted at in the Qurʾān and aimed at the select few who are able to grasp its meaning and who pass it down from heart to heart. Šarīʿāt, Islamic law, is for followers of the exoteric path, while Maʾrifat, mystic knowledge, is for followers of the esoteric path.”

Bāul music is influenced by kīrtan, Vaiṣṇava devotional music, and Sufi *halqah* gatherings, “an assembly of persons met together for the purpose of devotional exercises through the medium of *dhikr* accompanied by *sama* or musical performance.” The great Lālan Fakir (ca. nineteenth century), born in the Kushtia District, Bangladesh and revered as a supreme Bāul poet and originator, denounces the constraints of both Islamic law (Arabic: *sharīʿa*) and Hindu *dharma*. Among the Bāul singers I interviewed in the rural Birbhum district, West Bengal, Lālan's songs – at least, those songs attributed to him – were the most commonly recited and quoted songs of any Bāul composer.

There is a pronounced influence from tantric traditions, including the heterodox Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās and the Nāth and Vajrayāna Buddhist Siddhas; the Siddhas are semi-legendary figures who

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8 “Recollection” or “remembrance.” In Bengali this term is *jikir*.
lived throughout northern India, including what is now Bengal and adjacent states, in the early medieval period, perhaps around the ninth to eleventh centuries. Bāul minstrels are often discussed in relation to the larger so-called “Sahajiyā” milieu, those who pursue sahaja, a technical Sanskrit term crucial to the realizations expressed by the Siddhas in their vernacular poetry. The heterogeneous Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, appearing sometime during or after the lifetime of Caitanya (ca. fifteenth century), the revered reformer of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism, represent a unique confluence of tantric yoga and bhakti, an esoteric synthesis that continues to reverberate throughout modern Bengali heterodox groups, including the Bāuls.

The tantric Buddhist songs attributed to these medieval Siddhas, the Caryāpādas (9th or 10th century CE) orally transmitted esoteric teachings via vernacular poetry, deeply critiqued social and political institutions, sectarian religious division and jāti (Ben. jāt), religious-based caste identification. This style of transgressive folk-poetry, along with esoteric encryption of lyrics via the concealed linguistic style of sandhā bhāsā – alternatively spelled sandhyā bhāsā – is a potential influence on Bāul musical cultures, via circuitous confluences that formed throughout north and northeast India, to be further discussed in Chapter Three. These songs are difficult to date, though a common hypothesis is that they were written around 1000 C.E.; if so, they may be the oldest textual example of Bengali, or a form of proto-Bengali. This illustrates the pronounced connection between the history of Bengali

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11 This controversial term is largely a scholarly invention, corresponding with those Bengali tantric practitioners motivated by the pathway and goal of sahaja, to be discussed below in Chapter Three. For the so-called “Buddhist Sahajiyās” see Davidson, Reframing sahaja: genre, representation, ritual and lineage," Journal of Indian Philosophy 30, no. 1 (2002): 43-81. For the Islamic context, see David Cashin, The Ocean of Love: Middle Bengali Sufi Literature and the Fakirs of Bengal (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1995); Asim Roy, The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1983).

12 These songs will be further discussed below in Chapters Two and Three.

13 Linguist S.K. Chatterji argues in The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language (London: Allen and Unwin,
literature and the history of Bengali music. I draw upon Guy Beck's notion of “sonic theology” to develop a model of “sonic healing” – the ability of sound itself to have palliative, even transformative effects on human health and well-being.

_Jhākris_ are Nepali traditional healers, ritual specialists who often work part-time as psychophysiological healers, intermediaries between human beings and local spirits, and assistants in funerary rites. They often have a varied repertoire of techniques, including astrological prediction and analysis, the deciphering of omens and dreams, and the ability to contact – and embody – spirits and deities directly. _Jhākris_ can be of any gender, though female practitioners who follow a related yet distinct healing repertoire are known as _mātājīs_.

Following his ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal in the 1970's, Alexander MacDonald referred to _jhākris_ as “interpreters of the world” – able to interpret those unseen powers and spirits that affect those living in their local community. He defines _jhākris_ as:

...a person who falls into a trance, during which time voices speak through his person, thereby enabling him to diagnose illnesses and sometimes cure them, give advice for the future and clarify present events in terms of their relationship to the past. He is therefore both a privileged intermediary between spirits (who cause and cure illness) and men; between the past, present and future; between life and death, and most importantly between the individual and a certain social mythology.

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14 "The period 950 – 1200 A.D. would be a reasonable date to give these poems.” Also see Charles Capwell, _The music of the Bauls of Bengal_ (Kent State University Press, 1986), 83-5

15 "The various elements of Baul poetry discussed so far – the signature [of the composer], sexual yoga, praise of the guru, and riddles – can all be found in sectarian song-poems elsewhere in India [the caryā songs], which suggests that the Bauls are merely one branch of a fairly ancient tradition.” Capwell, _The music of the Bauls of Bengal_, 83. In Chapter Three, I will explore the historical and cultural context of the _siddhas_, the tantric poets who the _caryāpādas_ are attributed to. I do not agree that these songs are “sectarian,” as the composers appeared to be fluidly outside the constraints of religious sectarianism and indeed strongly critiqued it. As for the Bāuls being “merely one branch” of an ancient tradition, I argue for a morphological similarity between the performative context of the _caryā_ songs and contemporary Bāul songs, but not in the sense of a direct historical continuity of lineages.


This early attempt to define *jhākris* covers those general features that are common ritualized aspects shared by the ritual intercessors in my field site. Being an intermediary is key: the complex set of relationships among human beings, spirits, and terrestrial-bound entities is not always apparent to sensory perception, and the function of “interpreter,” being able to see that which is not commonly apparent, is key to the healing repertoires of *jhākris*. While *jhākris* are purportedly able to look into time frames outside the quotidian constraints of space-time, these phenomena occur when a clan or tutelary deity (Nep. *deutā*) enters their body – no *jhākri* ever used the word “trance” or any Nepali equivalent term during my fieldwork. MacDonald's description of a “certain social mythology” is indeed crucial; the etiologies provided by *jhākris* contribute to a social feedback loop, in which beliefs regarding malignant witches (Nep. *boksī*), harmful spirits, and the vulnerability of one's immaterial essence (Nep. *sāto* or *ātma*) structure diagnoses. *Jhākris* in my field site in turn offer treatment via healing and exorcisms that feed into the larger social mythology about health, the release of disease and harmful spirits, and the reestablishment of social order and propriety. Further issues relating to scholarship and Nepali traditional healers will be discussed in section 6 of this introduction.

Guiding research questions regarding the intersection of religious practices and ritual healing as applied by these two groups are:

1.) How do Baul performers and Nepali traditional healers, responding to unique sociocultural health care systems, conceptualize and understand embodiment, health and healing? 1a. Do their models of embodiment differ from Cartesian dualistic underpinnings which pervade biomedical science, distinguishing mind and body as separate, discrete categories? 1b. In what ways do their health care systems interact with biomedical systems of diagnosis and treatment?

2.) What is the orientation towards the human body in the domain of healing?
3.) This connects to another guiding research question: given the centrality of musical performance for Bāul practitioners, as well as the performance of instruments and chanting of *mantras* in healing *pūjās* among *jhākris* and *mātās*, what is the role of music in embodied healing?

In certain South Asian village-based contexts, healing praxis operates with the application of ritual elements, including yogic praxis, “folk-tantra” oriented healing rituals, and musical performance. Given my reading of academic studies regarding Bāuls, Nepali traditional healers, and South Asian music-based healing, further discussed below, I posit these hypotheses:

1.) The above-mentioned elements of healing praxis correspond with conceptual systems that emphasize bodily disciplines and practices, accompanied by non-dual conceptions of the body, wherein affective-emotional flux interweaves with one's physiological, visceral composition. Dominant Western biomedical research paradigms, driven by compartmentalized analytical specializations, tend to divide the human body into discrete, seemingly independent components, particularly in relation to what is conceived of as “mental/psychological” as opposed to physiological components; there is an involved philosophical background underlying this orientation, which I analyze in Chapter One, section two.

2.) I further hypothesize that while these healing repertoires and models of embodiment may align with aspects of Western biomedical science, they also form a uniquely cohesive and autonomous system, existing outside the domain of allopathic medicine while fulfilling a distinct health care niche.

3.) These healing repertoires thus closely approach my conception of healing as a totality, defined below.

I chose to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with Bāuls and Nepali traditional healers in rural West Bengal and Sikkim, India to gather material with which to test these hypotheses. I turn to these healing systems for insight regarding praxis that may fall outside the purview of dominant biomedical

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17 This is defined and qualified in Chapter Five.
paradigms. Fieldwork allowed me to engage in participant observation of healing rituals and musical performances and to receive firsthand knowledge regarding models of embodiment and healing practices via the key method of oral exegesis given by practitioners, elucidating orally-transmitted teachings and conceptions of health, disease, and healing.

While Nepali traditional healers are explicitly linked to healing traditions, this is less apparent among Bāul practitioners. Affinities between Nepali traditional healers and Bāuls include the centrality of oral literature, the application of tantric practices, marginal status in relation to religious institutions and the primary importance of embodied praxis. Both groups rely on song and musical performance as central forms of bodily praxis, which I discuss as “sonic healing” in Chapter Six. I also analyze the historical connection among these practitioners and South Asian Śākta-tantra esoteric communities. I thus present both Bāul singers and Nepali traditional healers as adherents of autonomous healing systems, who draw from related South Asian cultural influences.

Extending from my hypotheses, I approach the musical performances and esoteric bodily praxis employed by Bāul practitioners as unique forms of embodied healing. I posit that the tantric yogic practices applied by Bāuls comprise a form of self-healing. This form of healing is analogous to the ontological transformation that Joseph Alter refers to as “self-perfection.” I further argue that the subversion of socioeconomic limitations evident in Bāul lyrics and musical performances is another aspect of healing as a totality, and sociopolitical healing is interwoven with embodied healing.

My central argument rests upon a conception of embodied healing with which I refer to the practices applied by these groups: “healing as a totality.” “Healing as a totality” refers to an understanding of the self in which mental, physical, and spiritual components are interconnected and cannot be discretely separated. Healing is not the result of static events and is instead a continuous, multidimensional process grounded in embodiment but also involving music and aesthetic delight,
language, and social relationships. My conception of this embodied process of healing as a totality rests on the following premises:

1.) understandings of the embodied self, illness and disease, health and healing have wide cultural variants, relative to and socially conditioned by localized health care systems;

2.) indigenous South Asian models of health and disease may incorporate aspects of modern biomedicine, but etiologies and treatments also range outside the purview of biomedical diagnosis and treatment;

3.) relief and well-being may result from symbolic healing, in which certain forms of ritual speech, *mantras*, song and dance are charged with symbolic meanings able to “extract” sicknesses or promote health. My usage of the term “health care system” is indebted to the concept developed by physician and medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman. He describes his conception of a socially-constructed health care system thus:

> . . .we can view medicine as a cultural system, a system of symbolic meanings anchored in particular arrangements of social institutions and patterns of interpersonal interactions. . . .The totality of these interrelationships is the health care system. . . .The health care system is a concept, not an entity; it is a conceptual model held by the researcher. . . .Health care systems are socially and culturally constructed. They are forms of social reality. Social reality signifies the world of human interactions existing outside the individual and between individuals. It is the transactional world in which everyday life is enacted, in which social roles are defined and performed, and in which people negotiate with each other in established status relationships under a system of cultural rules.18

By situating analysis in specific culturally bound health care systems, it becomes clear that conceptions of the self, the body, health and disease vary widely. Thus the esoteric conception of bodily

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processes and the interrelated physical and “yogic” bodies in dehatattva Baul songs—literally “body truth/principles”—is distinct from biomedical physiological schemata, yet it develops an alternative, cohesive map of human embodiment. Similarly, Nepali conceptions of the term man as “heart-mind” and incorporeal bodily aspects which can detach from the physical body, including ātma and sāto, make up a unique, culturally localized model of embodiment and health, which in turn relates to cosmological beliefs about the potency and capriciousness of terrestrial spirits or ghosts who can easily wreak havoc on human communities, causing grave illness. The notion of health care systems as culturally bound, contextually specific structures, wherein conceptions of bodily schemata, health, and illness vary across localized settings, is crucial to my analysis of healing. I turn to medical anthropological theories to help elucidate a plurality of approaches to embodiment and healing. The subject of healing is multifaceted and wide in scope, and as will be further discussed below, cultural models of health, illness, and healing are quite variable. I attempt to narrow this scope by focusing on notions of local health care systems adopted by research participants in my field sites, relying on their unique terminologies and conceptions.

In An Anthropology of Biomedicine, Margaret Lock and Vinh-Kim Nyugen argue that “. . . human bodies are not everywhere the same; they are the products of evolutionary, historical, and contemporary social change resulting from ceaseless interactions among human beings, their environments, and the social and political milieux in which they live. . . .” They argue that Western biomedicine, developing this premise over the past three centuries, generally assumes that all human bodies everywhere are the same for the purposes of diagnosing and managing disease. Regarding the normalization of the human body, Lock and Nyugen continue, “An unexamined assumption about the
uniformity of human bodies continues to inform most biomedical practice.” That the human body is not uniformly existent is one component of my argument. I relatedly discuss cultural variations in human physiology, including unique conceptions and models of bodily physiology adopted by Bāuls and Nepali traditional healers, beginning in section 1.3.

I additionally argue that healing cannot be isolated as an individual, detached process. Sociopolitical action is an integral aspect in my analysis of healing, and social liberative action from the position of marginalized lower castes or social classes is crucial to healing as a totality. Relatedly, anthropologist Lisa Knight describes Rina das Bāul's hope for social transformation through singing the lyrics she composes for musical performance; I also interviewed Rina during fieldwork, and we discussed the complexities surrounding gender roles among Bāul performers, described in Chapter Four. Bāul songs “. . .do not merely reflect Baul ideology but, rather, become the means through which Baul ideology becomes experienced and embodied.” The role of music as an experiential medium for the transmission of esoteric teachings as well as sociopolitical critiques is a crucial aspect in my analysis of healing, and musical performances provide a dynamic relationality between audience members and Bāul performers, which I discuss further in Chapter Six. Rina's songs critique social inequalities, discrimination, and socially constructed divisions created by caste-based jāt distinctions, but she obliquely addresses the subject of gender inequality. Rina is compelled by a sense of social responsibility when she sings to village audiences: “I want to tell them that this [how they're living] is not right; don't do that, that is bad; that will destroy your life. This is something we do [to teach.] If Bauls say this, then people listen. A lot of people will listen.”

Along with ethnography-based research, I will also historically situate the early medieval Hindu

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19 Margaret Lock and Vinh-Kim, An Anthropology of Biomedicine (Hoboken: Wiley and Sons, 2010), 1.
21 Ibid., 123.
and Buddhist Siddhas, beginning around the ninth century, in relation to the tantric influence evident in Bāul musical culture. The syncretic Haṭhayoga milieu is significant in this historical influence. I borrow Daniel Gold's terminology in asserting a “morphological” similarity in “yogic cultures” between the early medieval Siddhas and Bāuls rather than a direct, historical continuity or transmission.\(^{22}\) This is further analyzed in Chapter Two. Significant morphological parallels include:

1.) distancing from Sanskritic Brahmanical and Buddhist institutional authorities, reflected in adopting vernacular languages such as the Old Bengali\(^{23}\) of the Caryāpādas or Apabrahmṣa in the tantric songs known as dohākośa, “Couplet Treasuries.” The content of these poem-songs also reflects consistent polemics directed against perceived hypocrisy across numerous institutionalized religious traditions, including Hindu ascetics and Brāhmaṇas, Jains, and Buddhists. This linguistic-cultural subversion continues in modern Bengali oral cultures, including Sahajiyā and Bāul songs.

2.) parallel metaphorical imagery, including quotidian and Bengali geographical imagery, used in describing the body – reflected in contemporary dehatattva songs. The crucial notion of dehatattva, “body-truths,” will be unpacked in Chapter 1.5.

3.) the tantric emphasis on reversal – the physical sublimation and reversal of sexual fluids, the antinomian reversal of cultural mores and social propriety, and the reversal of caste-based hierarchical social roles.

In terms of singing polysemic, cryptic lyrics that may be interpreted directly or literally as well


\(^{23}\) There is no agreement as to what language these songs were composed in – it may be a composite form of Prākṛt, not fully discernable as a singular vernacular language. This topic is briefly touched upon in Chapters One and Two.
as symbolically as a transmission of esoteric teachings, some Bāul songs certainly parallel the abstruse, paradoxical language employed in the *Caryāpādas*. Continuing the heterodoxic “reverse” way, Bāuls scorn caste hierarchy, religious formalism and authority; many of their songs are blatant polemics directed towards perceived hypocrisy and injustice existent within social institutions, as well as the futility of seeking salvation in temples or śāstras, scriptural texts. The Sahajiyā poet Kṛṣṇadasā therefore declared: “Neither the Vedas nor the Dharma of men hold any meaning for him; the sahaja-
manuṣ (sahaja person) has abandoned the duties of birth and conduct.”

Social divisions and oppressions created by jāt distinctions are famously criticized and mocked in Lālan Fakir's songs, and this eschewing of sectarian religious identification continues through the dynamic forms of social resistance employed by modern Bāul singers. Thus Rina das Bāul censures the notions of purity via caste-based hierarchy in a self-composed song:

> . . .you'll see that jāt has no substance [vastu]
> Find a teacher – surrender to the guru's teachings,
> Rina says you'll see that jāt is nothing but a societal prejudice.
> She'll not give it a place at the heart of society.

The first line of Rina's stanza may have a double connotation: jāt is dismissed as insubstantial, but vastu is also a technical term, referring to a material substance integral for bodily refinement and yogic praxis in Bāul sādhanā. Surrendering to the guru is crucial for the transmission of Bāul musical culture and bodily praxis; proper surrender to a guru also facilitates humility and the mental purification needed for the arduous path of Bāul practical training. Her final lines echo the sociopolitical critique common to Bāul songs, pointing out the useless divisiveness created by jāt, sectarian religious institutions and socioeconomic stratifications.

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2. Idealizing and Constructing the “Bāul”

In present-day Bengal, there is a fierce identity politics surrounding who are “real” Bāuls, as many self-identified Bāuls live off the earnings of musical performance, either not practicing – or feigning experience with – the direct application of esoteric practice, sādhanā. Among practitioners or sādhakas, when asked about those general details of sādhanā that are allowed to be discussed, idiosyncrasies manifest with varying, sometimes contradictory answers, as there is not a singular, cohesive worldview shared among practitioners. This “artist-practitioner” gulf is wide enough to establish a discourse surrounding so-called śilpī Bāuls who may be talented artists but are inexperienced with the practice of sādhanā itself. Identity politics is nested both within and without the Bāul community, including village residents throughout rural West Bengal and the urban middle and upper class Bengali elite, the bhadralok, regarding what constitutes an authentic Bāul. According to one Bāul singer, Sudhir das Bāul, “It is a time of crisis. True and fake Bāuls live side by side. Look at rats and cats, the mongoose and snake. They live near each other even though they harm each other. Their tradition continues like a natural law.”26 As Lisa Knight comments, “(t)he discursive landscape of Baul and gendered identity, as articulated by Bauls, bhadralok, non-Baul neighbors, and many others, is a veritable field of conflicting expectations and pitfalls.”27 Contributing to lively discourse and controversy, Bāul singers defy attempts to essentialize them as a homogeneous “religious movement” or a singular, centralized lineage, sampradāya.

The projected image of the idealized “Bāul,” the Bengali rustic minstrel par excellence, was

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26 Sudhir das Bāul, personal interview, Birbhum district, 26 March 2016.
27 Lisa Knight, Contradictory Lives, 6.
mainly developed by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Kshitimohan Sen, both of whom labored to establish an international center for scholarship in Santiniketan, West Bengal with the creation of Visva-Bharati University. Tagore's influence is particularly pronounced in Santiniketan and surrounding vicinities. One Bāul singer from the Birbhum district dryly remarked to me, “Before Tagore, no one cared about Bāuls at all. Now the world is interested in us.” Tagore, deeply immersed in Bengali nationalism and a drive to encourage an aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual “Bengali Renaissance,” left such a profound impact on social constructions of the “Bāul” that some scholars distinguish a sub-tradition relating to the idealized fantasy – or contemporary existence of – the “Tagorean” Bāul, connected with the commercial, commodified aspects of Bāul performative cultures in Santiniketan. Tagore was deeply entrenched in Calcutta middle and upper-class bhadralok elite culture, and his reformulations of the “Bāul” continue to inform contemporary conceptions regarding what is expected of a “real” Bāul, among the bhadralok, outsiders/non-initiates, as well as Bāul singers themselves, primarily in the vicinity surrounding Santiniketan.

For Tagore, Bāuls represented the romanticized ideal of “rustic” spirituality – non-sectarian, rural minstrels who are aloof of social hierarchy and caste distinctions, preserving a pure, indigenous Bengali sensibility, insulated and uncorrupted by the urban and colonial vicissitudes of metropolitan Calcutta. This provided the potential basis of a universal religion, what Tagore referred to as the “Religion of Man:” “the Bauls did not become crystallised into any particular order or religious tradition. In the Bauls ... there is a freedom and independence of spirit that resists all definition.”

Seemingly aware of their esoteric bodily practices, he bypasses their significance completely, claiming

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it is to be spoken of only by initiates, “These Bauls have a philosophy which they call the philosophy of the Body; but they keep it secret it is only for the initiated.” Instead proffering a sanitized conception of the Bāuls, preserving the image of a wandering, ascetic minstrel, Tagore claims, “their songs. . . are their only form of worship.”

Thus we have a caricature presented of an independent, unencumbered minstrel, one who seemingly transcends social conventions and sectarian religious divisions. Any mention of heterodox, tantric practices is omitted completely, as these scandalous aspects did not fit into his sanitized, ideal conception of the “real Bāul.” Whatever Tagore's intentions were, his idealized popularization of the “Bāul” reinforced his political agenda: the valorization of rustic poet-minstrels as symbols of nationalism – the marginalized folk culture that served to inspire a Hindu Bengali renaissance, a rediscovery of indigenous values in contrast to foreign, colonial domination. Tagore's assumptions and reconstructions about the romanticized “Bāul” are encapsulated well in another excerpt from The Religion of Man:

The wandering village singers, belonging to a popular sect of Bengal called Bauls, have no images, temples, scriptures or ceremonials, but declare in their songs the divinity of Man. . . Coming from men who are unsophisticated, living a simple life in obscurity, it gives us a clue to the inner meaning of all religion, for it suggests that these religions are not about a God of a cosmic force, but about the God of human personality.

This summarizes the “Tagorean Bāul” well: an elitist rendering of rural “unsophisticated men,” outsider, wandering minstrels “living a simple life in obscurity,” who promote a universalist, humanistic religion. The Divine is perceived as not dual or transcendent and can be related to directly

31 Tagore, The Religion of Man, 110-111.
32 Ibid., 16.
and personally. Such a humanistic religion is essentialized as the apogee of “all religion.”

Kshitimohan Sen, a contemporary and colleague of Tagore, published an early religious studies-based analysis of the Bāuls, Bāṅlār Bāul, in 1954. Given the inwardly-focused aspects of Bāul bodily praxis, he accorded Bāuls with the contemplative mysticism expressed in the Upaniṣads – realizing the identity of the individual ātman with the absolute Brahman. In his own form of reconfiguration and essentialism, Sen attempted to fit the disparate elements of Bāul spiritual practices into a cohesive framework echoing Vedantic mysticism. Sen was an early proponent of defining what constitutes a “real,” as opposed to inauthentic, Bāul – an obsession that still captivates non-Bāul enthusiasts in West Bengal. Unsurprisingly, echoing Tagore's embarrassment with Bāul sexual rituals, “real” Bāuls only follow “inner truth” instead of engaging in sexual praxis.33

Sen's confidence in essentializing a fixed nature imposed upon “Bāuls” deeply impacted public perceptions and stereotypes about the socially constructed “Bāul.” Related to this, Charles Capwell comments, “(t)hus the prejudicial image he constructed, reinforced by the artistic power of Tagore, has had widespread influence on the way Bengalis view the Bauls.”34 I agree with his conclusion – and traces of the “Tagorean Bāul” and Sen's sanitized, stereotyped construction continue to thrive, especially in the modern setting of Santiniketan.

Following this was Upendranath Bhattacharya's influential 1957 ethnography, which attempted to distill commonalities among Bāuls into five main principles, ostensibly shared as a common “worldview:”

1.) bed-bahirbhūt dharma, the rejection of social castes and religious dogmatism;

2.) gurubād, the necessity of learning musical training and esoteric practice from a competent guru;

33 Kshitimohan Sen, Bāṅlār Bāul (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1954): 50.
3.) *bhāṅḍa-brahmāṅḍabād*, reflecting a common tantric maxim: the individual human body is a microcosmic reflection of the greater universe;

4.) *maner mānuṣ*, the search for the “Person of the Heart,” the veiled divinity dwelling within human beings;

5.) *ṛūp-swarūp-tattva*, the principle that connects the individual human form (*ṛūp*) with the ultimate, cosmic existence. Bhattacharya's work was an early attempt at describing the alchemical, sexo-yogic practices employed by Bāuls, a topic purposely ignored by Tagore and K.M. Sen. Bhattacharya was the first to refer to Bāul philosophy with the Bengali term *bastubāḍī*, often translated into English as “materialist,” referring to the bodily transformation of material substances (Skt. *vastu*), e.g., the refinement of bodily fluids. Though based on years of fieldwork rather than textual extrapolations alone, Bhattacharya's conception of the yogic-materialist Bāul established yet another essentialized stereotype, though directly contrasting that of the Tagorean Bāul construction. Nonetheless, his work has been quite influential on later twentieth-century scholarship, for those who choose to emphasize the so-called “materialist” aspect of Bāul praxis.

3. **Untangling Scholarly Perceptions and Original Contribution to Research**

Scholars in the last few decades, avoiding such generalized essentializing of “Bāuls,” have produced considerable breakthroughs in analyses of Bāul songs and contextually-based ethnographies, focusing on specific lineages of performer-practitioners in West Bengal or Bangladesh. Anthropologist Jeanne Openshaw, attempting to move away from generalized essentialisms regarding “Bāuls” by focusing on the lineage of Raj Khyāpā, remarked that “contextual studies relating songs or

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song series to particular performances and the exegesis of those performers are virtually non-existent. Among English-language publications, Openshaw’s nuanced ethnographic work did much to shift scholarly emphasis away from imposed reifications; she discusses the issue of definition at length, to the extent that she uses the term “Bāul” only within quotation marks. Her careful exegesis of esoteric sexual praxis, Ben. yugal sādhanā, strongly contributed to understandings of Bāul bodily praxis.

Modern scholarship, moving past older constructions of “Bāulness,” include the insightful analyses and song translations of Carol Salomon, and sociopolitical critiques and Bengali cultural analyses of Hugh Urban. Carola Erika Lorea contributed to modern scholarship with an exhaustive, lineage-based ethnography, applying folkloric studies and performance theory in the analysis of Bengali oral cultures and Bhaba Pagla, a renowned Śākta saint also associated with Bāuls. Charles Capwell developed initial directions in musicological, performance-based studies. Bodily-praxis centered studies were innovated by Sakti Nath Jha and sociopolitical analyses of gender relations in Bāul communities by Lisa Knight. Sudhir Cakrabarti has greatly contributed to studies of Bengali esoteric oral literature. The scholarship of these authors helped to avoid the one-sided constructed stereotypes of earlier accounts, granting a nuanced perspective of the plurality of “Bāul” possibilities,

42 Sudhir Cakrabarti, Bālāhādī sampradāyār tāder gān (Kolkata: Pustak Bipani: 1986); Gabhir Nirjan Pathe (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers 1989); Bānlā Dehatattwer Gān (Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, 1990).
complicating the rigid distinction assumed by some scholars between “authentic” practitioner (sādhak) and allegedly inauthentic “performer” (Ben. gāyak) Báuls. Focusing strictly on the esoteric yogic aspects of Baul practice inspired by Upendranath Bhattacharya’s bastubādī fixation also prompted the apt observation of Manjita Mukharji: such scholarship “has largely viewed the Bauls as asocial, ahistorical and insulated esoteric sects,” reinforcing the stereotype of the itinerant Baul, solely focused on esoteric practice, aloof of societal conventions. The contextually-based studies cited above, as well as my own fieldwork, contradict such assumptions. Baul musical performance is deeply tied to bodily praxis, and their performances are eminently public, varying in scale depending on the performative context and audiences; indeed, performances are a kind of cultural transmission, a social outreach. Ongoing discourse regarding social perceptions of the Bauls among non-initiates, disciples, and Bengali bhadralok illustrate the inherently social, permeable nature of Baul communities, which are far from asocial and insulated.

While I am indebted to these previous studies, I shift my research focus by contextualizing Baul praxis as a modality of embodied healing. This includes esoteric bodily practices connected to tantric yoga systems, intended to purify and transmute the material constituents of the body, as a form of self-healing, promoting longevity, bodily strength and prevention of sickness. I also interpret musical performances and sociopolitical critiques via the transmission of songs as contributing to healing as a totality. I develop an explicit link between the healing potential of bodily practice, Ben. deha sādhana, and musical performance, Ben. gān sādhana. The palliative effects of aesthetic healing, including music and sound – what I term “sonic healing” – are analyzed within the framework of Śābda / nāda-brahman, Sanskrit terms prevalent throughout numerous Indian philosophical traditions referring to the

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sonic power inherent in sound itself. My approach to the dynamic nature of healing is informed by the interdisciplinary lens of medical ethnomusicology, which approaches the link between modalities of healing and musical performance – often specifically ritualized, sanctified musical contexts.

4. Music and Healing

The multidimensional, multisensory phenomenon of music, practiced throughout an enormous diversity of cultural contexts, has a plurality of disciplinary approaches. In *Traces of the Spirit: The Religious Dimensions of Popular Music*, Robin Sylvan notes the many levels on which music functions – physiologically, psychologically, socio-culturally, semiotic, virtual, ritual, and spiritual. Comparing this to the multidimensional nature of religious practice, Sylvan refers to music's parallel ability to function simultaneously at multiple levels, which “. . .makes it a vehicle par excellence to carry the religious impulse.” These simultaneous levels of functionality correspond to my integrative conception of healing as a totality.

The *Oxford Handbook of Medical Ethnomusicology* addresses the intersection of music and healing from a variety of ethnographic studies. This anthology includes Benjamin Koen's analysis of music-healing-meditation, Therese West and Gail Ironson's quantative-based approach to the physiological effects of music relating to health and wellness, and Jean During's analysis of the healing practices of Islamic musical performance, including healing methods within Sufi sama gatherings, which I draw from in my analysis of Bāul musical performance.

While prompting questions about the cross-cultural implications of musical healing, *Musical Healing in Cultural Contexts* aims to do what the title states – situate music and healing within specific

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Penelope Gouk, in her introduction to this collection, describes the concept of *animu* shared among Andean cultures, a word referring to an inherently animated cosmos:

> It is within this framework of an animated cosmos that music, or more precisely sound energy, plays a fundamental part in shaping and rebalancing the forces at work in nature. Because sound is considered a form of *animu* which is equivalent to life itself, certain kinds of sound play an important role in ritual healing: those produced by whistles, llama bells and dynamite are among the examples he offers.

This strongly parallels my discussion of the pan-Indic concepts *Śābda* and *nāda-brahman* in Chapter Six, referring to the inherently salvific nature of sound as coterminous with the universe itself. These terms are both prevalent in tantric yoga traditions, in which the “inner sound” of *nāda* pulsates within the body when cognition is stilled during meditation. I apply these terms within the context of Bāul musical healing, as well as the use of instruments such as hand and frame-drums, conches and bells among Nepali traditional healers during healing pūjās, as well as the central emphasis placed on *mantra* as a supreme vehicle for sonic healing.

Relationally, in his approach to ritual-music which he terms “liturgical musicology,” Edward Foley argues that “sound, as such, does not really exist in the world around us. What does exist is vibration. . .there is no sound until we hear it. . .it is not only a physical phenomenon, but also the response to that phenomenon and to a lesser degree the intentionality behind the phenomenon that enables us to distinguish between noise and communication.” The immediate, *visceral* effects of music's physical presence on the body – which is a multisensory process as sound waves enter *via* the eardrums – thereafter processed by the nervous system and affecting a number of physiological processes – is integral to my analysis of sonic healing in Chapter Five. Foley's reference to

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intentionality is also important in the construction of musical meaning – music intended to heal clearly differs from entertainment-based or strictly “artistic” music. Music's vibratory physical presence as the Sanskrit notion of *spanda* will also be explored in Chapters Five and Six.

The importance of aesthetic therapeutics is stressed in Gregory P. Fields' *Religious Therapeutics: Body and health in Yoga, Āyurveda, and Tantra*. This work is particularly intersectional with my theoretical framework, as Āyurvedic healing has cross-fertilized with tantric bodily theories and praxis, and Nepali traditional healers apply both “tantra-mantra” and Āyurvedic medicines to heal afflicted patients. Fields also analyzes the connection between ultimate soteriological liberation and embodied healing in yogic practices, which relates to one element of my argument explored in Chapter Six regarding the interconnection between embodied healing and social liberative action.

I now present the second part of my dissertation, which addresses the health care system of Nepali traditional healers in the Indo-Nepali borderland areas of Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills.

5. **Nepali Traditional Healers**

In the domain of sociopolitical healing, while *jhākris* and *mātās* in my field site are also socioeconomically marginalized, they do not employ the subversive platform of sociopolitical and institutional critiques found in Bāul songs and performances. In my field site, their social tensions connect especially with institutionalized religious practitioners with higher social prestige, including Hindu Brāhmaṇas and Tibetan Buddhist lamas. Biomedical practitioners and physicians who are based primarily in urban settings also hold higher social status, and despite villagers in my field site criticizing *jhākris* as frauds, outdated or “backwards,” they nonetheless generally consult *jhākris* before
biomedical practitioners when a family member falls suddenly ill. I posit that the ongoing practice of traditional healing arts and the transmission of familial lineages, *kul*, among Nepali traditional healers, despite the immense social pressures presented by medical specialists to “modernize” their healing repertoires, as well as tensions with more socially prestigious religious practitioners, is also a form of sociopolitical subversion. Thus low caste villagers who are marginalized within the well-defined South Asian social strata structure develop a unique position of authority by demonstrating their successful ability to embody deities, to predict the future and to heal those who are afflicted.

6. Avoiding Essentialism in Nepali Traditional Healer Studies

Following his ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal, Alexander MacDonald referred to *jhākris* as “interpreters of the world” – able to interpret those unseen powers and spirits that affect those living in their local community. His definition, previously quoted on page 16, describes them as people who fall into a trance and subsequently have voices speak through them; such individuals are privileged intermediaries between spirits and human beings.

This early attempt to define *jhākris* covers those general features that are common ritualized aspects shared by the ritual intercessors in my field site. Being an intermediary is crucial: the complex set of relationships among human beings, spirits, and terrestrial-bound entities is not always apparent to sensory perception, and the function of “interpreter,” being able to see that which is not commonly apparent, is crucial in the healing repertoires of *jhākris*. While *jhākris* may have voices speak through them, and they are purportedly able to look into time frames outside the quotidian constraints of space-time, these phenomena occur when a clan or tutelary deity (Nep. *deutā*) enters their body – no *jhākri* ever used the word “trance” or any Nepali equivalent term during my fieldwork. MacDonald's
description of a “certain social mythology” is indeed crucial; the etiologies provided by *jhākris* contribute to a social feedback loop, in which beliefs regarding malignant witches (Nep. *boksī*), harmful spirits, and the vulnerability of one's immaterial essence (Nep. *sāto* or *ātma*) structure diagnoses. *Jhākris* in turn offer treatment *via* healings and exorcisms that feed into the larger social mythology about health, the release of disease and harmful spirits, and the reestablishment of social order and propriety.

MacDonald's chapter is from an early work, *Spirit Possession in the Nepal Himalayas*, published in 1976 and edited by Rex L. Jones and John T. Hitchcock, both of whom contribute to that volume. The authors in this collection confidently equate the ever-imprecise cross-cultural term “shaman” with *jhākri* and other Nepali traditional healers, a precedent that remains to this day, continued in the ethnographic work of David Gellner, Gregory Maskarinec, H. Sidky, David Holmberg, Romano Mastromattei, and Larry Peters. Indeed, it has become a generally uncontested matter to use this term in studies related to Nepali traditional healers. One preoccupation among scholars engaged with *jhākri* studies is the establishment of defined subcategories of “ritual intercessors,” such as *jhākri* and oracular mediums, Nep. *dhāmis*, within the monolithic, ever

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convoluted category of “shamanism.” While establishing a typology of differing practitioners may be useful for analytical purposes, it ceases to be helpful when framed within the cross-cultural essentialized notion of “shamanism” and states of “ecstasy,” which itself is largely an ongoing response to the mid-twentieth century controversial work of Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*. Related is the ongoing debate about what may constitute “authentic shamanism,” creating a dichotomy between so-called “soul journeys” and spirit possession: thus Jean-Loïc Le Quelle posits “the shaman” as master of spirits, on the opposite end of a continuum from those who are passive instruments of possession. I discuss the phenomenon of spirit possession in relation to the work of *mātās* in chapter five, but I consider this proposed distinction to be a false dichotomy, particularly because I contextualize the activities of research participants in their own terms, rather than connecting their work to the conceptual morass of shamanism. Much of this debate exists amid the backdrop of Sergei Shirokogoroff’s popularization of the Tungusic (or Evenki) term *šamán*, a word unique to the cultural context of the Siberian Tungusic; given that this term relates to a specifically North Asian cultural context, some scholars insist that this word only has analytical value within the Siberian and Inner Asian folk religious contexts, as the “shamanic complex” is geographically specific.

In Chapter Five, I explain my restricted use of “shamanic” as a heuristic adjective rather than referring to “shaman(s)” or the *Urreligion* “shamanism,” which is a category too faulty to be applicable; I do not attempt to equate jhākri with the term “shaman,” and I instead rely on the analytical terms

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employed by the research participants themselves. I likewise avoid relying on Western psychological categories of “mental states” and corresponding “trance” or “altered states of consciousness” to explain the effects of jhākris and mātās while possessed by deities and/or spirits. There are certainly critics of this within shamanic studies, such as Peter Jones, who critiques the association of “shamans” with “altered states” as “spatiotemporal free theories,” a kind of “anything goes” approach in which anyone engaging in so-called altered states may be defined as a shaman. While studies of jhākris are generally conducted in Nepal, my ethnography is uniquely based in the Nepali-majority areas of northern West Bengal and rural Sikkim, India, borderland areas that are geographically porous to an array of differing cultural influences. I also situate the usage of mantras by Nepali traditional healers within the context of sonic healing.

7 Research Methodologies

I employed ethnographic fieldwork in rural West Bengal and Sikkim, India to test my hypothesis regarding the healing praxis of Bāuls and Nepali traditional healers as a systemic form of healing, or “healing as a totality.” As bodily praxis, models of embodiment, health, and disease are transmitted as oral teachings among these groups, participant observation, interviews and oral exegesis are crucial to gain understanding of their praxis and embodied theories.

Though my research emphasizes ethnographic fieldwork to present the healing practices of Bāuls and Nepali traditional healers as living traditions on the ground, I also employ textual analysis. This is seemingly paradoxical, as both groups emphasize the oral literary transmission of teachings,

with the Bāuls ostensibly rejecting scriptural-based authority. Robert Redfield popularized the notion of “Great” and “Little” traditions and communities in the mid-twentieth century, with the former referring to textually-based literary traditions and the latter referring to village-based “folk” religious and cultural traditions. Within South Asian scholarship, these terms have been applied to refer to the Sanskritic literary tradition and the primarily oral, folkloric literatures of rural villages. While my research participants operate within village-based oral traditions, I nonetheless argue for a dialectical exchange between Sanskritic literary cultures and the heterodox tantric-yogic cultures of early medieval India; the influence resulting from these dialectical exchanges trickles down from the early medieval period to contemporary practices applied by Bāuls and Nepali traditional healers. Trawick similarly discusses how these tensions manifest within South Asian village-based praxis as “. . .the multiplicity of contexts in which the rules of the texts might or might not be more or less enacted.”

I thus analyze Sanskrit texts associated with Haṭhayoga and the Nāth Siddha yogis, such as the Siddhasiddhāntapaddhatiḥ (SSP) and Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā (HYP) in Chapter Two, because I view these texts as the codification of practices employed by the fluidly permeable yogic cultures in early medieval India. As such, one function of these texts is to serve as manuals for practical training, and the practices and body-centered theories exhaustively described in these texts show an affinity with the esoteric bodily praxis (Nep. deha-sādhanā) employed by Bāul practitioners. In addition, I analyze segments of Buddhist tantric works, including the Hevajra Tantra and the Caryā songs, to elucidate a parallel morphological connection between the tantric subtle-body physiological schemata and related practices and Bāul bodily praxis. Analysis of Bāul songs would be nearly impossible without the generous oral exegesis provided by research participants; this is a key method by which I interpret the

61 Margaret Trawick, Notes on Love in a Tamil Family, 23.
veiled esoteric references concealed within *dehatattva* songs.

### 7.1 Baul Fieldwork Methodologies

Though I do not consider myself an objectively detached observer, my level of participation varied throughout differing fieldwork contexts. My fieldwork approach is based in qualitative research. I balanced participant observation with a level of critical distance and reflection. Those I interviewed include two familial lineages of performers, initiatory (*dikṣā*) *gurus* and established Baul performers. I engaged in participant observation and interviews with ten performers in the Birbhum district and Kolkata, including: Dindayal das Baul, Sudhir das Baul, Binod das Baul, Biswanath das Baul, Deb das Baul, Sibsundar das Baul, Tarak das Baul, Basu das Baul, Rina das Baul and Tarun das Baul, all of whom will be further introduced in Chapter Four. I additionally interviewed Khyāpā Baba, who, while deeply immersed in Baul musical culture and praxis, identifies as an *avadhūta* renunciant; he nonetheless has given *dikṣā* initiation to Bauls himself.

Numerous performers I interviewed indirectly referred to having practical experience with esoteric bodily practice, *deha sādhanā*, while a few older performers claimed they “no longer need” to apply this practice. Other performers remarked that they had no practical experience, instead focusing on musical performance as *sādhanā* (*Ben. gān sādhanā*). I accompanied some Baul singers during their travels to various performances throughout West Bengal, in addition to spending time with them at their homes. While my fieldwork was based primarily in the rural Birbhum district, I also met performers from the Nadia and Bankura districts in Kolkata, the main metropolitan hub of West Bengal, where musical gatherings such as *utsav* are common, drawing in Baul performers from throughout Bengal. I employed conversational and structured interviews and recorded these, as well as song
performances, on a digital audio recorder. I attended major melās or large musical gatherings, including the well-established Jaydev Kenduli Melā, where thousands of musicians from West Bengal and Bangladesh meet. I also visited communal ākharās, public gathering spaces, where many Bāuls and fakirs converge for all-night gatherings. The exuberance, constant singing and spirited conversations of these ākharā gatherings drew me in as a kind of passive participant rather than a detached observer. I was offered initiation, dīkṣā, as a requisite to understand Bāul praxis on the practical level of an initiate, but I declined this offer, choosing to give myself more critical distance.

Oral exegesis given during these gatherings regarding the hidden meanings of Bāul songs was a primary source of insight regarding the polysemic, often paradoxical content of these songs. During these discussions and debates, singers gave exegesis after performing a section of a song and pausing to reflect, offering their interpretations. This is known as Ben. hari kathā, what Openshaw discusses as “talking about practice.” As teachings are transmitted primarily through songs, other than occasional quotations from texts such as the Caitanya-caritāmṛta, the biography of the famed Bengali Vaiṣṇava reformer Caitanya, this culture of exegesis among Bāul singers is crucial in the ongoing discourse regarding the transmission of Bāul teachings, including the more veiled aspects of bodily praxis, or teachings in relation to musical performance and training.

Carola Lorea critiques the academic conception of a text as a fixed and static creation, somehow historically frozen in time: given the analytical lenses of folklore studies and performance theory, she presents “performance” not only as staged musical events, but also as “aesthetic practices. . .For instance, the Gurus’ speech, the insiders’ doctrinal debates, and the lyrics of Bāul and Fakir songs are all concretized in single performances that share a common mode of discourse,” drawn from a shared

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62 Openshaw, Seeking Bāuls of Bengal, 233-239.
set of code-words, metaphors and allegorical images – all of which establish a performance. I also incorporate this broader sense of discourse-based performance as a vital aspect of interpreting the multiple referents concealed within Baul songs. Though interpretations and understandings varied widely among the performers I interviewed, with exegeses often contradicting other interpretations, certain code-words and allegories had meanings that were commonly agreed upon, whether or not these understandings were practically applied in bodily practices, deha-sādhanā. Thus “Bauls” comprise a heterogeneous tradition, avoiding any monolithic doctrinal position, while also preserving specific lineage-based interpretative connotations and pragmatic instructions for embodied praxis.

7.2 Traditional Healers: Fieldwork Methodologies

Among Nepali traditional healers in the Darjeeling Hills District and Sikkim, I observed healing pūjās for various kinds of afflictions. Along with jhākris and mātājis, I interviewed a Lepcha bongthing in rural Sikkim, and a Newari Vajrācārya or “vajra master” in Kathmandu, Nepal. I used a digital audio recorder to record interviews and informal conversations. I conducted interviews and participant observation with ten Nepali traditional healers, including three mātās and seven jhākris.

Further introduced in Chapter Five, these practitioners include: Sankar Chamgling, Jitindra Kumar, Kumar Sarki, Monkumari Tamang, Nima Sherpa, Dhanbhdur Chhetri, Gopal Jhākri, Duma Mātāji, Pumpha Regmi Mātāji, and Lakṣmi Lhamu Sherpa Mātāji.

The first jhākri I spoke to, named Gopal, offered to perform a pūjā after observing there may be an imbalance in my kul or familial lineage; he then diagnosed this as relating to my uncle, who had

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recently passed away. Sankar, a Rāi bijuwa, a term analogous with the word “jhākri” specifically used among the Rāi, also performed a divination (Nep. jokhānā) and healing pūjā for me. Other jhākris I met immediately performed jokhānā before allowing me to say anything, interpreting my present circumstances and predicting future outcomes, apparently assuming that I came to them with the sole intention of seeking future predictions. Much of the fieldwork was quotidian, meeting jhākris and mātājis at their familial homes and staying there for some time, while they busied themselves with gardening, cooking, manual labor and domestic duties. I also observed healing pūjās performed by practitioners for various kinds of ailments, including the treatment of chronic stomach (Nep. gastrik) problems and persistent physical and mental symptoms suspected to be the result of witchcraft.

David Holmberg discusses the “total religious system” regarding his fieldwork with the western Tamang in Nepal, concluding that Tamang traditional healers cannot be isolated from their ongoing interactions and dialogues with Tibetan Buddhist lamas. Likewise, in my field site I encountered a nuanced division of labor between Nepali traditional healers and Tibetan Buddhist lamas. Because of the relevance of this ongoing dialectic, I also interviewed Tibetan Buddhist lamas about traditional healing practices, both geshes (dge bshes) and high-ranking khenpos (mkhen po), in Darjeeling and Gangtok. These lamas include Khenpo Chowang, Geshe Nyhma Dorje, and Nyhma Holser.

The tensions and dialogues vary in differing settings: in villages in my field site, smaller Buddhist monasteries (Nep. gūmbas) house lamas who often perform funerary rites and healing for local villagers, where witchcraft and affliction by harmful spirits (pret, bhūt) are suspected. In these rural village contexts, interactions among lamas, jhākris and mātās are more common, with traditional healers even referring patients to lamas during difficult cases, and vice versa. In the urban settings of

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64 Sankar informed me that “we bijuwas are Rāi jhākris.”
Darjeeling and Gangtok, the larger, established monasteries, often of the Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist tradition, are esteemed with a higher status, and lamas therein carry more pronounced social prestige. In these contexts, interaction between lamas and rural villagers is sparser, and the necessity for healing is less pressing, since the access to modern biomedical care is more prevalent in these urban settings. I also observed more skepticism from these urban-based lamas regarding the healing practices of jhākris; for instance, Khenpo Chowang, whose interview I discuss in Chapter Five, describes the worldview shared among local villagers regarding harmful spirits and ghosts as “small minded.” The skepticism expressed by these lamas seems to be less about doctrinal differences, e.g., the efficacy of non-Buddhist practices, and more about the concern that “folk” practices may engender reified conceptions about ghosts and witchcraft, which intensifies village gossip and superstitions, increasing collective suffering. As my focus is on the practices of traditional healers, I do not overly emphasize the dialectical relationship between Nepali traditional healers and Buddhist practitioners in my field site. The practical aspect of the division of labor among ritual practitioners for varying healing contexts is quite relevant for my fieldwork, which is why I include this dialogue in my analysis.

The primary research participants included jhākris, mātās, Tibetan Buddhist lamas and villagers in my field site. As I spent extended time in villages throughout the Darjeeling Hills and southeast Sikkim, much of my assistance came from villagers I befriended during fieldwork, as many were curious why a foreigner would come to stay there during the freezing winter months. I thus gradually grew a network of acquaintances directly embedded in the local village-based health care system, which has rather minimal access to physicians and biomedical specialists. Because of this, relying on jhākris and mātās during an array of mental and physical health crises is central. Opinions about the efficacy of traditional healers varied widely: some complained of jhākris as being simple frauds and crooks who deceive patients with false diagnoses and cures. Those healers who consistently gave false
diagnoses and predictions or were unable to heal afflicted patients eventually lost all esteem and trust and were no longer visited. Others claimed that whatever power jhākris once had as healers is now in the domain of Buddhist lamas who are more ethical and effective with their healing repertoires. Some villagers begrudgingly admitted that at least certain jhākris and mātās are effective healers, but these are “outdated” methods that modern biomedicine will replace in time. Thus, the ongoing discourse surrounding the legitimacy and trustworthiness of jhākris and mātās in my field site is an important aspect of the social exchanges and negotiations within the local health care system.

7.3 Indigenous Methodology

This research oriented toward healing practices is linked to my personal involvement with indigenous American healing traditions, in which healing is understood as a comprehensive process involving body-mind-spirit, occurring relationally between individual beings and the community they are embedded in.

My mother's family settled in the borderland area of what is now the southwest United States and northern Mexico, roaming around the borderlands until settling more long term in the San Antonio Valley area in southern Texas. Their ethnic and cultural identity was especially hybridized and complex, as they were embedded in the larger Tejano milieu of Mexican Americans living in Texas, while having a blended mestizo heritage of indigenous Mexica (or Nahua) mixed with Hispanic ancestry. Gloria Anzaldúa notes this complex borderland relationship in Borderlands: La Frontera, “Indians and mestizos from central Mexico intermarried with North American Indians. The continual intermarriage between Mexican and American Indians and Spaniards formed an even greater mestizaje.”

According to oral history, a few of my grandmothers were curanderas generations back, healers

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connected to the tradition of *curanderismo*, a syncretic blend of Roman Catholicism and indigenous American healing traditions. The mixture of languages, including Nahuatl – among other indigenous languages – and Spanish, and the blending of indigenous deities, healing techniques, and Roman Catholic theology reflect this ethnocultural syncretism. Given our colonial and Spanish Catholic influence, my family was gradually de-indigenized and de-tribalized, losing touch with their ancestral languages and traditions over time. This led to immense pain, a *susto* or cultural soul-loss which occurs intergenerationally among many de-indigenized people, which my relatives have suffered from profoundly. We are not recognized as belonging to any indigenous Nation; yet the land of Aztlán dreams of us as our ancestors dream of us, asking us to return.

Due to the complex factors that contributed to my family's distancing from ancestral ways, I was not able to turn to family elders for guidance and training in traditional healing. I therefore sought out elders from other indigenous communities in North America, and I was fortunate enough to begin training in an indigenous healing modality, primarily in Oregon with an elder from the Chinook Nation, while also reclaiming and piecing together my heritage in *curanderismo*. Reclamation is one aspect of a larger decolonial struggle occurring among indigenous people throughout North America and globally. My personal background thus directly shapes my positionality and my understanding of the dynamic processes of healing, and the central role of embodiment in healing.

Shawn Wilson, an indigenous Canadian scholar of Opaskwayak Cree heritage, proposes an indigenous research methodology as the following:

One major difference between the dominant paradigms and an Indigenous paradigm is that the dominant paradigms build on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity: the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained, and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all creation.
. . .For research it is important to think about our relationship with the ideas and the concepts that we are explaining. Because this relationship is shared and mutual, ideas or knowledge cannot be owned or discovered. . .This becomes my methodology, an Indigenous methodology, by looking at relational accountability or being accountable to all my relations. 67

It is this paradigm that informs my research orientation. The methodology rests firmly on the importance of relationships, rather than an attempt to “objectively” extract information – thus my engagement in fieldwork depends on an involved nexus of relationships with participants, with ecologies, with places. I sometimes describe analyses from a first-person perspective to call into question the objectivity of my position as a researcher. Before beginning interviews in the field, I describe that I am training in an indigenous American healing tradition, which directly affects my research interests and general orientation. I say that my interest is in sharing knowledge and gaining a mutual understanding, rather than simply taking information or relating to others as objects to study.

Margaret Kovach, in her approach to indigenous methodologies, notes the consistent bias in Western scholarship that favors written traditions and publications: “. . .oral culture, of course, does not have a history of following this tradition. . .In crafting a research framework consistent with Indigenous epistemology and methods it complicates matters when there is little literature to reference.” 68 The practitioners who participated in my research are embedded in primarily orally-transmitted cultures, which again illustrates the importance of oral exegesis and ethnographic engagement. Likewise, my personal experience with indigenous American healing modalities connects with orally-transmitted teachings. I will sometimes refer to these understandings of healing as a frame of reference that links with my research positionality, rather than delving into autoethnography. Kovach also mentions

68 Margaret Kovach, Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 128-9.
“inward knowledges” drawn from her Canadian Nehiyaw Cree heritage that include insight gained from dreams, fasts, and ceremonies.\(^69\) While interviewing \textit{jhākris} and \textit{mātās}, numerous healers confided that everything they learned, even elaborate \textit{mantras}, came directly from dreams and visions. I similarly have found much inward knowledge in dreams, which I described to them. This helped to establish a relational rapport by sharing insights and experiential knowledge.

Both Margaret Kovach and Shawn Wilson emphasize that their work is not an attempt to add another qualitative research method to ethnographic contexts. They are instead actively working toward the decolonial project of including indigenous ways of knowing in academic research. Kovach situates academic institutions as sites of power which have excluded indigenous peoples as well as indigenous knowledge.\(^70\) Working towards the inclusion of indigenous knowledge involves ongoing institutional resistance, as Kovach refutes the theoretical positions of modern North American post-colonialism, arguing that “there is nothing post about it.”\(^71\) Wilson’s research paradigm is founded on shared ontological and knowledge systems common to indigenous Canadian and Australian researchers. He stresses the role of the storyteller as an appropriate model for indigenous research, rather than transmitting knowledge in the guise of a detached social scientist. I also commonly qualified field interviews by stating that my intention was not to document practices impersonally as a scientist; my intention was to share stories and experiences with research experiences. Indigenous American methodologies are rarely applied to research outside of North America. The application of this methodology is central to my positionality and orientation toward research, but I am careful not to impose this framework onto the South Asian indigenous knowledge systems explored in this thesis.

I additionally draw upon the work of indigenous philosophers Thomas Norton-Smith and

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 126-7.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 158-63.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 76.
Patrisia Gonzales, whose book *Red Medicine* includes etiologies unique to indigenous American understandings of the body and health. Gonzales presents a thoroughly nuanced analysis of the Texas-Mexico borderland milieu of mixed Nahua and Spanish traditional healing once practiced in my family.

Among the indigenous American elders and healers I worked with, healing is always understood as an ongoing process that never fully concludes; as long as one lives, there is more potential for healing. Healing does not occur solely individually and is always directly connected to healing on a collective level, which includes all living communities and the Earth as a totality. From a perspective that views the body-mind-spirit as a unified continuum, healing must occur in every layer of oneself. This defies the attempt to establish discrete, separate categories such as “psychological” or “physical” when an understanding of the self is that of a totality rather than a fragmented and sectioned entity. Given the framework of nondual embodiment that is my starting premise, thinking and emoting are just as physical as bodily physiological processes, and the array of ongoing thoughts and emotions leaves an indelible trace throughout one's body.

### 7.4 Phenomenological Ethnography

Along with a phenomenology of embodiment to be discussed below, my methodological approach is inspired by an ethnographically-informed philosophical framework. Michael Jackson refers to this as calling into question “. . .the analytical usefulness of identity thinking and demands a new vocabulary – built on such terms as lifeworld, relatedness, intersubjectivity, coexistence, negotiation, multiplicity, potentiality, transitivity, event, paradox, ambiguity, margin, and limit.” Rather than simply applying new vocabulary terms, this attempt intends to develop a strong self-reflexivity within the researcher: “(c)ritique is predicated on our capacity to see beyond or see through entrenched ideas

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about the nature of the world. . .Critique also implies a preparedness to subject one's provisional knowledge to continual retesting in the real world.”73 Thus, ingrained biases and assumptions regarding the body and healing derived from Western biomedical science and Cartesian metaphysics are continually retested in the course of ethnographic fieldwork, and participants' understanding of the body often contradicts foundational assumptions of biomedical science. That which I consider to be possible or impossible is one more set of limitations and presuppositions that may cloud my perceptions of all that occurs throughout fieldwork, including the relationships developed.

Terms such as “lifeworld” relate to the concrete, lived experience of research participants, and relatedness, coexistence, and negotiation refer to the ambiguities and cross-cultural adoption of practices that may not fit within discrete cultural, sectarian or linguistic boundaries. Jackson continues, “(b)y passing both the individual subject and culture as sui generis phenomena, we seek to explore the space of appearances – where that which is in potentia becomes in presentia – disclosed, drawn out, brought forth, given presence, or embodied.”74 This requires an open sensitivity to what appears and what practices are embodied directly by practitioners, which may or may not relate to textual traditions or reified conceptions of “religion(s).” The notion of embodiment, to be discussed in Chapter One, is particularly important to my research, not as an abstract philosophical notion, but again relating to direct and lived experience, to lifeworlds. Thomas Csordas' “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,” discussed in Chapter One, refers to the mechanistic, objective tendencies in the modern sciences which, ironically enough, alienate us from the very bodies we inhabit, which in turn has methodological consequences. Such consequences include becoming enmired in conceptual abstractions in the striving for scientific objectivity in ethnographic research, which may obscure the

73 Ibid., 23.
74 Ibid., 24.
qualitative descriptions of experiences described by research participants.

The phenomenological method is inherently oriented towards lived experience as it manifests among ethnographic participants. Knibbe and Versteeg comment on this orientation thus: “(i)n anthropology this means that views on reality are not evaluated for their truth. . .Rather, they are understood as experiences of reality that arise out of the daily life and practical concerns of people, without reducing them to socio-economic conditions or principles external to the situation itself. So ‘religions’ or religious experiences do not have to be ‘explained’, but simply ‘understood’ as the way of experiencing the world that is natural and unremarkable, strange only to the outsider.”

Michael Jackson relatedly describes this approach as “. . .a way of illuminating things by bringing them into the daylight of ordinary understanding.” The ethnographer-as-participant enters an ambiguous position herein: the epistemological critique of phenomenology implies that ethnographers are not detached and scientifically objective while observing the experiences of research participants, nor are findings purely subjective interpretations – analysis of fieldwork data lies somewhere in between. Within the domain of religion, this requires an attempt to illuminate participants' experiences lucidly, without recourse to further explanatory models of what these experiences might “mean.”

I also apply the phenomenological epoché, the attempt to “bracket” or set aside – as much as this is possible – any cultural and metaphysical presuppositions that may be imposed upon participants' worldviews. As Robert Desjarlais and C. Jason Throop conclude regarding this orientation, such a method should “. . .attend at once to the tangible realities of people’s lives and to the often interrelated social, biological, corporeal, sensorial, discursive, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and

75 Vague and open-ended as this term may be, one task of phenomenologists is to carefully define and qualify what this may mean in relation to ethnography.
environmental dimensions of those realities.” My research framework attempts to bring to light the tangible, lived experiences of research participants, while illustrating how the interrelated elements described by Desjarlais and Throop interweave within my model of healing as a totality.

8 Thesis Outline

Chapter One begins with theoretical reflections. These include theoretical underpinnings of models of place, health, and embodiment. I critique Cartesian body-mind dualism, which continues to underlie biomedical approaches to the human organism as well as psychological reifications of “mental states” or “consciousness” that are independent of physical corporeality. Since embodiment is inherently ecological in Baul dehatattva body-theories and the cosmological frameworks applied by Nepali traditional healers, I apply a phenomenological approach to place that posits the relational dynamic among human beings and landscapes. I then propose a model of embodiment that informs my analysis of tantric bodily practices while developing a working definition of “tantra” to be applied in this thesis. Following this, I draw upon medical anthropological theories to present sociocultural models of health and healing, emphasizing the culturally contextual nature of ideas regarding embodiment and health. I then turn to the “subtle body” model common to numerous tantric traditions, which influences Baul esoteric bodily praxis. Chapter One finishes with a discussion of dehatattva as an inherently ecological model. Dehatattva, “body-truth/principle,” is a unique conception of embodiment shared among Sufi fakirs and Hindu and Buddhist tantric practitioners in the medieval Bengali dialectical exchange of yogic cultures.

Chapter Two explores connections between Haṭhayoga and Rasa Šāstra, Indian alchemical

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works. This section begins the historical situating of complex interactions among Śaiva and Buddhist Siddhas, “accomplished/perfected ones,” in the early medieval epoch of northern and northeast India. I discuss the role of destructive emotions in yogic praxis, the resolution of which develops a form of healing. After briefly exploring the commonality of celestial body references – primarily lunar and solar references – in Haṭhayoga texts, I present the Haṭhayoga-inspired “four moons” esoteric practice employed by some contemporary Bāul practitioners.

Chapter Three expands on the historical confluences in early medieval northern India that resulted in a cross-fertilization of disparate tantric traditions. The composers of the Caryā song cycles are celebrated as both Śaiva Nāth and Vajrayāna Buddhist Siddhas. Given linguistic hypotheses about the “proto-Bengali” employed in these songs, a common historical hypothesis places these Siddhas in Bengal and northeast India. The unique Sahajiyā milieu of Bengal demonstrates a morphological connection among these heterodox, non-institutional yogic cultures. The reemergence of goddess worship and śakti as the divine feminine is explored in relation to Hindu and Buddhist tantric practitioners, including a discussion of Bengali Śakta-tantra. The role of śakti is significant among Bāul performers, which I discuss in Chapter Four. Sahaja – a central term commonly appearing in vernacular poem-songs attributed to these Siddhas and a technical referent for ultimate nondual realization – is analyzed as a key term with multiple connotations and applications. The north Indian Sants are introduced as a related heterodox folk-poet yogic culture. This chapter concludes with a discussion of Nepali Newar cāca song cycles sung in contemporary Newari performances. These songs illustrate both a continuity with and divergence from the Caryāgītī.

Chapter Four addresses ethnographic fieldwork with Bāul performers in West Bengal. I initially situate my research orientation and the general logistical background regarding fieldwork. Fierce debates regarding identity politics, an ongoing source of tension among Bāuls and non-Bāuls, are then
discussed. I return to the principle of śakti as divine feminine power and the contradictory expectations regarding śakti and female practitioners among Bāul communities in my field site. Interviews with Bāul performers, based in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, are presented, along with related analyses of the transformation of vastu, “substance,” and erotic lust, kām. The “sleeping goddess” kuṇḍalinī is contextualized as a crucial aspect of bodily praxis and transformation. I discuss the role of psychoactive plants, primarily cannabis, as they relate to Bāul esoteric bodily praxis. The chapter culminates with an analysis of bartamān, the reliance on direct unmediated experience rather than inferential deduction for realization.

Chapter Five then turns to fieldwork with Nepali traditional healers in the Darjeeling Hills and rural Sikkim. A central feature of their healing practice is tied to pragmatic necessity, as rural villagers in remote areas have few options when medical or spiritual crises occur; thus, jhākris and mātās, among other traditional healers, are relied upon for healing. I situate the context of folk tantra as well as the dialogue between heterodox tantric practitioners and shamanic healers in South Asia. The notion of “soul loss” and its relation to Nepali traditional etiologies is explored. Interviews with jhākris are interwoven throughout this chapter, helping to contextualize their healing practices and unique cosmology and health care system. I analyze the multivalent relationships between Tibetan Buddhist monastic healers and traditional healers in my field site, which comprises a set of negotiations, compromise, and a collaborative division of labor. After discussing the related phenomena of possession and spirit mediumship, I present interviews with mātās regarding their healing practices while including the criteria they use to distinguish themselves from jhākris.

Chapter Six serves as an analysis of the aesthetic orientations to healing employed by research participants in relation to my central framework of healing as a totality. I return to embodied healing orientations applied by Bāul performers and Nepali traditional healers. Theoretical reflections relating
to affect, emotional release, and musical performance are offered. Within aesthetic healing, sonic healing is emphasized, and I analyze the role of mantra recitation, bhakti-inspired singing, drumming, and musical performance as healing modalities. The dissertation then concludes with reflections on healing as a totality, which includes sociopolitical subversion and liberation.
Chapter One: Theoretical Reflections on Embodiment, Place, and Health

1.1 Relating to Place

Embodiment posited ecologically – as the total human body constituting a dynamic process of relati\-onality with one's physical and social environments – will be a central theme in relation to healing within this analysis. Social relationships or social ecologies, both human-human and human-nonhuman, are a major aspect within ecological relationships. My research concurs with Thomas J. Csordas and Arthur Kleinman's assessment that the therapeutic process depends on larger contexts such as sociological, political, and economic backgrounds, all of which shape the effectiveness of healing within a therapeutic structure.\(^79\) Social conditioning also deeply shapes how one reacts to and psychologically processes illness and disease.\(^80\) This is particularly relevant regarding Nepali traditional healing practices, wherein healing pūjās are often communal and experienced as a group with family members and local community members in attendance, and the diagnosis of illness brings the afflicted patient into accordance with the larger milieu of traditional Nepali cosmology, metaphysics, and conceptions of health and body-mind-spirit balance. “Social order” refers not only to human intra- and inter-personal relationships, but also to the nexus of relationships established among human and non-human entities, including terrestrial spirits such as water beings, nāg, and the capricious, sometimes dangerous spirits associated with the forest, Nep. shikari.

The engagement with place – the embeddedness and relationships between human beings and the immediate physical environment – is a significant aspect of the health care system and related cosmological framework adopted by villagers in the rural Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim. I apply a

\(^{80}\) This is further explored in Chapter Six.
phenomenological critique of body-mind dualism, to be unpacked in 1.2, which attempts to dissolve the Cartesian dualism thoroughly permeating systems of Western research and discourse; this critique also relates to theories of place and affect, to be discussed in Chapter Six. One modern innovation in place theory is developed by Christopher Tilley, who offers a phenomenological model of landscapes, emphasizing the network of embodied relationality between human beings and the ongoing engagement with place:

From a phenomenological perspective landscape is ‘platial’ rather than ‘spatial’. It is not something defined by space as an abstract container but by the places that constitute it and make it what it is. . .Landscape is thus always both objective physical place and a subjective cognized image of that place. Ecology and mythology are thoroughly intertwined, the former providing a rich set of possibilities, or affordances, for the latter. . .In other words the relationship between myth (where seemingly anything might happen) and the landscape is not arbitrary. It is grounded in a profound sensory awareness and knowledge of the world as it is inhabited. . .Social identity, myth, memory and meaning have their generative source in the lived experiences and sensory perception of people as they move in and through the water and on the land and observe and make sense of that which is already given. . .The particular characteristics of social relations can only be understood in relation to place. In this sense places, like persons, have agency or effects. Moreover places are not just platial in character but are rather bundles of relations; places are in people, and in landforms, and the powers of ancestral spirits. 81

“Platial” as an adjective refers to conceiving of a physical landscape in terms of place, rather than abstract “space.” The notion of dynamic relationality is again integral to this conception of place. Places become embodied in people as much as people become embodied in places – hence, “places are in people.” This phenomenological orientation, ever focused on dissolving the Cartesian dualistic privileging of individual selfhood and private, disembodied subjectivity, implies that landscapes are physically interiorized over time, as residents mythologize and narrativize their surrounding landscapes in relation to their lived experiences, dependencies and relationships with the land. The embeddedness

of people in relationship with their physical environment is central in the partially shared cosmological framework adopted by villagers and traditional healers in my field site. Conceptions of sentience among the local ecology grant places with agency. Certain water springs, consecrated as Nep. devī-thān, are considered dwelling places of the Goddess, and these springs are commonly visited by villagers who pray and give offerings at the thān. Jhākris and mātās also perform pūjās at these sites to be empowered by Devī. Springs and other sources of water are also habitations of subterranean beings such as serpentine nāg, who may be helpful to humans as well as mischievous. Places are indeed related to as having agency: particularly the forest sentiency of shikari, which has a multitude of embodiments that may manifest as nonhuman animals such as birds, or even in the form of a human being. Having independent agency, shikari can be polluted by the disruptions of human beings entering the forest disrespectfully, after which wrath is enacted upon the offenders. The “powers of ancestral spirits” is also relevant to this discussion – the spirits of deceased family members, those belonging to ancestral kul, also inhabit the land and are equally capable of becoming upset and inflicting sickness. Not giving offerings or paying homage to one's kul is a major source of chronic illness, according to the interviews presented in the ethnography in Chapter Five. Since these interactions and reciprocal ecological obligations correspond with entities who are often beyond the purview or sensory perception, it is the jhākris' work to interact directly with these spirits, seeking their appeasement if they are harmed or offended. These ecological relationships will be further explored in Chapter Five.

Edward Casey analyzed the human body as it is situated in place as “body-in-place.” The body serves as the experiential foundation for place; our bodily orientation provides the basis from

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Also see Casey, Edward S. "How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: Phenomenological prolegomena," Senses of place 27 (1996): 14-51.
which we make sense of all spatial orientations. The “living-moving” body “serves to structure and to configure entire scenarios of place.”

Sukanya Sarbadhikary, in her excellent recent work on Bengali Vaishnavas, extends Edward Casey’s notion of embodiment in relation to place, or body-in-place, to body-as-place and “interiorized body-places.” This is a framework that is very useful for my research, as it explores the human body as a unique geographical place in itself, replete with its own “landscapes.” Conceiving of the body in this way also avoids the somewhat cumbersome terms often employed in tantric scholarship – that of the body being a “microcosm” homologized and reflecting the universal “macrocosm.” Among the Baul singers I interviewed during fieldwork, the human body is always understood relationally in correspondence with the external universe, as it directly reflects the greater universe (Skt. Brahmāṇda) and is composed of the same constituents; a proper insight about the body’s true nature also grants immediate insight into the nature of the external cosmos. Given this framework in relation to Baul praxis, my research addresses the important role of bodily transformative practice in Baul practitioners’ healing modalities, which occur in numerous domains: in the sociopolitical realm, psycho-physiologically, and soteriologically.

I return to metaphors of transition and movement. The ongoing process of healing is a movement, a movement from isolated ego-fragmentation to wholeness, from ignorance of one’s bodily-mental processes to direct awareness, from disempowerment to empowerment. Movement towards healing coincides with one reconnecting to the energies of land and Earth. This constant movement is an ebb-and-flow, and moving “forward” inevitably leads to moving “backwards” in one’s individual growth and healing. We must heal, but it is to be a continual healing. This understanding, along with

83 Casey, Getting Back Into Place, 48.
84 Sukanya Sarbadhikary, Place of Devotion: Siting and Experiencing Divinity in Bengal-Vaishnavism (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 112.
the theoretical reflections discussed regarding place, culturally variant health care systems, and culturally-bound immunity responses, inform my working definition of what healing means.

The following section presents a paradigm for embodiment to be applied throughout this dissertation, offering a phenomenological critique as well as drawing from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's theories of metaphor. I apply this model of embodiment to disparate tantric traditions that emphasize the central role of the body for spiritual practice, accompanying the attempt to establish an alternative “yogic” or “tantric body.” I also draw from the metaphor of “mapping” the body to describe how tantric subtle physiological schemata represent a rigorous attempt to develop first-hand experiential knowledge of the human body's dynamic processes, occurring both in the gross physical body and quasi-material subtle bodies.

1.2 Tantric Embodiment and Phenomenology of the Body

For the purposes of healing, embodiment is central for Bāuls and jhākris: the body is reevaluated as the locus of divinity and perfection for Bāuls, while jhākris and other Nepali traditional healers directly embody local spirits and deities to heal afflicted patients during public and highly performative pūjās.

From one vantage point, the human body is seemingly self-contained and autonomous, existing in relation to other beings and environments while still maintaining an independent cohesion and integrity. Upon further analysis, it is undeniable that human beings also exist as a “social body,” as the way in which one caters to his or her physical appearance is deeply shaped by social conditioning regarding what is deemed socially appropriate behavior and appearance. Bāul singers who practice esoteric sādhanā pursue a unique path of bodily purification and transformation, which Hugh Urban
refers to as “an alternative, social body – [belonging to] the esoteric Tantric sect.”\textsuperscript{85} Such an alternative body exists outside the constraints of traditional Bengali social stratification. This alternative yogic body, a quasi-material “subtle body” to be discussed below, emerges from disciplined bodily praxis to unveil a \textit{siddhi deha} – a perfected body. The notion of Skt. \textit{siddhi deha}, a perfected or “spiritual body” is an example of the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās creatively incorporating a technical term from Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism to apply in a new context; among the latter, the \textit{siddhi deha} is a transformed body able to reach the heavenly realm of Vrajaloka.\textsuperscript{86} As a Sahajiyā technical referent, the \textit{siddhi deha} results from the transformation necessary in mastering the bodily disciplines associated with \textit{dehatattva}.\textsuperscript{87}

Given that Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās are generally of low-caste origin and marginalized within sociopolitical discourse, they often maintained a dual identity, appearing externally to align with orthodox Vaiṣṇava values and mores. Hugh Urban notes that this involved “. . .accepting their often marginal or lowly place in the social hierarchy – even when they cultivated a secret, supremely liberated and supra-orthodox occult self, the perfected body. Their subversion of the social order was internal and personal rather than external and revolutionary.”\textsuperscript{88} Contemporary Bāul songs continue an oblique subversion of sociopolitical hegemony, including South Asian social hierarchical structures, through the cultivation of this secret, liberated “perfected body.”

Partha Chatterjee, a prominent scholar within subaltern studies, applies a post-colonial critique of South Asian nationalism and modernity, arguing that the orthodox caste system has a monopoly on bodily control, physical substances and purity – therefore heterodox groups inevitably will reframe

\textsuperscript{86} See Bhaktirasāṃrtasindhu 1.2.295: trans. David Haberman (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts, 2003), liii–liv, 96 note 126.
\textsuperscript{88} Urban, “Secret Bodies,” 55.
these same aspects as a form of subversion: “(t)he deviant cults. . .are fundamentally concerned with the body. The Sahajiya cults practice forms of bodily worship that do not respect the dictums of the śastra. . .[they] attempt to define a claim of proprietorship over one's body, to negate the daily submission of one's body. . .”\(^{89}\)

Chatterjee’s claim is compelling, as it calls into question the larger sociopolitical ramifications of focusing on the human body as the locus of sacred powers and potentia. Bodily praxis and the devotion to “internal” (antara) processes may appear to be individually-centered processes of refinement and transformation, perhaps even a form of societal disengagement, while in actuality body-centered praxis can be strongly subversive. Inverting societal expectations about what is “pure” or “impure” is a hallmark of antinomian tantric practices generally and widely influential within the Bengali Sahajiyā milieu specifically. Reevaluating one's understanding of bodily fluids as the habitation of deities, and even incorporating bodily substances within yogic praxis or sādhanā, is central to Bāul and Sahajiyā bodily praxis, which is another factor that grants them the notoriety as “deviant cults,” a term used by Chatterjee which is often used as a translation of Skt. asampradāya.

Defining the multifaceted and heterogeneous term “tantra” is notoriously difficult.\(^{90}\) Often cultivated outside of sectarian boundaries, this phenomenon is shared among Śakta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Jain and Buddhist contexts. Geoffrey Samuel aptly observes that tantric studies has “. . .been historically dominated in various ways by Western fantasy (partly shared by Indian scholars under Western influence),” while indigenous usages of the term “tāntrika” in the Brahmanical context mean little more than “non-Vedic.” This term is translated as rgyud in Tibetan and is a specific category in the


Tibetan Buddhist canon, encompassing a wide array of ritual practices. The Western fixation on “tantric sex,” itself a fairly modern invented term, does much to obscure what this multivalent term may have meant as a referent in its developing cultural contexts.

David Gordon White, in *Kiss of the Yoginī*, argues that tantric practice largely hinges on the exchange of sexual fluids and related transgressive practices stemming from the Kaula, yoginī-centered Hindu tantric traditions. Contrarily, Christopher Wallis argues that “...āveśa—meaning controlled possession—and the related term *samāveśa*—meaning the fusion or commingling of one’s self with one’s deity—constitutes one of a handful of key concepts that distinguishes Tantric Śaivism from mainstream (Vaidika/Paurāṇika) Indian religion and thereby gives it its specificity.”

Replying to David Gordon White’s foundational premise regarding ritual transactions in sexual fluids, Wallis continues, “This statement is overly influenced by ill-informed Western conceptions of Tantra as primarily sexual that formed over the colonial period, and further suggests a lack of wide reading in the primary sources of the Tantric traditions, in which sexual practices of any kind are usually conspicuous by their absence. A general survey of the Tantric literature reveals that these sources are primarily concerned with ritual and yoga, and only very rarely with transgressive or sexual practices.”

To confuse things further, the degree to which both “controlled possession” with one's tutelary deity and the application of transgressive practices were emphasized varied widely throughout the genesis of disparate tantric traditions, and interpretations as to how central these practices were are largely speculative, stemming from the analysis of tantric texts dating to the late Gupta period, perhaps around the sixth or seventh centuries C.E. Exactly what practices were *sine qua non* “tantric” is very

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92 These terms will be discussed in Chapter Five in relation to shamanic healing practices and spirit possession.
93 Christopher Daren Wallis, “To Enter, to be entered, to merge: The Role of Religious Experience in the Traditions of Tantric Shaivism” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2014), 3.
94 Ibid.
difficult to determine, and this relates to the nearly impossible task of creating a monolithic definition of “tantra” which can encompass the disparate traditions that self-identified or were subsumed under the tantric category. Certainly Wallis' hypothesis regarding tantric Śaivism is plausible, given the many references to yoga and āveśa in Śaiva tantric texts, but what of the many tantric traditions that have no textual traces or whose practices did not fall within the purview of a textual tradition? The Bāuls, for instance, transmit esoteric teachings orally, primarily through songs, rather than through written texts.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am wary of positing any singular conception that could possibly encompass the many connotations and practices relating to tantra, both Hindu and Buddhist, as well as the tantric-Sufi Islamic confluence evident throughout Bengal, deeply influential within the Sahajiyā milieu. Such a comprehensive definition is impossible to establish. As I discuss in chapters three and four, the usage of this term in contemporary Bengal has its own convoluted and contradictory meanings. Instead, I seek to apply practical applications relating to tantric practice as they arose during fieldwork. Positing a kind of middle position within the spectrum discussed by White and Wallis for my working definition, the specificity of “tantric” practice corresponds with a heteropraxic rejection of the Vedas and other scriptural authority, central emphasis placed on the refinement and transformation of the body as the locus of sacred powers, fusion or merger with a tutelary deity, and transgressive practices which eschew South Asian standards of moral purity. Such practices include esoteric sexual praxis, which may involve the ritual consumption of sexual fluids or the inward sublimation of sexual essences through “reversal,” ūṭa.

Āveśa as deity possession emerges in my discussion of South Asian folk tantra in relation to Nepali traditional healers in Chapter Five. While Wallis' claim about the exaggeration of tantric transgressive and sexual practices is sound, particularly regarding textual analysis of Tantras, these

95 Tantric texts are generally termed tantraśāstra.
practices are relevant within the context of Bāul esoteric bodily praxis, which, as stated previously, are connected to a system of esoteric oral transmission unique to Bengal and northeastern India.

David N. Lorenzen further discusses recurring elements in Indic tantra as: yogic and shamanic practices, goddess worship, “especially worship of the Mātrkās and demon-killing forms of Hindu and Buddhist goddesses,” specific tantric traditions (and their interrelatedness), and the texts themselves. 96 I further discuss what Lorenzen briefly mentions as “shamanic practices” in relation to tantra in the section on tantric healing and jhākris in Chapter 5.4.

Though difficult to trace historically with precision, tantra blossomed sometime during Gupta-era India (ca. 320 – 520 CE) and culminated during the early medieval period. This genesis illustrates a reintegration of Indic religious elements outside of Brahmanical hegemonic control, including the recurring themes of “popular” religion: magic, possession and exorcism, the emphasis on somatic praxis, and the revitalization of Śakti goddess devotion. It is notable that this development began during the Gupta dynasty, when a constellation of diverse philosophical and religious traditions,” both theistic and non-theistic, solidified as a religious system later generalized as “Hinduism,” with Brahmanical authority disbursing throughout village and urban centers in South Asia. Patañjali’s Yogasūtras, most likely composed during or slightly before the Gupta era, was one attempt at systematizing the various yogic repertoires practiced throughout South Asia, and this text includes a strong Sāṃkhya metaphysical influence, an ontological framework that reverberated throughout disparate philosophical traditions in South Asia.

One unifying factor among the tantric traditions is the emphasis on somatic praxis. Modern scholarship is engaging with this corporeal emphasis. The ascetic trajectory of certain Indian philosophical traditions often denigrated the body as an object to be ignored and ultimately transcended; indeed, physicality itself is viewed suspiciously. An example is that of the dualist Sāṃkhya metaphysics, one of the six Āstika schools, originating during the first millennium BCE. This metaphysics posited two distinct ontological modalities, puruṣa and prakṛti. The former refers to the immaterial, immutable reality that is the source of all phenomena, while the latter term refers to the field of material existents, which is itself the combination of numerous material constituents. One method for the attainment of ultimate liberation is to identify purely with puruṣa while detaching from all corporeality, thus being liberated from the confines and enslavement of physical embodiment.

The tantric critique offers a contrary understanding of the body and physicality. The embodiment of powerful deities unique to each tantric tradition implies that the self is to be divinized: that is, individual subjectivity dissolves into ultimate identity with the sacred power and entity invoked. Tāntrikas may accomplish this by gaining a new-found awareness of the interconnection of bodily and mental processes, which themselves are coterminous with larger cosmic processes. By dialectically relating physical praxis to tradition-specific revelations and texts, the body is literally reimagined, renewed and rediscovered. Gavin Flood argues that a unique body is developed altogether: the “tantric body:” “(t)he practitioner inscribes the body through ritual and forms of interiority or asceticism, and

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so writes the tradition onto the body.”

As tantric revelation is esoterically encrypted in textual form – within the focus of this dissertation, often in poetic and song form – so too can realizations be “written” onto the body as it is reconfigured in somatic praxis, to continue with the metaphor of culturally embodied discourse. Dominik Wujastyk also refers to the “tantric body” as an analytical term for understanding conceptions of the human body in premodern India: “...the Tantric body is yet another example of a non-anatomical body. Just as the Vedic body was profoundly implicated in ritual meaning, the Tantric body is an instantiation of the universe in miniature and a conduit for mystical energies that awaken consciousness.”

I agree with Wujastyk’s assessment about the development of “many bodies” in premodern India, including non-anatomical bodies; in addition to the “tantric body,” he describes the medical body, the Buddhist body, the yogic body, and so on. India's premodern period “...produced a rich and diverse world of bodily discourse all of her own...” My approach to embodiment rests on the premise that such different imagined bodies are central in the development of tantric bodily praxis, in which the materially existent body is presented as coexistent with quasi-material subtle bodies.

The human body is thus reevaluated and reaffirmed as the nexus of sacred powers and potentialities – as well as the base from which a plurality of bodies may manifest – within the heterogeneous tantric milieu. The analysis of tantric somatic praxis calls for an embodied theoretical framework; similar to modern phenomenological analyses, this somatic emphasis requires a complete reorientation in awareness, directed towards the unified continuum of cognition and bodily-kinesthetic

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100 Ibid., 190.
perception. The following section will elucidate a phenomenology of the body that may assist in a theoretical understanding of tantric somatic revitalization.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body and physicality as the locus of experience and perception is novel due to his reaction to the deeply ingrained metaphysical assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition. Beginning primarily with Plato and Parmenides, continuing throughout medieval Scholasticism and culminating with Descartes' thought, the history of Western philosophy is that of dualistic tension: tension between the status of mind and matter, spirit and corporeality. Descartes' famous formulation of res cogitans and res extensa formalized the ontological distinction that separates consciousness from "mindless" matter. It is this ontological gulf that Merleau-Ponty addresses when insisting on the primacy of "the lived body" and the la chair du monde, "flesh of the world" as modalities of experience that bridge the commonly posited split between body and mind, subject and object. Typical to the Greek philosophical orientation is the emphasis of mentality over the physical dynamics of one's body. The visceral experience of life itself is consistently denied in the Western philosophical tradition, brushed aside as epiphenomena, irrelevant compared to the power of pure reasoning. Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the "flesh of the world" contrarily points to the body as being in and of the world, interdependent with natural phenomena and not detached as an isolated vessel of reasoning.

According to the dualistic metaphysical scheme sketched above, there is the "objective" world in contrast to one's subjective experience of this world; however, the process of perception itself in relation to this objective world is often marginalized. Per Descartes' metaphysics, the mind is

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101 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 139-140. This ambiguous notion of "the flesh," posited toward the end of Merleau-Ponty's life, has come under great scrutiny and debate. This term appears to refer to an ontology that is neither subject, object, nor world, but a living circuit that connects all of these seemingly separate points of reference. *La chair du monde* in relation to tantric somatic praxis is especially fitting, insofar as one's flesh is understood quite literally as being identical with the material constituents of the universe.
considered to be a detached consciousness, located in but somehow independent of the physical body. Merleau-Ponty subverts this by focusing primarily on the mechanics of perception itself before making ontological commitments; as a phenomenologist, he is – at least theoretically – to approach philosophy devoid of prior metaphysical assumptions.\textsuperscript{102} Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the \textit{complete} body as the nexus of perception and consciousness: “[t]his subject, which takes a point of view, is my body as the field of perception of action (pratique) – in so far as my gestures have a certain reach and circumscribe as my domain the whole group of objects familiar to me.”\textsuperscript{103} Sensory perception, so often assumed to be the result of one's five primary senses, derives in actuality from one's entire body in constant motion and feedback with the world. Merleau-Ponty continues, “we must think of the human body (and not consciousness) as that which perceives nature which it also inhabits.”\textsuperscript{104} This explicitly overturns the Cartesian – and general Euro-American philosophical assumption – that it is consciousness alone that perceives, aloof and removed from the objective world it perceives.

Therefore, the body in its totality is the locus of perception. This theoretical framework is an “embodied philosophy” insofar as it addresses the dynamically interwoven nature of cognition and physicality, since “the perceiving mind is an incarnated mind.”\textsuperscript{105} Perception and cognition can only occur \textit{within} the body, among the flesh of the world.

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\textsuperscript{102} Merleau-Ponty inherits the phenomenological tradition, formally posited by Edmund Husserl. A major aspect of Husserl’s philosophical project is the phenomenological reduction, \textit{epoché} or “bracketing.” This involves a movement away from the “natural attitude,” the naïve, often unquestioned set of presuppositions that constitutes one’s perceptions and worldview. Applying this process, one is to “bracket” all preconceptions and ingrained assumptions, turning focus upon the flow of cognition itself, by removing conceptual imp\textsuperscript{166}ositions and presuppositions – which occur almost instantly – that impose upon unmediated sensory experience. Husserl considers this a renewal, a “pure subjectivity.” This clearly parallels meditative practice, as an initial step in yogic training is to suspend the turnings of thought, to focus on the arising of thoughts/emotions/bodily sensations themselves, rather than on the *evaluation* or judgment of experience. See Edmund Husserl, \textit{Cartesian Meditations}, trans. Dorian Cairns. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).


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Likewise, the ascetic trajectory of certain Indian philosophical traditions often denigrated the body as an object to be ignored and ultimately transcended; indeed, physicality itself is viewed suspiciously. An example is that of the dualist Śāṃkhya metaphysics, one of the six Āstika schools, originating during the first millennium B.C.E. This metaphysics posited two distinct ontological modalities, puruṣa and prakṛti. The former refers to incorporeal, pure consciousness, while the latter term refers to the field of material existents, which is itself the combination of numerous material constituents. One method for the attainment of ultimate liberation is to identify purely with puruṣa while detaching from all corporeality.

An embodied philosophy can thus be directed toward meditative and somatic practices by explicating these techniques in terms of the lived body. In future phenomenological analyses, such a reorientation in awareness may alter the Western philosophical privileging of mind over body and physicality. Merleau-Ponty's unique phenomenological insight is expressed in a philosophy of body that stresses the continuity of cognition and physical processes, which parallels the tantric emphasis on somatic practices that assume continuity between psycho-physical processes and subtle body physiology.

Proceeding from Merleau-Ponty's attempt to collapse body-mind dualism, the body as the ground of experience is approached nondualistically. All fluctuations of the mind, “consciousness” as such, is an embodied process in which the body projects itself into lived experience, rather than an ontologically distinct existence somehow separate from embodied corporeality. A nondual account of embodiment implies that cognition and emotions are also bodily processes, insofar as cognition and emotion are not distinct from the physical, biological domain, and thus they may affect and alter one's physiological health – this relationship is central to the study of psychoneuroimmunology, to be further discussed below.
I draw from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* due to its compelling and deeply influential philosophical framework, which analyzes the usage of metaphor systems in relation to embodiment; Glen Hayes applies their model to shed insight on the particularly complex “subtle body” notion within tantric yogic traditions, to be discussed below in this chapter, enabling him to apply a unique lens with which to conceptualize how the subtle or yogic body is engaged in tantric praxis. Though grounded in cognitive linguistics, Lakoff and Johnson's work is applicable to a wide array of anthropological and religious studies conducted outside of cognitive-based frameworks, regarding how individuals relate to or aim to transform their bodies. Instead of viewing the human body as a singular, monolithic existence, the body can be framed as being couched within psycho-physiological, social and cultural metaphor systems. In a later work, *The Body in the Mind*, Johnson analyzes the function of metaphor thus:

> . . .metaphor is not merely a linguistic mode of expression; rather, it is one of the chief cognitive structures by which we are able to have coherent, ordered experiences that we can reason about and make sense of. . .First, our bodily movements and interactions in various physical domains of experience are structured (as we saw with image schemata), and that structure can be projected by metaphor onto abstract domains. . .Concrete bodily experience not only constrains the 'input' to the metaphorical projections but also the nature of the projections themselves, that is, the kinds of mappings that can occur across domains.\(^{106}\)

The crux of Johnson's argument is in positing that *first*, direct bodily experience occurs, which encompasses sensory and affective domains; proceeding from this, a metaphorical projection of individual and cultural patterns arise which then coherently structure the directly embodied experience. An “image schema” is defined as “a recurring, dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and

motor programs that gives coherence and structure to our experience.”¹⁰⁷ This establishes a feedback loop between imagined conceptualizations and viscerally embodied, non-conceptual experience, giving coherence to the latter while reinforcing one's apprehension of the former. Metaphor is therefore an experiential “map” – to employ a metaphor – that we cannot avoid, as we quite literally live by them. Thus, among tantric practitioners, image schemata could include conceptual systems esoterically transmitted from guru to student that contextualize direct bodily experience, such as the subtle physiological system replete with bodily “wheels,” cakras, and inner channels or nāḍīs. Among Bāuls, this schema might involve geographical or botanical referents such as bodily ponds, sarovara, lotuses, kamal, and internal rivers, nāḍī.

Thomas J. Csordas, in an important phenomenologically-inspired contribution to anthropological theories of embodiment, differentiates himself from Johnson's cognitivist-oriented model of embodiment thus: “(t)his approach to embodiment begins from the methodological postulate that the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture.”¹⁰⁸ This approach aligns more closely with my research paradigm, insofar as I present healing as an embodied shift in one's entire existence, a dynamically ontological transformation. One conviction ostensibly shared among Bāul singers is the premise that the body is the locus of all potentia, transformation, bliss and divinity; unlike other ascetically oriented South Asian traditions which seek liberation by transcendence of the body and its impulses and desires, it is essential within the Sahajiyā milieu that one become liberated while embodied – samdeha.

Further extending this framework, Laurence Kirmayer argues that embodied experience not

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., xiv.
only inevitably results in metaphor – metaphor itself becomes embodied, and as such, the “psychophysiology of metaphor” is in need of serious consideration. Kirmayer further concludes, “(t)he essential insight of embodiment is that the body has a life of its own and that social worlds become inscribed on, or sedimented in, bodily physiology, habitus, and experience.” I agree with this claim, and I posit that the wide variance in bodily physiologies can be partially ascribed to the effects of how one's local “social world” or culture is embodied. This also challenges the assumption that mystical or esoteric practices, such as tantric sādhanā, are “quietest” or somehow outside the vicissitudes of one's social world; bodily praxis is instead culturally dialectical, a dynamic movement between individual bodily physiology and the cultural metaphors imprinted within one's body. As such, continuing with the notion of metaphor as a coherent-structure seeking form of patterned projection, varied cultural understandings of the self, the body, disease, health and healing can be viewed as uniquely contingent narratives which seek to make cohesive sense of the seemingly chaotic, unpredictable flux of direct, embodied experience.

1.3 Sociocultural Models of Health and Healing

In the domain of cultural anthropology, James Wilce and Laurie J. Price develop a compelling claim about human immune systems, arguing that they have cultural and social lives. Entering into the dialogue regarding Lakoff and Johnson's embodiment-metaphorical framework, Wilce and Price discuss “metaphors our bodyminds live by:”

We live by what we imagine; this must include our metaphors. In this chapter we make the even stronger claim that cultures help to shape actual bodies, partly by means

of widely held models, images, and metaphors. . .We propound just such a model of culture-as-multistory/metalevel phenomenon, and thus explain cultures' roles in mobilizing immune response and healing. . .At one level, our claim that human immune systems (and psychoimmune systems) exist in relation to the empirical and symbolic life of societies is founded on the most fundamental insight of epidemiology – that health and disease have social contexts. . .We would suggest a reconsideration of health and healing, too, as performances of cultural potentialities.\footnote{Laurie J. Price and James M. Wilce, “Metaphors our Bodyminds Live By” in Social and Cultural Lives of Immune Systems, ed. James M. Wilce Jr. (London: Routledge, 2003), 51-2.}

To fit this model into a cross-cultural perspective, one possibility is to align it with the starting premise of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), which assumes a universal preconceptual, precultural human body that responds in similar ways to emotions and behaviors such as reprocessing trauma by writing or vocalizing it, or engaging in the therapeutic effects of guided imagery intervention.\footnote{Ibid., 54} Such a notion of a cross-cultural human body is not without controversy.\footnote{See Brenda Farnell, "Metaphors we move by." Visual Anthropology 8, no. 2-4 (1996): 311-335.} To continue with Wilce and Price's claim, the notion of a universal human “immune system” itself is a cultural narrative, attempting to integrate bodily components such as immunoglobins, antibodies, T-Cells and other biological systems into a singular system. I agree with the possibility of cultural variants, in which local immunological systems are subject to social structures and environmental factors.

The “cultural and social lives” of immune systems can be applied contextually to specific cultural examples. For one example, within the plurality of worldviews shared by Nepali traditional healers in my field site, health and disease are very much connected to cultural symbols and models. As will be further expanded in Chapter Five, jhākris and mātājis who participated in my ethnography recognize the efficacy of modern biomedical pharmacology in the treatment of “natural” (Nep. prākṛtika) sicknesses such as microbial infections, broken bones, and the all-too-common diagnosis of general stomach ailments, referred to as gastrik issues. Many other persistent ailments, however,
including common *gastrik* problems, are diagnosed as resulting from harmful witchcraft or the effects of malicious spirits and ghosts, *bhūt*.

Chronic anxiety, depression and listlessness may also be signs of malicious influences that correspond with shared cultural models of imbalance and affliction, rather than reducing these symptoms to individualized psychological processes. In this context, some *jhākris* in Nepal memorize elaborate oral texts which establish a cosmological framework, cosmogonic narratives and practical instruction for healing repertoires, as described by Gregory Maskarinec, which intersects with and reinforces localized conceptions about harmful spirits and terrestrial entities or *deutā*, thus propagating a cultural model of disease and healing that is at least semi-shared by local residents.

Wilce and Price's final point about health and healing as performances accords with my fieldwork, in which *jhākris'* healing *pūjās* are often highly dramatic, public performances, with the presiding *jhākri* often possessed by his or her tutelary spirit, vehemently yelling and at times even entering martial combat with malicious spirits inhabiting afflicted patients. Here I also apply Lorea's broader definition of “performance” as encompassing the systems of cultural discourse that inform localized conceptions of healthcare systems – including what constitutes “health” and the healing of afflictions – in the rural Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim.

Brian Morris analyzes conceptions of selfhood within India in *Anthropology of the Self*. He concludes that “two selves are recognised in Hindu thought – a material or phenomenal self, and an 'inner self.'” Given the influence of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, he argues that the inner self is “formless, immutable and absolute” while the phenomenal self is the material body: “the mind, cognition, the entire psychological aspects of life are seen in philosophical terms as material

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conceptions, as part of the phenomenal world of change and karma.” While I am wary of the overly general notion of a monolithic sense of self subsumed under a monolithic “Hindu thought” – this is a rather abstracted and generalized perspective – applied to contextual examples, Morris’ claim is compelling insofar as it differentiates uniquely South Asian senses of selfhood from Western individualized conceptions of self, though I do not agree with the conception of a singular South Asian selfhood. Morris’ assertion implies that the body-and-mind comprise a unified “phenomenal self,” while the “inner self” is identified with spirit and immateriality.

Relatedly, Bāul singers I interviewed, while emphasizing the body as the locus of practice and divinity in bodily practice, deha sādhanā, also often agreed that the ātma “drives” or directs the body, transcending materiality and leaving the physical body after death. While not constituting a distinct mind-body dualism, the Bengali word for “mind,” mon, is another kind of body-mind complex related to a conception of selfhood. “Mon is the Bengali term for mind (or ‘heart–mind’), mood, affection, concentration, intention, and personal opinion. It is etymologically related to Sanskrit manas, Greek menos, Latin mens, and English mind.” Also derived from Skt. manas, the Nepali word man has a similar connotation of “heart-mind.” Man is often not associated with physical ailment or disease, but an excess of emotion and over-thinking can lead to psychophysiological problems.

Graham Dwyer draws upon Morris' categories in his ethnography of spirit possession and healing in Rajasthan, centered at a famous site for exorcisms and ritual healings at the Mehandipur Bālāji Temple. Dwyer argues that “. . .in the Indian context, because the phenomenal or lower self (body-and-mind) is the central focus of healing rituals, such as exorcism, it is this conception of the

115 Ibid.
self. . .with which I am concerned. Generally speaking. . .the phenomenal self, by contrast, [to
soteriological concerns] is a pragmatic or worldly one." Dwyer connects exorcism, as a curing of
body-and-mind, with Western psychotherapy, insofar as psychotherapy focuses on transforming the
“phenomenal self” (body-and-mind) as well as eliciting a deep emotional release or catharsis, which
Dwyer argues is central to the exorcisms he describes in his ethnography. Continuing with the notion of
a unified body-and-mind in Indian conceptions of selfhood, Dwyer further emphasizes the role of
emotions: they are intrinsically connected to body-and-mind, “. . .having their seat in the heart or the
mind (the manas) which is part of the subtle body, the locus of identity for the mind as well as the gross
body.”

Dwyer, further reflecting on his fieldwork conducted at the Bālāji Temple, comments:

conceptualising illness in terms of spirit attack or the supernatural, as well as responding
to it appropriately through ritual, are evidently a collective project. Ideas about illness
and ceremonial curing in Mehndipur are socially or culturally constructed, as in any
healing system. . .pilgrims to Mehndipur are socialised into the local system of health
care management, a system in which learned behaviour, particularly trance, essentially
dictates how participants act during exorcism as well as how they report on their
experience of it.

In the context of traditional Nepali ritual healing, illness is also very much a collective endeavor.
As I observed during fieldwork, the “performance” of sickness – the set of constructs about how to
express affliction socially, as well as the methods and contexts by which healing is achieved – is
collectively learned. As pilgrims go to Bālāji Temple to enact healing and seek relief for their chronic
ailments, learning the nuanced, performative expectations of how healing is to be undertaken there, so
are afflicted patients in the rural Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim socialized into localized, village-based

118 Graham Dwyer, "Healing and the Transformation of Self in Exorcism at a Hindu Shrine in Rajasthan." Social
119 Ibid., 129.
120 Ibid., 120, 129-30.
healing modalities and conceptions of illness and health. The shared cultural symbols regarding the
effects of harmful incorporeal entities are enfleshed, insofar as afflicted patients in my field site
informed me that only powerful *jhākris* or *mātājis* can heal most diseases, as chronic sickness often
results from offending both harmful and benevolent entities, and local traditional healers are specialists
in identifying, appeasing, and releasing such malignant influences from the bodies of those afflicted.

Given this analysis of embodied cultural symbols and metaphors, though the modern natural
and physical sciences have granted remarkable empirical precision and tremendous breakthroughs in
biomedical innovation and medicine, they also stem from cultural narratives, albeit highly reified ones.
Wilce and Price refer to science as a “cultural activity:” “(i)t feeds upon and nourishes cultural
images. . .And science produces images that enter the popular imagination.”121 While I include
quantitative studies from biomedical research in the dissertation as an ongoing aspect of discourse
relating to health and healing, I am wary of scientific reductionism, the imposition of scientific
hypotheses as the *sine qua non* form of explanation regarding the esoteric conceptions described by
research participants in my ethnography. This critique in no way denies the empirical and practical
results that modern scientific research produces; rather, Price and Wilce argue that on the level of
cultural activity, in the domain of potent cultural symbols and images, including martial symbolic
references to “fighting off” or “waging war” with harmful microbes and cancer cells, scientific
disciplines affect our sense of healing and immune response; thus, modern science is another form of
embodied culture rather than inalienable fact.122 Csordas, while discussing the phenomenological
project of “pre-reflective,”123 first-order accounts as the starting point of research, comments thus:

122 Ibid.
123 Corresponding with Husserl’s “bracketing” of the “natural attitude” that enmires us in a dense network of conceptual
reflections *about* the world and subjective experience, pre-reflective first-order awareness refers to the qualia of
“The collapse of the subject-object distinction requires us to recognize that if ‘hard science’ deals with hard facts, they are the result of a hardening process, a process of objectification.”

Objectification implies that the body is an object to be studied – an entity to detach from and to analyze. It is in second-order reflective self-awareness that one conceptually reflects on and detaches from direct corporeal experience, viewing the body from a distance – as an object – which in turn enables one to easily view other beings and ecologies as objects, as things. My research paradigm instead rests on a nondualistic understanding of embodiment. From this position, all forms of cognition, emotion, cultural imagery and narratives, as well as disease, imbalance, and the possibilities for healing and reconfiguration, are embedded in and arise from our bodies.

The following section proceeds from these theoretical considerations of embodiment and health to an analysis of the so-called “subtle body” physiology shared among numerous tantric traditions. This includes a notion of ecological embodiment, in which the body is homologized with the constituents of the external cosmos. I also connect the culture of bodily praxis developed by the early medieval Buddhist and Nāth Siddhas with the contemporary esoteric bodily praxis employed by Bāul practitioners.

1.4 Numerous Bodies

The śarīra traya or “three body” theory is mentioned initially in the Taittirīya Upanishad, composed sometime in the first millennium B.C.E. This tripartite division includes the “causal” body or karaṇa śarīra, the subtle body, sūkṣma śarīra, and the physical or “gross” body, sthūla śarīra.

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125 I am using the English terms that are typically used to translate these various bodies.
The latter two bodies, and the dynamic relationship between subtle and gross bodily processes, are particularly important in tantric yogic praxis. The *pañca-bhūta* or five elements compose the *sthūla śarīra*, and working with these elements is stressed in Bāul *sādhanā*.

In tantric somatic praxis, gaining direct awareness of the dynamic relationship between the energetic “wheels” or centers in the subtle body, is by no means uniform among tantric physiological theories, and various yogic systems rely on whatever schemata is the most pragmatically effective.\(^\text{126}\) There is a dynamic relationship between gross and subtle bodies, and empirically measurable changes, such as neurochemical and oxygenation alterations *via* retention of breath, may in turn affect the dynamics of the *sūkṣma śarīra*. The repeated emphasis on the sublimation of sexual essences upward through the central *suṣumṇā nāḍī* in tantric-yogic literature illustrates the observed endocrinological effects resulting from the alteration of hormonal processes in *ulṭa-sādhana*, reversal or regressive practice, reversing the sexual current from its usual descending movement.

Jeffrey Lidke proposes a compelling argument regarding the tantric practices described in the renowned Kashmiri yogi Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka*. Abhinavagupta describes the culminating state of *pratitimīlana-samādhi*, which Lidke translates as “bi-directional.” Lidke argues that the practice of the “bi-directional gaze” simultaneously activates both the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems, stimulating both relaxation or anabolic “tonic alertness” and arousal or catabolic “phasic alertness.”\(^\text{127}\) Relaxation or “tonic alertness” is often associated with calming, quiescent practices such as *śamatha* meditation practice, and tantric practices that involve visualization and further engagement with bodily and yogic praxis may activate both tonic and phasic alertness. Within the context of Bāul


sādhanā, calming of the body-mind occurs with the lessening of emotional fluctuation and desire via breath control or prāṇāyāma, gaining control of the internal wind-currents (Skt. vāyu), preparing practitioners for sexual yoga. The ecstatic singing and dancing of musical performances is powerfully arousing, even leading to the possession-like rapture of bhāva.

This simultaneous activation can be deeply therapeutic, even resulting in the siddhis or magical powers which Lidke aligns with neurological well-being. The attainment of neurological well-being has compelling implications regarding psycho-physiological healing. Since the siddhis or accomplishments are described as including complete control of bodily processes and the prevention of disease, might the simultaneous activation of both divisions of the autonomic nervous system produce a long-lasting “recalibration” of the nervous system with accompanying psychotherapeutic effects?

These practical engagements with subtle bodies illustrate a unique form of indigenous health care, situated within tantric bodily anatomical models to promote self-healing and bodily rejuvenation alongside ultimate soteriological goals.

I now turn to the important theory of embodiment applied by Bengali heterodox practitioners, dehatattva.

1.5 “Flesh Of the World:” Dehatattva and Ecological Body-Truths

The riverine geography of Bengal, with its countless rivers, streams, rivulets, and deltas are a major ecological correspondence among bartamān-panthīs, and rivers are potent symbolic referents for sexual union, female menstrual flow, and the internal rivers, the naḍīs or subtle channels of the yogic body. Glen Hayes discusses the important notion of dehatattva, literally “body truths” or “principles”
among Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, which he conceptualizes as “cosmophysiology.” “Dehatattva” is conveyed throughout numerous Bengali folk songs, commonly shared among Bāul and Sahajiyā singers. Cosmophysiology refers to the direct correspondence between the body’s physical structures and the larger cosmos, including the many rivers, mountains, lakes, and celestial bodies therein, cryptically alluded to in the lyrics of “Dehatattva” songs. “The correspondence between rivers and subtle channels of the body is so recurrent that we may say it is a literary convention of Bāul songs. For example, Lalon Fakir’s Deher madhye nadī āche (tr. There are rivers within the body.”)

Imagery conveying the body as a boat is consistent in many Bāul songs, again using a common, quotidian image as well as a geographical reference for polysemic meanings. A song attributed to the Mahāsiddha Saraha illustrates an early usage of geographical referents as bodily analogies. Saraha, a famous yogi and “Great Accomplished One” described in hagiographies as a fletcher or as a brahmin, ostensibly lived around the ninth or tenth centuries – potentially in northeast India or Bengal – though like many of the semi-legendary Siddhas, situating him in a specific place or time is extremely difficult. He is associated with Buddhist lineages related to Yoginī tantra practice as well as the “great seal,” mahāmudrā. Saraha drew inspiration from similar imagery employed in Bāul songs – and, perhaps, from the same geographical features if he indeed lived in Bengal. He expands on this metaphor of the body-as-boat while extolling the guru as a source of inspiration and teaching in the following song excerpt. Here the symbolism of “pushing up-stream” ostensibly refers to the reverse way – ulṭa, the reversal of sexual fluids upwards through the central channel – a significant aspect of Bāul esoteric practice:

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The body is a small boat, the mind is the oar
Hold the helm by the instruction of the true Guru.

Pacifying the heart, take out the boat
In no other way may one cross over.

A boatman tows his boat by a rope,
Coming together with the Innate [sahaja] again and again,
one may not go any other way.

On the way there is danger; pirates are strong,
In the tornado of existence the possessions are lost.

Along the bank it pushes up-stream against strong currents;
Saraha says, It comes to port in the sky.  

_Dehatattva_ is also shared among the Sufi Muslim influenced Bāuls, who often self-designate as
“Fakirs” or “Fakirānīs,” male and female respectively. Lālan often referred to his guru Sirāj Sāi with
the Sufi title darbeś (dervish) in his songs. Enamul Hak argues that _darbeś_ status refers to a specific
level of attainment among Sufis, in which esoteric accomplishments such as direct knowledge of “nine
subjects,” including the subtle bodies (tan), the six “dics” or subtle energy centers (ṣaṭcakra) and
sexual essence (bindu) is achieved.  

The Bāul singers I interviewed presented a common delineation
of four overlapping, yet distinct lineages, all connected to the heterodox “Sahajiyā” milieu: Āul, Bāul,
Darbeś, and Sāi. This was also repeatedly explained to me as differing “stages,” the Āul stage
representing the initial aspect of practice, in which one begs for alms, Ben. mādhukori.

Middle Bengali literary examples such as the _Yoga Kalandar_ illustrate a blending of Bengali
Sufi, Hindu and Buddhist tantric regimens.  

Shaman Hatley, in his article on mapping the esoteric

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body within this syncretic milieu, argues that this unique Sufi development “adapted to itself the basic template of the yogic body as formulated by the Nātha cult and reconfigured it within the parameters of Indo-Islamic thought.”

Around the eleventh or twelfth century, a hagiographic description of eighty-four Buddhist Mahāsiddhas appeared, one famous description attributed to Abhayadatta. The Mahāsiddhas or the “Great Perfected/Accomplished Ones” were semi-legendary tantric adepts who may have lived in northern and northeast India during the eighth – tenth centuries. The importance of these Siddhas will be discussed further below in Chapter Three. Some of these Siddhas, including Kāṇha and Luipa, may or may have not existed historically; verses in the Caryāpādas, also referred to as Caryāgīti, literally “songs of conduct/activity,” a series of tantric Buddhist songs which orally transmitted esoteric teachings, attribute authorship to these Siddhas. Haraprasad Śastri discovered a manuscript of the Caryāgīti in 1907 at the Royal Library in Nepal, which he later edited and published in Bengali as Bauddhagān O Dohā in 1916. This, along with subsequent critical editions by P.C. Bagchi, threw open the door for twentieth century scholarship on these enigmatic pādas.

The Caryāgīti, composed in couplet form, conveys highly complex content, including cosmology and praxis, in a terse structure. These verses, set to numerous melodies or rāgas, were ostensibly meant to be sung and were thus performative works. The language, often referred to as “Old Bengali” but difficult to specify, is particularly obscure and paradoxical, and the content is often nearly incomprehensible. Linguist S.K. Chatterji argues for a direct influence from Sauraseni (Eastern)

Apabrahmṣa, once a literary lingua franca throughout northern India. Munidatta wrote a thirteenth century Sanskrit exegesis, attempting to interpret the songs within a tantric Buddhist context. Without Munidatta’s Sanskrit commentary, deciphering the meaning of this encrypted language in relation to tantric cosmology and praxis would be exceedingly difficult. Like all hermeneutical attempts, Munidatta's interpretation is one of many potential interpretations, and it is impossible to decipher what the composers of these songs intended with a high degree of certainty.

_Tattva_ as “truth” in the compound word _dehatattva_, “body-truth” does not refer to abstract philosophical truths, but instead a _lived_ truth that is directly experienced throughout one's body-mind. Sudhir das Bāul summarized _dehatattva_ quite tersely and pragmatically during an interview: “_Dehatattva_ is basic control of the senses and physicality. Control body and the mind. Control _ras_ (sexual essence) to go upwards. One should not have children.” In this summary, _dehatattva_ is contextualized as the practical engagement with the body required for various kinds of bodily praxis. As for the admonishment not to procreate, this will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

Kāṇha, a Mahāsiddha who blurs the boundary between Śaiva and Buddhist Siddhas, is attributed as the author of various songs in the _Caryāpāda_ song cycles as well as the composer of couplets or _dohās_; he is also assigned authorship for a commentary on the _Hevajra Tantra_. Again, it is very difficult, given fragmentary manuscript excerpts and extrapolated commentaries, whether this refers to one or multiple people, or whether he is a purely legendary construction. When he sings of realizing _mahāsukha_, great bliss, by joining _śūnyatā_ and _karaṇā_ in the body, these are embodied truths realized experientially, rather than philosophical principles one adheres to. That the body is

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138 Sudhir das Bāul, personal interview, Birbhum district, 26 March 2016.
139 See Shahidullah, _Les chantes mystiques_, 3-4; Dowman, _Masters of Mahamudra_, 128-131.
140 Nia deha karaṇā śunamei heri. . .Chalīla Kānha Mahasuha sange.
conceived of as being a unique universe in itself while corresponding to the larger material universe is illustrated in the Caryāpādas: Kāṇha refers to his body as a “body-city,” deha naari, that carries the sun and moon in Caryāpāda 11. Luipa describes his body-tree with five branches, kāā taruvara pañcavi dāla in Caryāpāda 1. The antinomian attitude, strong emphasis on bodily practices as central to realization, use of linguistic paradox and veiled terminologies, and searing critique of institutionalized religious structures also appear in modern Bāul songs, illustrating a potential cultural influence descended from the Siddhas as north Indian folk-poets, to be further discussed in Chapter Three.

Dehatattva relates to the tantric framework of pīṇḍa-Brahmāṇdavād, which posits the homology between the body and the material universe, pragmatically applied in the different regimes of somatic praxis in tantric sādhana. The Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati (SSP) attributed to Gorakṣanāth, an early medieval Mahāsiddha associated with the Śaiva Nāth Siddhas, to be discussed in Chapter Three, exhaustively develops this theory, describing the many devas, elements (bhūta), powers and cosmic realms existing within the human body. This text, written in the early medieval period, perhaps between the 11th and 13th centuries, espouses a model of a yogic or “subtle body” having three primary channels or nāḍīs as well as cakras or wheels, aligned in a vertical column mirroring the spinal cord. The dynamic relationship between the human body and greater cosmos is bidirectional: as one works ever more diligently with the mysteries of the body, the larger structures and components of the cosmos are in turn revealed. Embodiment is thus posited ecologically in relation to the larger material universe.

In the multifaceted development of Haṭhayoga theory and praxis, deeply embedded in the Nāth

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and Vajrayāna Siddha medieval-era tantric milieu, bodily correspondences with the celestial powers of sun and moon became increasingly common. The bodily integration and subsequent unification of solar and lunar celestial powers in yogic praxis illustrates the tantric homology between self and cosmos, as well as the desire to recirculate various ecological and celestial powers into one’s material form for inner transformative work. An important text regarding Haṭhayoga is the Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā (HYP), appearing in the medieval period around the fourteenth or fifteenth century, though this text and related Haṭhayoga works are notoriously difficult to date.\(^\text{142}\) Section 3.52 describes the descent of *amṛta*, ambrosial nectar, from Mount Meru, situated near the *sahasrāra-cakra* above the spinal axis, illustrating how the body is a “container” for ecological powers.

Kuṇḍalinī, the coiled goddess, represents the embodied presence of śakti, residing in dormant slumber near the base of the spine along the central channel *suṣumnā*. Through bodily “locks,” *bandhas*, the regulation of breath, and other Haṭhayoga practices, Kuṇḍalinī may ascend through this central channel until she meets the head and unites with Śiva in dissolution (*laya*). This entails profound transformation as Kuṇḍalinī ascends, including the gaining of magical powers, *siddhi*. Their meeting ultimately results in liberation, *mokṣa*, as well as the powerful bliss of the nectar of immortality, which floods the body as Kuṇḍalinī descends to the base of the spine (see *Khecarīvidyā* 3.8c–14d). This process is one significant aspect of Bāul esoteric practice, particularly in the control necessary to properly awaken Kuṇḍalinī in training for sexual practice, obliquely referred to in Bāul songs, which will be discussed further in Chapter Four. A crucial aspect of tantric praxis is the internalization and direct *embodiment* of external pilgrimage sites, shrines, and deities. The body is re-framed as a receptacle of geographical power: the entire Earth with its vast oceans and lands is a living power.

residing within the adept's body.

The body is thus a unique universe in itself reflecting the powers of the material universe, churning with internal rivers, lakes, oceans of blood, celestial bodies and coursing winds. Haṭhayoga practice requires interfacing with the external constituents of the universe that reside within the human body in order to alchemically transform these elements into ever more subtle energetic manifestations. Haṭhayoga along with other tantric yoga practices are a vital component of Bāul esoteric praxis or sādhanā.

Of these ecological correspondences, that of internal winds in the body-place – Skt. vāyu – is of primary importance for Bāul bodily praxis: “(i)n the concrete practice of Bāul sādhanā, the initial requirement is vāyu dhāraṇa: control of vāyu, the vital air.”143 The word “Bāul” itself may derive from Skt. vātula, “wind-madness.” “The Bāul explains the word 'bātula' as composed of two segments: the syllable bā-, which stands for bāyu, and tula, meaning tulai – 'to raise'. . .The Bāul is accordingly understood as the one who is able to raise – that is, to rouse – vāyu, and to obtain this capacity is the prime object of vāyu sādhanā”144 As the internal currents of vāyu (Ben. bāyu) typically flow downward in human beings, reversing the current upwards requires intensive concentration and training.

During interviews, Bāul sādhakas consistently emphasized the three main stages of breathing practice or prāṇāyāma: pūrak, recak, and kumbhak, which are the distinct phases of inhalation, breath retention, and exhalation, respectively. In sexual practice or yugal sādhanā, control of bāyu is crucial for the retention of sexual fluids, as proper breathing calms the internal fire of lust that enflames; certain practitioners stressed the importance of a diligent application of prāṇāyāma for this control,

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144 Ibid., 10.
while others maintained that the practice should not be too exertive – it should instead flow naturally, sahaj. Yogic breathing control, Skt. prāṇāyāma, is essential for bodily purification in yogic training, as it is able to cleanse the bodily channels or nāḍīs of their many blocks and impurities. The Gorakṣa Śataka, attributed to Gorakhnāth, concludes by describing the purification of bodily nāḍīs, which thereby leads to proper restraint of prāṇā. Effective singing relates directly to prāṇāyāma practice, as proper singing should originate from within the abdomen, requiring an intensive amount of breath control and circulation. Lālan Fakir refers to catching hold of the the metaphorical prāṇ-pākhi, “the bird of prāṇ, in his songs, referring to the modulation of breath in prāṇāyāma practice.145

In Vāyuyoga, Prāṇā is subdivided into various forms of subtle breaths or winds, vāyu, which are to be directed and mastered via prāṇāyāma. Prāṇa as a subtle breath or internal wind is initially described in the early Vedic corpus, appearing in the Rg Veda (1.65.10.2). Prāṇa is also one of five inner winds that circulate through the body; the Atharva Veda lists four additional winds: vyāna apāna,, udāna and samāna (10.2.13). The circulation and directing of these five inner winds are still an important aspect of yogic praxis, including among Bāul practitioners. Of the terrestrial powers homologized as residing within the human body, wind is particularly important: the mastery of “internal winds” is essential for tantric yoga praxis and particularly relevant in Bāul sādhanā. Above all, prāṇā and sexual essences must be carefully controlled in bodily praxis: “Our total emotional outcome is sexual energy. Prāṇā is kāma (lust). You can not be free from Prāṇā and kāma. Prāṇā is vital energy – it is not only breathing. You have to go to the source of your primordial emotion which is sexuality.”146 Thus, in ultā sādhanā, the currents of prāṇā and associated lustful energies are redirected upwards, “against the current.” While I do not argue for the objective existence of prāṇa, its existence

145 See Salomon, City of Mirrors, song 137.
146 Baba Khyāpā, personal interview, Santiniketan, 27 December 2017.
in the body is taken for granted by Baul practitioners, and mastering its circulation is crucial for esoteric bodily praxis; it is also an important aspect of musical performance, further discussed in Chapter Six.

Musical performance is an extension of bodily sadhanā. Dindayal das Baul, further introduced in Chapter Four, described this connection thus: “Singing and its rhythm gives the 3 stages of prāṇāyāma. You don’t need prāṇāyāma if you know this. Dancing is a primary exercise and works with the breath. You can do yogas, but dancing is primary.”

One soteriological aspect of tantric practice is to embody the process of cosmogony and subsequent universal dissolution. In the Vajrayāna, this polarity is often expressed as the tension between – and ultimate union of – prajñā and upaya in their aspects as female and male cosmic principles, respectively. Among Śaivites this is expressed as the meeting of Śiva and Śakti, and among Vaiṣṇavas this polarity manifests as the yearning and divine love shared between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. The Bauls of West Bengal with a Vaiṣṇava orientation employ this terminology, though Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā are esoteric referents to energies existent within the human body, and they also commonly use the Sāṃkhya terms puruṣa and prakriti to refer to male and female practitioners. This “absolute oneness” of Sahaja is achieved through the commingling of male and female essences, puruṣa and prakriti in ritual maithuna, wherein there is paradoxically no longer polarity or distinctions. The dissolution of duality into ultimate unity is known among Sahajiyās as Ben. sahaja-mānuṣ – the “sahaja person” or the divine androgyne. Though the manifest universe is one of duality, applying ujān to sexual practice – moving in a reverse, counter-current manner – results in the original nondual state of Sahaja. The famed Sahajiyā poet Caṇḍīdāsa describes this process in a poem, “Sahaja mānuṣa kothāo nāi, “the sahaja person is nowhere:”

147 Dindayal das Baul, personal interview, Kolkata, 5 May 2018.
The sahaja person is nowhere, 
but if you search you will find it nearby.

It is not born from the womb, 
but gains its birth through controlled passion (rāga).

If this physical body is lifted away, 
then one has been truly touched by divine love (prema).

The great people say: “Dwelling in the nectar of immortality, 
let my mind enter and remain in the together-born (sahaja) state.”

These terminologies are important referents for Bāul esoteric practice as well. Transmuting uncontrolled lusts, kām, into the “controlled passions” of rāga is an important initial state in the transformation of unchecked passions. The first line, seemingly paradoxical, refers to the futility of searching for the sahaja-mānus, which is not anywhere identifiable, since it resides within the human body, concealed until the proper bodily regimens are applied. Caṇḍīdāsa equates those who have been touched by prema with the “dead-while-alive,” jiyante marā, a term also applied by Bāul practitioners to refer to those who walk a balance between renunciation and worldly attachments: such a person can live among worldly existence (Ben. sansāra) without being swept away by its tensions and vicissitudes.

One song attributed to Premānanda compares various sweet-meats, syrups, and sugar to the “sweetness” of properly cultivating sexual desire (kām) – common metaphorical tropes in Bāul songs; the rasik, literally “juicy one,” who “eats” these sweets – properly controlling desire – becomes liberated: dead while alive.

Even when doctrinal, philosophical and soteriological goals differed greatly among disparate traditions during the tantric milieu that formed in the early medieval era of northeast India, the practical

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149 Khele kāmer mandā daphā thānda / jiyante mānus hay marā
techniques employed by tantric practitioners follow rather similar patterns. In the contemporary context of Bengali groups influenced by the greater Sahajiyā milieu, this manifests as a robust eclecticism, including a confluence of Sufi Muslim, Vaiṣṇava bhakti, Nāth, and Vajrayāna traditions to synthesize a unique array of traditions, connected by similar approaches to embodiment and sādhanā.

The following chapter explores this cultural eclecticism in relation to the medieval Haṭhayoga milieu. Purification and refinement of the physical body are central emphases, which continues in Bāul bodily praxis. Connections between Haṭhayoga and alchemical practice are addressed. The central alchemical reagent rasa, referring both to mercury and sexual fluids, is an esoteric referent in Nāth and Vajrayāna texts and ritual contexts as well as a key term in Bāul sādhanā.
Chapter Two: The Mixed Haṭhayoga Milieu and the Bodily Crucible

2.1 Reframing The Body in Haṭhayoga

This chapter explores the relation between Haṭhayoga and Bāul bodily praxis. I draw from textual sources such as the Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā as well as fieldwork interviews in this analysis. While Chapter Three explicitly situates the complex historical interactions and morphological connections between yogic cultures in early medieval India, this chapter preempts that analysis by discussing the yogic cultural confluences present in the Haṭhayoga milieu.

The mixed Haṭhayoga milieu, textually codified around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and influenced by both Nāth and Vajrayāna siddhas, provides a rather elaborate praxis for psycho-physiological healing and longevity. Along with the well-known āsanas which strengthen and rejuvenate physical health by applying internal kinesthetic pressure to the skeletomuscular system, the six practices or saṭkarman regimen are delineated in the HYP. These include physical cleansing techniques, such as nasal cleansing, “skull polishing” breathing (kapālabhāti), enemas and other internal cleansing methods. A premise clearly taken for granted here is that even if the yogin accepts a metaphysical dualism between “mind” and “body” or immateriality and materiality, in concreto, there is a very clear connection among one's mental equilibrium, flow of prāṇā, and physical condition; there is no clear demarcation between what is “physical” or “mental.” Thus, purifying and strengthening the gross physical body is as critical as the more subtle and refined meditative practices, such as dhyāna and prāṇāyāma.

There is indeed a dynamic relationship between the bodies, and empirically measurable changes, such as neurochemical and oxygenation alterations via retention of breath, may in turn affect the dynamics of the sūkṣma śarīra. The repeated emphasis on the sublimation of sexual essences upward through the central susūmṇā nadi in tantric-yogic literature illustrates the plausibility of
endocrinological effects resulting from the alteration of hormonal processes in *ulṭa-sādhana*, reversal or regressive practice, reversing the sexual current from its usual descending movement. This practice of regression marks a confluence between Haṭhayoga and alchemical practice. The common inverted postures practiced in Haṭhayoga, including headstands and handstands, allow a reversal of blood flow to the cranium as well as physically inverting the body to reverse the normal downward flow of sexual essences.

The Haṭhayoga Pradīpikā (HYP) 1.5-9 praises yogic *siddhas* known in Abhayadatta's list of the eighty-four siddhas, including Gorakṣa, Matsyendranāth and Virupa, siddhas recognized in both Nāth and Indian Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions. To complicate this further, the names of Siddhas may refer to more than one individual, and these names may not refer to specific historical figures at all. Matsyendranāth is particularly legendary, as he is revered as an early proponent of Vajrayāna Yoginī tantras and the founder or co-founder of both the Yogini-kaula and Nāth traditions; he may also be Lui-pa, author of two *Caryāpādas*. Kāṇha or Krṣṇācārya, the Buddhist Siddha previously mentioned, is also an important character in Nāth lore, sometimes referred to as Kanni Pajvi. This illustrates the mixed milieu and overlap between Śaiva and tantric Buddhist practitioners, occurring during the early medieval period ca. 8th – 10th centuries CE. Haṭhayoga as a system of somatic alchemy, to be discussed below, captivated Siddha culture across sectarian divides, whether it be the Tamil Cittars, Nāth siddhas, or Buddhist Mahāsiddhas.

This mixed milieu manifests textually in Buddhist tantras such as the *Guhyasamājetantra* and the *Kālacakratantra*, both inscribed around the eighth to tenth centuries CE. The later commentary on the *Kālacakra*, the *Vimalaprabhā*, explicitly defines haṭhayoga (*idānim haṭhayoga ucyate*) by explaining the process of arresting *prāṇa* in the central bodily channel, *madhyamā*, a specifically
Haṭhayogic term. This is an early textual example of employing the word “haṭha” with the connotation of “forceful” – which it is often translated into English as – in the context of “forcing” inner winds along the central channel madhyamā. Birch argues that the Kālacakra reference to bodhicittabindunirodha refers to the sexual retention of bindu in sexual practices, possibly the vajrolimudra, a technique of urethral bodily fluid reversal applied in sexual union, described in the HYP 3.83-94. The word vajroḷī itself may be associated with Vajrayāna praxis during the systemization of Haṭhayoga, and this technique is particularly crucial for Bāul uḷṭa-sāḍhanā, wherein sexual fluids from both partners are drawn upwards in the male’s body via “urethral suction.” Additionally, the Amṛṭasiddhi, attributed to Avadhūtacandra, is significant for Indo-Tibetan Haṭhayogic praxis, and it employs technical terminology specific to Haṭhayogic texts. This important text illustrates an explicit cultural exchange between Indian Nāth and Vajrayāna traditions, as well as potential interaction between Nāths and Tibetans. The manuscript of this text is uniquely bilingual, written in Sanskrit via Newāri script, transliterated into Tibetan hand-script and translated in Tibetan cursive script. Though presented within the Tibetan context as a Vajrayāna Buddhist revelation, the transmission of the teaching is attributed to one Virūpākṣanātha, and the text presents the supreme goal of jīvanmukti, “liberation while alive,” with the yogi transforming into the primordial Lord Ādināth – Śiva – all of which is ostensibly Śaiva in orientation. In a bold statement that subverts sectarian and doctrinal barriers, Avadhūtacandra writes that he is impartial to all views, distilling an

151 Ibid.
extract of all tantras. Intriguingly, the text dates itself as deriving from the twelfth-century (~1159 CE), which establishes the earliest codified expression of Haṭhayoga praxis, predating Śaiva Haṭhayoga texts such as the Dattātreyaḥyogaśāstra and the Gorakṣaśatakā by at least one century; these latter texts borrow technical terms and descriptions of the yogic body from the Amṛtasiddhi, the Gorakṣaśatakā repeating entire verses. I agree with James Mallinson’s claim regarding the temptation to view Vajrayāna practitioners as the historical originators of Haṭhayoga because of the early date of this text; such practices were most likely employed by yogis throughout South Asia before they were codified and assigned an ordered taxonomy in the Amṛtasiddhi.

James Mallinson, in a recent article, analyzes a manuscript of the Amṛtasiddhi, situating it as an important source text for Haṭhayoga. The first section, regarding the Yogic Body, continues with a common tantric identification of immortal nectar, amṛta – a veiled reference for seminal essence – with the moon, residing within the skull. This also presents the first textual example of positing bindu as having male (bindu) and female (rajas) manifestations, the loss of which leads to death: adhaś candrāmṛtam yāti tadā mṛtyur nṛṇāṃ bhavet: the moon-nectar goes downwards; as a result, men die. An important connection among the mind (cittaṃ), the fluctuation of breath (vāyus) and bindu is also posited. This connection among mental fluctuation, breath control, and sexual essence is continually stressed in Bāul songs – it is indeed a central motif in the songs attributed to Lālan Fakir, wherein warnings about “thieves,” “guards” and “robbers” are repeated: “. . .control of semen is dependent on control of breath. If during ritual intercourse the mind is distracted and the adept fails to control his

155 Ibid., 524.
157 Mallinson, “The Amṛtasiddhi,” 5
158 Ibid., 6.
breath, then the thief – the sahaj mānuṣ – will rob him of his patrimony – semen.”

The author of Amṛṭasiddhi also states in 7.12: binduś candramayo jñayo rajah sūryamayas tathā: know bindu to be made of the moon, know rajas (menstrual fluid) to be made of the sun. This is later mirrored in nearly identical terminology in the Gorakṣaśataka, which stresses the bodily transformation that occurs when these two are united, as the Amṛṭasiddhi similarly describes at the end of section 7.12. Uniting these two forms of bindu ostensibly refers to engaging in sexual practice.

In a further interweaving of disparate traditions, Avadhūtacandra asserts: bindur buddhaḥ śivo bindur bindur viṣṇuḥ prajāpatiḥ – bindu is Buddha, bindu is Śiva, bindu is Viṣṇu, the Lord of Creatures. This rhetorical strategy seamlessly integrates numerous traditions into a singular mode of tantric engagement, what Schaeffer refers to as “the birth of a Tibetan Buddhist Śiva.” This intriguing and unique text innovates pragmatic topoi that consistently recur throughout Haṭhayoga texts, such as describing the techniques of mahāmudrā, mahābandha and mahāvedha. Regarding the convoluted relationship between the Nāth yogis and Vajrayāna Buddhists, who appear to have shared inter-traditional yogic cultures, Mallinson concludes that this text's Vajrayāna origins “provide the first known doctrinal basis for this connection.”

The Amṛṭasiddhi exemplifies a syncretic work deeply influential to the later Haṭhayoga textual corpus. The orientation exhibited in this text also aligns strongly with the tantric yogic heritage propagated by Bāul practitioners. The following are particularly influential on Bāul praxis:

1.) the model which identifies bindu with the moon and rajas with sun/fire continues among Bāul

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159 Carol Salomon, “Bāul Songs,” 197.
163 According to Bāul practitioners, rajaḥ heats the body, and too much heat is potentially poisonous.
practitioners, and esoteric practice is deeply connected to blending the essences of bindu/śukra and rajas during sexual praxis;

2.) locating sexual essences as dwelling within the cranium is also important for Bāul dehatattva;

3.) the goal of jīvanmukti, “liberation while living,” is stressed, rather than the transcendence of samsāra;

4.) identifying sexual fluids with the abode of deities.

These shared conceptions are reflected in this terse description given by a Bāul performer, Basu das Bāul, regarding how one is born into the world, “I was first in my father's head (as bindu). Through desire, śukra and rajaḥ mix. That is how creation is born. Primary bindu comes from prakṛti. In the womb, I was created. We don't know where we are going or where we came from.” He then contrasted this description of procreation with urdha redha, the upward movement of sexual essences within the body that does not result in procreation. “Kām (desire) procreates – it is tamasic. Prem (divine love) does not – it is supreme love. Contradictions live side by side.”

2.2 Rasa and Bodily Alchemy

The Arabic word alchemy is disbursed throughout numerous European languages. One common etymological hypothesis is to trace this word to Khem, an Egyptian word referring to the dark soils of the Nile riverbank. Purposely obscured terminology and techniques are strikingly similar among European, Arabic, Indian and Chinese alchemical traditions; Joseph Needham argues for a

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164 This is a reference to the three guṇas. Lustful desire is tamasic – the most dense, opaque and inertia-bound of the guṇas. Basu's description elicits the complex and ambivalent attitude towards procreation among Bāul performers. The reversal of sexual fluids, urdha redha, is a marker of success in bodily praxis, and success in this will not lead to procreation. Prem as divine love is sattvic, the most exalted guṇa; it does not lead to procreation, but a different kind of “birth.”

165 Basu das Bāul, personal interview, Santiniketan, 14 March 2016.
potential continuity of alchemical cultural exchange along the Silk Route, particularly at Khotan and Kucha, areas historically famous as a meeting-place of Greek, Arabic, Indian and Chinese cultures. The fixation on working with the same metals, including mercury, lead, and sulphur across these cultural boundaries, as well as veiled sexual references to a “cross-current” or regressive way, may indeed illustrate a mutual cultural exchange.

On one level, alchemists cross-culturally developed a proto-chemistry, fixated on creating gold or transforming base metals such as lead with laboratory apparatuses. This is the level of metallurgic practice, sometimes referred to as exoteric or “external” alchemy, involving the separation and purification of metallic ores. These practices were contextualized as working with the fundamental elements: in the Graeco-Egyptian or Hermetic tradition, theories of the origins of metals “were based on the theory of the four elements (derived from Empedocles and Plato), the idea of a single, underlying prime matter; and vapors and exhalations – the moist and the dry – as the ‘parent principles’ of all things that were quarried and mined. . .the four elements were regarded as different ‘forms’ or ‘appearances’ of an underlying matter or prima materia, from which all visible, material objects are derived, each composed of a different combination of hotness, coldness, and moistness.”

The Latin term Prima materia, literally “prime matter,” refers to a primordial material substratum; the alchemist must diligently work and transform this original matter into other material states, refining and “perfecting” substances this way. Analogous concepts are found cross-culturally among alchemical traditions, as will be discussed below.

The subtle body is not immaterial per se, but rather is a kind of quasi-material entity. Within the background of Sāṃkhya ontological delineation, the subtle body and its sūkṣma tanmatras or subtle

elements is still of *prakṛti*, the field of material existents. This enables the yogin-as-alchemist, within the “crucible” of the body, to transform the subtle and gross manifestations of *prakṛti* into their most rarefied forms. This again parallels the metallurgist, who applies flame to base metals as manifestations of *prima materia* to remove all dross and impurities, eventually to procure the noblest of metals, gold. Gradually, certain alchemists grew interested in bodily rejuvenation\(^{167}\) and compounding medicines with plants and minerals. The terminology of external, metallurgic alchemy became increasingly interpreted as referring to internal processes, and thus the “exoteric” and “esoteric”\(^{168}\) interpretations of highly obscure alchemical language refer to both processes simultaneously.

*Rasaśāstra*, the compendium of Indian alchemical works, displays this gradual shift in semantic domains. Wujastyk notes the first known reference to the ingestion of mercury or *pārada* in the Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasamhitā, ascribed to Vāghbaṭa, ca. seventh century CE, prescribing the ingestion of *pārada* as *rasāyana*, which Wujastyk translates as a “rejuvenating tonic.”\(^{169}\) Samuel describes the strong influence of the Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasamhitā on an important Tibetan medical text, *Rgyud bzhi*, which includes longevity practices and mercury-based medicinal compounds.\(^{170}\) The Tibetan practice of *bcud len*, meaning “essence extraction, is a translation of *rasāyana*.\(^{171}\)

David Gordon White translated the first chapter of the important eleventh or twelfth-century CE text *Rasārṇava*, contextualizing the adaptation of tantric alchemy from *rasaśāstra* as a discipline of

\(^{167}\) Samuel, “A Short History”, 221

\(^{168}\) This Greek-derived term (*esōterō*) literally means “within,” and this is a fitting adjective to apply when referring to alchemical processes occurring within the body.

\(^{169}\) Dominik Wujastyk comments on the intriguing connection between alchemical works that describe chemical approaches to physiology and medicine, or iatrochemistry, and ayurvedic medicine: “It should be noted that ‘alchemical works’ (rasaśāstra) are considered a separate genre from medical literature, though alchemical texts often contain large sections on iatrochemistry. The development of ayurvedic iatrochemistry seems to have its origins in rasaśāstra literature, as methods of processing and using mineral- and metal based drugs first described in rasaśāstra works were incorporated into ayurvedic medicine.” In "Perfect Medicine," *Asian Medicine* 8, no. 1 (2013): 18 fn 12.

\(^{170}\) Samuel, “A Short History,” 226

\(^{171}\) Ibid., 222.
proto-chemistry. The medieval epoch during which this text was written marks a shift to internal praxis with an emphasis on siddhi and bodily perfection and immortality. The human body is correlated with chemical and metallurgic processes; thus, the Rasārṇava proclaims: “yathā lohe tathā dehe:” as in metal, so in the body.\textsuperscript{172} Mercury, known variously as \textit{rasa} and \textit{pārada}, is the alchemical reagent par excellence, extolled in Chinese, Indian, and European alchemical systems. The nature of quicksilver – a metal which is a liquid at room temperature – fascinated experimental alchemists, who associated liquidity and fluid movement with mercury. In the context of tantric alchemy, metals and minerals are living entities, and metals are also equated with sexual fluids: “(m)ercury was, for them, the seminal essence of a god [Śiva] who (pro-) creates the universe sexually.”\textsuperscript{173} These alchemists thus ingested mercurial preparations along with other mineral and plant substances to operate on the internal bodily laboratory.\textsuperscript{174} Verses 18-22 describe how Haṭhayoga accompanying the ingestion of mercury is essential for transforming the physical body into a perfected, deathless one. The Goddess' sexual emissions are referred to as mica, while menstrual blood is identified with sulphur. The significance of bodily fluids and excreta in relation to esoteric alchemical practices among Bāuls will be discussed in Chapter Two.

Verse 34 of the Rasārṇava, describing a dialogue between goddess Devī and Bhairava, declares that \textit{rasa}, both mercury and the essence of sexual fluids, is generated in the sexual union of Šiva and Goddess – this claim is especially important in tantric-yogic sexual practices. Verse 28 asks, “Until such time one eats Šiva’s seed – that is mercury, \textit{rasa} – where shall he seek liberation, where shall he

\textsuperscript{172} White, \textit{The Alchemical Body}, 54
\textsuperscript{174} See Openshaw, \textit{Seeking Bāuls of Bengal}, 213, for a description of Bāul and esoteric Bengali songs that obliquely refer to metals and bodily chemical processes.
seek the maintenance of his body?"\(^{175}\)

White's voluminous work *The Alchemical Body* presents an exhaustive analysis of the development of internal alchemical techniques among *siddha* yogic practitioners in South Asia, who easily move beyond sectarian barriers. *Rasa* as mercury and sexual essence becomes an increasingly polysemic term among the numerous *siddha* traditions: “the *rasa* in question is mercury, which substitutes itself for human bodily fluids and thereby transforms a body of flesh and blood into a golden (*svaṇa*), adamantine (*vajra*), or perfected (*siddha*) body.”\(^{176}\) The implements and technology of metallurgic alchemy are increasingly internalised, and this process of internalisation is a key feature in the development of tantric internal alchemy. As evidenced in the HYP and SSP, *rasa* is gradually conceptualized as the ultimate corporeal alchemical substance, a lunar nectar oozing from the *sahasrāra cakra* downwards, to be captured as rarefied saliva in the seal of *khecari-mudrā* with the tongue locked into the rear palate.

In *Caryāpada* 22, the great *mahāsiddha* Saraha is seemingly critical of dwelling on *rasa* practice, as he states, “*jībante maile nāhi bišeso / jā ethu jāma maraṇevi saṅkā / so karau rasa rasānera kaṅkhā*,” “Life and death are not different. Those afraid of life and death, look for *rasa* and and *rasāyana* (elixirs or medicines).”\(^{177}\) Atindra Mojumder, editor of a 1967 translation of the *Caryāpadas*, comments on this *pāda* thus, “. . .the method advocated [by Rasa *siddhas*] is that of transubstantiation with the help of Rasa or chemical element (generally mercury), and of thus making the body immutable. . .but the Sahajiyās say that those who have understood what perfection is, are not afraid of death and so they do not search for Rasa and Rasāyana.”\(^{178}\) As Saraha’s songs are continually

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\(^{176}\) White, *The Alchemical Body*, 303.


\(^{178}\) Ibid., 61.
critical of the hypocritical asceticism of religious practitioners, whether Hindu or Buddhist, this interpretation may indeed align with a polemical mockery by Saraha. This accords with one connotation of Skt. sahaja, “naturalness,” in which excessive strain is undue and in fact inimical to spiritual practices, insofar as it can invoke anxiety and tension. Saraha’s critique also addresses the yogic-ascetic obsession with immortality and jīvan-mukti, “liberation while alive,” which may embed one is a dualistic struggle against death.

Rasa is particularly important among Bāul sādhakas who refer to male and female sexual fluids as ras in Bengali. The term “rasāyana” is employed by some sādhakas, who assume that this term refers to internal bodily processes, rather than external alchemical tonics. One practitioner informed me that he occasionally adds minute amounts of mercury to his gānjā which he then smokes, claiming in English that it “balances brain chemicals and alcohols.” He cryptically alluded to rasāyana practices that are continued by Bāuls, and he described a Tibetan lama he knew who was able to drink a large amount of mercury and immediately vomit the contents out as a form of bodily purification.

2.3 Union of Sun and Moon: Recirculation of Celestial Powers

Haṭhayoga praxis became increasingly fixated on the bodily integration and subsequent unification of solar and lunar celestial powers in the later medieval period, illustrating the tantric homology between self and cosmos, as well as the desire to (re-)absorb various ecological and celestial powers into one’s material form for inner alchemical work. Embodiment is posited ecologically in relation to the larger material universe. While Bāul practitioners do not rely on texts as a source of valid knowledge, I analyze excerpts from Haṭhayoga texts because of the codified practices mentioned therein, which correspond directly with Bāul esoteric bodily praxis.
The HYP (3.52) describes the descent of amṛta from Mount Meru, situated in the sahasrāra-cakra above the spinal axis. This nectar is elsewhere referred to as a Soma-liquor (somapanam) in HYP 3.44-6, and the ambrosial, intoxicating drink soma is also associated with lunar power, soma being another referent for the moon. This ambrosial fluid corresponds with its subtle essence as kunḍalinī in the subtle body. The nectar’s movement is arrested from its normal downward descent via prāṇāyāma and pressing the tongue backwards into the palate (3.51), which enables siddhi by tasting the blissful, alchemically transformed saliva that descends from candra and interacts with prāṇa and internal circulatory rhythms.

Among the Nāths, the moon, candra, is a repeated referent for semen; this reference is also used by Bāuls in relation to “four moons” or cāri candra practice, discussed below. There is a danger of this amṛta (nectar) being burnt in the Sun of the navel region by sexual fluids being released in the burning flame of lustful passion. Dasgupta comments on solar and lunar associations among Nāth and Buddhist siddhas thus, “. . .(t)he Sun represents the principle of destruction (kālāgni) through the process of change and decay – and the moon represents the principle of immutability,” arguing that the Nāths embody alchemical theory in yogic praxis by continuing the notion of a perfected body that results from commingling the Sun and Moon.179

Birch argues that the definition of ha-ṭha as corresponding to solar and lunar powers occurs later in Haṭhayoga literature, spelled out explicitly in the Yogabīja attributed to Gorakṣanath, 148cd-149ab, while claiming that Haṭhayoga is thusly named because of the union of sun and moon: sūryācandramasor yogād haṭhayogo ’bhiddhiyate.180 Haṭhayogic bandhas, physical “locks” that involve muscular contractions of the abdomen and perineum, provoke union (aikya) of the internal prāṇa and

179 Dasgupta, Obscure Religious Cults, xxxviii.
apāna wind currents. The descent of bindu essence in sexual excitation is associated with the downward flowing tendency of the apāna current, as the respiratory rate is greatly increased during such excitation, and the yogin is to force this current upwards via mūlabandha (HYP 3.62). HYP 3.27 posits mahāvedha mudrā as connecting moon, sun, and fire in the body; likewise, the Amṛtasiddhi, further analyzed in Chapter Three, discusses body-wind (vayū) through bandhas and mahāvedha, and Yoga is defined as uniting sun and moon in 4.10 (candraṃ caiva yadā sūryo grhṇati cābhramāndalāt | anyonyāṃ jāyate yogas tasmād yogo hi bhanyate), yet another reference to the Haṭhayogic/Nāth Siddha emphasis on bodily lunar essences.

In SSP II.5, Gorakṣanāth identifies the left nāḍī, iḍā, with the moon, naming it candranāḍī (tatra vāma iḍā candranāḍī). I.63 describes various activities and fluctuations that occur throughout the body-mind, labelling these as “phases” (kalā) of the moon, while I.64 describes similar processes as solar phases; the phase of amṛta arises from nivṛtti or inactivity among the lunar phases, again showing the importance of stilling the perturbations of thought and emotion in yogic practice.

A yogic text attributed to Gorakṣanāth, Gorakṣaśataka, also states that semen is connected (samyuktam) to the moon, while rajas or menstrual fluid is connected with the sun.Śloka 74 equates bindu with Śiva and rajas with Śakti, while an exalted state (paramam padam) comes from uniting these two.

As one's sthūla śarīra or material body is dependent on the consumption of plant or animal-based food, the composition of which is dependent on solar radiation, soil, rain, and various minerals, careful observation notes that the body itself is made of these same basic elements and celestial powers. Being able to transmute these basic constituents within the body via somatic practices forms the basis

181 śukraḥ candreṇa samyuktam rajah suryena samyutam raviḥ
182 binduh Śiva rajah Śaktir bindum induu rajo raviḥ
of bodily rasāyana praxis.

A practice among Bengali Sahajiyās that works directly with recirculation of lunar powers is cāri-candra bhed, “piercing the four moons.” Lubomír Ondračka analyzes a Bengali poem-song attributed to Gorakṣanāth, Gorkha Bijay. This poem describes a common legend of Gorakṣanāth rescuing his guru Matsyendranāth, who was overcome by the sexual powers of yoginīs. This story is sometimes interpreted as describing the Nāthas distancing themselves from the Kaula erotic practices attributed to Matsyendra.

Ondračka translates an excerpt of this song, which has Gorakṣanāth teaching Matsyendranāth/Mīnanāth how to revivify himself after nearly dying from sensual indulgence. In verse 4 of this excerpt, Gorakṣanāth mentions four bodily moons (cāri candra) that will rescue Mīnanāth. Given consistent references to the loss of fluids as a loss of vitality, e.g. śarīr śukhāila, “the body is dry” and gānge nāi pāni, “the Ganges has no water,” Ondračka argues that this song may refer to the Sahajiyā practice of ingesting the four moons of urine, feces, semen and menstrual blood, a concealed tantric practice to replenish the body via the reabsorption of lunar nectars. While it is difficult to know what these various “moons” meant in relation Nāth practices, the connection between lunar power and bodily fluids may have eventually developed as cāri candra longevity practice among Sahajiyās. As this is a secretive, orally-transmitted practice, the obscurity surrounding details of the practice is to be expected, as is the vague, cursory reference to four moons in the Gorkha Bijay. It is still rather unclear how much the Nāthas influenced specific Sahajiyā practices and beliefs, and

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183 The Yogatattva Upanisad 73 describes rubbing excrement on one’s body to achieve siddhi, analogizing this as transforming lead to gold.

184 In the Advayasiddhi śloka 7, the Siddha Lakṣmīnkarā refers to sakṣira, literally “milk,” possibly a symbolic referent to bodhicitta. In śloka 17, however, while referring to worshipping the body, kṣīra is again mentioned in accompaniment with Abalāsvyambhukusuma, which refers to menstrual fluid. Ślokas 3 and 20 also cryptically refer to the application or ingestion of excreta, seed (bīja) and urine. These substances produce perfections, siddhi, and prevent bodily disease and decay, similar to the discussion below regarding four moons practice. For this text, I consulted the Sanskrit edition with commentary by Malati J. Shendge, Advayasiddhi: a study, No. 8. (Oriental Institute, 1964).
Ondračka argues that the Nāth vernacular songs in Bengali were more accessible to lower caste Bengali Sahajiyās. Indeed, the encrypted and ambiguous language of the Gorkha Bijay is open to numerous literal and figurative interpretations, which aligns with the various understandings and applications of cāri candra practice among modern Sahajiyās.

G.W. Briggs notes that some Nāth yogis drink a mixture of secretions in an esoteric practice. This is because “(i)n the highest stage of attainment, kaulacara, the sādhaka does away with all rules and injunctions. The theory is that as poisons counteract poisons, so men must rise by those things through which they so often lose their manhood.” This illustrates the principle of extracting nectar (amṛta) from poison (biṣ). In this case, human excreta can effect other poisons within the body-mind, thereby catalyzing a physiological rejuvenation. This practice also exemplifies the attempt to move beyond moral standards of “pure” or “impure” when ingesting certain substances in tantric praxis. Regarding healing practices, Briggs also describes Nāth yogis’ reputation as practitioners of medicine, who recite mantras to cure disease, paralleling the folk-healing repertoires of tantric practitioner-healers.

Sakti Nath Jha combines interviews with Sahajiyās and Bauls with textual studies to analyze the practice of cāri-candra bheda. While describing the varied purposes of this practice, he notes that interviewed sādhakas associate the mind, will-power (maner īcchā) and desire with the moon. Furthermore, “(i)n songs and conversation concerning dehatattva (theory of the body), the rotation of desire (kām) or semen through different parts of the body on different lunar days is likened to the

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185 Lubimir Ondračka, “What Would Mīnanāth Do to Save His Life?” in Yogis, Heroes and Poets: Histories and Legends of the Nāths, eds. David N. Lorenzen and Adrian Muñoz (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 130. The Nāth influence within the general Sahajiyā milieu will be explored in Chapter II.
187 Ibid., 283.
189 Ibid., 76
waxing and waning of the moon.”

Taking the moons back within the body is returning the *ras*, or returning the moons; “*candra sādhanā*, they say, removes disease and weariness, and brings brightness to the body. . .the gross is thus transformed into the subtle, and becomes immensely more powerful in the process.” Bāul *sādhakas* hinted at this practice during my fieldwork interviews in coded language, and emphatically stressed that this practice, along with proper sexual praxis or *yugal sādhanā*, is the ultimate key to unlock the latent potentials of the human body, which reverses the aging and decay process and eliminates all forms of disease and fatigue. It is seen as the ultimate panacea, by working with the secretions of the human body itself. These secretions and excreta are understood as having powerful curative properties, and recycling them prevents the damaging effects of losing them from the body. They are understood as the body's inherent medicinal compounds; as Binod das Bāul described in an interview further expanded in Chapter Four, *ras* can be divided into its constituents of chemicals (Ben. *rāsāyanika*) and vitamins, which are strongly palliative when applied by an experienced practitioner. Commonly, two, rather than four, moons are ingested: *rajaḥ* and *bīj*, menstrual fluid and semen, under precise ritualistic circumstances.

Relating this practice directly to alchemical practice, Jha conjectures, “*Lauha-bedh* for example means the transmutation of iron into gold. It may be that 'bhed' is 'bedh' in corrupted form.” Connecting this practice to the extolled, immutable alchemical substance of gold, he continues, “(t)he aim of *candra-bhed* practice is to transmute the moons of the body into gold, and confer on it the brightness of the moon by the help of the bodily substances of mercury, mica, sulphur etc.” This practice serves as a bodily longevity method, able to prevent or cure all diseases, ultimately aiming to

190 Ibid., 74.
191 Ibid., 99.
192 Ibid., 76-7.
193 Ibid.
transform the body into a perfected one, Skt. *siddhi deha*.

This illustrates the Haṭhayogic emphasis on not simply *identifying* celestial correspondences with the body as abstract principles, but practically engaging with these powers so as to alchemically transform the constituents of one's gross material body into ever subtler gradients of form, to establish a *living* truth, absorbing and circulating the celestial powers of sun and moon within the body so as to effect this transformation. This union of sun and moon is achieved individually by uniting the *apāna* and *prāṇa* currents, or in sexual practices by the inversion of sexual fluids in *vajrolīmudra*, urethral suction in which the commingled fluids are drawn in and upward through the male practitioner's body; the latter practice again stresses the principle of duality, as the sexual fluids of male and female are combined and alchemically transformed. In *cāri candra* practice, the “moons” and excreta are ingested – either literally or figuratively/symbolically – so as to recirculate the rejuvenating powers associated with the white purity of the moon. Working with these bodily compounds is a form of indigenous medicine that engenders psycho-physiological healing.

The next chapter attempts to situate the unique historical confluences among wandering tantric folk-poets in Bengal and northeast India. I analyze the morphological connection between yogic cultures, rather than a genealogical descent of lineages, that links the antinomian orientation, emphasis on embodied praxis, and esoteric coded language of the early medieval Siddhas and modern Bāul singers. These early medieval cultural exchanges include a softening of sectarian boundaries among heterodox practitioners and intertextual borrowings between Hindu and Buddhist Tantras.
Chapter 3: A Confluence of Histories: Siddhas, Tāntrikas and Folk-Poets in Northern India

3.1 Early Medieval Developments

The following section traces the mixed tantric milieu that developed during Gupta-era India and the later medieval period, a highly syncretic era in Indian religious history that illustrates a shared heterodox response to Brahmanical hegemony and caste-based social hierarchies. David Gordon White argues that South Asian Siddhas or “accomplished ones” easily transgressed sectarian boundaries, as they “were always first and foremost Siddhas,” who formed “. . .the most syncretistic landmarks on the religious landscape of medieval India.”194 To be venerated as a Śakta or Śaiva tāntrika while also being recognized as a Buddhist Siddha is not contradictory, as this syncretic trajectory incorporated disparate traditions in the name of pragmatic efficacy, not stopping at sectarian barriers, even when facing the rift of vastly different doctrinal premises. I conceive of this as a dialectical system of mutual exchange, in which secretive tantric lineages engaged in continual feedback loops in the generation of their sādhanā repertoires. Thus to be Śaiva and Buddhist simultaneously is not, per se, mutually exclusive, nor does it necessitate converting from one tradition to another. The great Siddha Kāṇha or Kṛṣṇācārya is credited with writing Yogaratnamālā, a commentary to the Hevajra Tantra, a tantra widely practiced among the early medieval Buddhist Siddhas; Kānha also self-designated as a Kāpālika, the infamous skull and trident wielding Śaiva ascetics, in Cāryāpada 10. The Kāpālika “style” or ascetic orientation mirrored depictions of Bhairava, the violent, transgressive aspect of Śiva akin to his Vedic form, Rudra; these ascetics thus gathered in charnel and cremation grounds, covered themselves in ash, carrying ritual implements including a skull bowl, kāpāla. Firmly positioned outside caste-bound, conventional moral standards, depictions of Kāpālikas in various plays and narratives, including in the Cāryā songs, suggest that they engaged in transgressive practices, ingesting alcohol and intoxicants and indulging

194 The Alchemical Body, 80.
sexually with consorts. Feared as sorcerers, they purportedly had magical powers, as did the female spirits or humans accompanying them, mysterious dākinīs and yoginīs. This Kāpālika culture was particularly permeable with tantric Buddhist practitioners, who took on the ritual accoutrements of these feared ascetics. The dangerous, chthonic and wrathful female deities and spirits became increasingly important among these more extreme tantric cultures.

There are shared sacred pilgrimage sites, pīṭhas, among Buddhist Tantric, Śaiva, and Śākta traditions, enabling a strong possibility for cultural confluence and experimentation to flow among these traditions. The emphasis on goddess worship, and the correlated reverence for women, is evidenced in Śākta texts such as Kaulāvalīnirṇaya; this orientation may have also influenced Vajrayāna's focus on powerful goddesses and the divine feminine. As I argued above, sectarian boundaries did not prohibit the free-flow of cultural exchange among disparate tantric traditions in the spirit of pragmatic eclecticism. The Nāth influence among Sahajiyā and Bāul praxis is certainly pronounced, insofar as Haṭhayoga and tantric theories of embodiment and subtle physiology are relevant for bodily practices.

A connecting thread among these disparate traditions is the shared emphasis on bodily praxis or kāya-sādhana and the consistent use of the Sanskrit term sahaja as an ultimate referent among other connotations. Literally meaning “born together,” this word has numerous English translations, including “the innate,” “co-emergent,” and “simultaneously arisen.” H. Geunther defines sahaja thus: “The literal translation of the Tibetan term lhan-čig skyes-pa (Sanskrit sahaja) would be ‘coemergence’. . . Essentially it refers to the spontaneity and totality of the experience in which the opposites such as transcendence and immanence, subject and object, the noumenal and phenomenal
Especially relevant to this thesis, Kværne describes the paradoxical, ineffable nature of sahaja as being accessible only to heterodox tantric initiates: “. . .since the elaborate initiations of tantric ritualism are rejected, the songs themselves constitute an initiation. By initiation we mean a revelation. . .” Kværne further argues that it is the “systematic ambiguity” of the imagery within the Caryāgīti songs that allows the ultimate state of sahaja to be revealed. This is a compelling claim, and the parallel use of oblique jargon and ambiguous imagery seems to have a parallel function within Baul songs – to express – and to reveal – that which by its nature is inexpressible.

This term appears many times in the Caryāgīti songs as well as in Nāth Siddha vernacular poetry. In the jargon of the Siddhas, sahaja is the ultimate nondual realization, often couched in the terminologies of sexual yoga. Sahaja as both a pathway and ultimate realization refers to processes of liberation. Sahaja songs are kept alive to this day in folk music sung throughout Bengal, illustrating a shared history – though not, per se, an unbroken chain of continuity – between the early medieval Caryāgīti songs and modern Sahajiyā songs.

The connotation of “easiness” and “naturalness” is yet another interpretation of sahaja used as an adjective, a usage that is favored among Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās and Baul singers. This adjectival meaning was commonly explained as an important way to understand how Ben. sahaj is practically applied in quotidian life. This involves an unencumbered spontaneity in one's way of existing, an unstrained equilibrium between self and external universe. Sudhir das Baul explained his understanding of sahaja while sitting under a shaded canopy in his small āśram to shield himself from the searing early summer heat in a rural Birbhum district village, “See everything, all of life, in a simple way.

196 Per Kværne, An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2010), 63. Emphasis in original.
Accept what is there, what appears. Love simply and laugh simply. Live in an easy way. In our songs there are very complex ideas, but they are expressed easily. Snakes bite someone who is afraid, but not a baby – a baby has that easiness of sahaj.” Other Bauls expressed similar interpretations, explaining sahaja as an attitude that embraces and accepts everything as it comes, not resisting when there is loss or pain, nor becoming overzealous when good fortune appears.

In the context of Caryāgīti songs, this “naturalness” means avoiding excessive strain and stress, while also incorporating – rather than rejecting – the natural instincts and desires that arise in one’s experience as a human being, including carnal ones, since our nature is innately sahaja. This connotation of non-excessive effort is subtle, as it does not imply passivity or sloth, but is grounded in the paradox of having nothing to achieve or transcend since one's ultimate nature is sahaja. Among the Mahāsiddhas, sahaja was an ultimate referent, an oblique reference to the unspeakable ultimate realization that defies conceptual categories and language itself. Shashibhusan Dasgupta compares the various applications of sahaja thus, “Whether conceived of as 'supreme bliss' (Mahā-sukha), as by the Buddhist Sahajiyās, or as 'supreme love' (as with the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās), strength of the body was deemed necessary to stand such a supreme realisation.”

There are a multitude of vernacular-poems in numerous languages throughout South Asia attributed to these Siddhas, both Buddhist and Nāṭh. The tantric system associated with the early medieval Mahāsiddhas, the Yoginī Tantras, was eminently performative: Davidson argues that these tantras were “overwhelmingly dominated by ritual, song, dance and story-telling – all blended together. Thus one source of the new scriptural authors might be sought from a social strata composed of, or

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197 Sudhir das Baul, personal interview, Birbhum district, 26 March 2016.
at least exposed to, singers, performers, players, street preachers, and touring theater troupes.”199

Given this plausible claim, these performative songs connect to a larger sociological shift in the religious landscape of early medieval India, in which heterodox practitioners drew inspiration from traveling folk-poets, and indeed took on that role themselves; these vernacular religious songs thus may have served as a form of syncretic negotiation among disparate tantric traditions. Charlotte Vaudeville posits that the Buddhist tantric songs are adopted from popular folk-songs: “genuinely popular in origin: [the pada] is really a folk-song, adapted to religious purposes. . .the pada's metrical looseness is mainly due to the necessity of adapting the words to melodic variations; it probably also reflects the indifference of uneducated audiences to prosodical subtleties.”200

Relating to other folk-poet traditions, the use of sahaja is also popular in the Hindi vernacular songs of the north Indian Sants. The Sants illustrate another culturally permeable esoteric tradition, which arose in the medieval period; the works of Kabîr, the most famous Sant poet, appear in the fifteenth-century.201 Here the use of paradox and descriptions of seemingly contradictory behavior mirrors the poetry of the Buddhist Siddhas; Gold maintains this is “morphological only,” concluding that “(a)ny Buddhist roots of the sants probably must have come through the nāths, who shared a common yogic culture with the siddhas. . .”202 The Sants drew influence from both esoteric Sufi and Hindu yogic traditions, continuing heterodoxic critiques of Indic social and religious structures. Gold notes the “parallel socioreligious roles” shared by Sants and Sufis in pre-Mughal India, particularly in these aspects:

1.) frequent meditation on lights and the guru or pîr's image;

202 Ibid.
2.) basic practice is auditory, as opposed to visualizations;
3.) Attachment to the Lord, and associated worldly aloofness, leads to full concentration on the Lord; 4.)
Little cultivation of the physical body.\textsuperscript{203}

Gold argues that though the Sants continue a heterogeneous culture of the “convention-mocking holy man” shared among Nāth and Buddhist Siddhas, they differ in a significant way: while the latter were more focused on internal practice, they were less interested in “people at large,” somewhat aloof from large numbers of lay disciples. The Sants, contrarily, were often householders, tradespeople and lay people, interested in communicating their experiences and social critiques to the greater public.\textsuperscript{204}

However instrumental the tantric yogic influence from the Siddha cultures may have been among the Bengali heterodox traditions, for Bāuls, the Sants’ emphasis on engaging with the “people at large” is shared with the central importance of Bāul public performances, as well as relatedly embracing householder life along with a renunciate focus. Transmission of esoteric praxis is balanced with the impetus to reveal – at least partially – these experiences to others, both practitioners and non-practitioners.

The Sants’ heterodox approach is illustrated in the medieval vernacular poetry of Kabīr and Dadu, expressing polemics in which sectarian and caste distinction, traditional gender roles, and Brahmanical hierarchy were polemically mocked. Thus Kabīr says, “kahai Kabira so jīvatā, jo duhun kai nikati na jāi,” “one lives when one goes to neither [Islam or Hinduism.]”\textsuperscript{205} A poem attributed to the Nāth yogi Gorakṣa uses very similar language, “jogi ākhain alakha kaun, tahān Rāma achai na khudāi,” “The yogi calls to the invisible One (alakha), within which is neither Ram nor Khuda” (a

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 208.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 207.
\textsuperscript{205} Karine Schomer, “The Doha as a Vehicle of Sant Teachings,” in \textit{The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India} (Delhi: Motilal Bandarsidass, 1987), 70
Persian word for Lord). Such heterodox practitioners deftly absorbed yogic techniques and doctrines from disparate religious traditions, while eschewing identification with any one tradition. Schomer discusses the similarity in the application of dohā meter/poetic structure as a shared form of poetics among the Sants, Buddhist Siddhas and Nāth Siddhas, who used vernaculars such as Hindi, Bengali and Apabrahmṣa purposely to distance themselves from Sanskrit elitism; the Sants are unique for their “...lyrical evocation of intense feeling, particularly the feeling of viraha, the pain of separation from one's beloved,” which she connects with women's folk songs.

This deep yearning and pain of separation are key themes in Sahajiyā and Bāul songs, where the divine love generated through devotion, Skt. prema-bhakti stressed by north Indian Sants, is central. Vernacular poetry attributed to Nāth Siddhas, such as the Bengali Gorka Bijay, strongly influenced the tantric yoga regimens employed by heterodox tantric Sahajiyā and Sufi practitioners throughout Bengal. Coterminal with this medieval development is the appearance of bhakti musical forms, the kīrtan and bhajan. Bhakti vernacular devotional poetry rapidly disbursed, incorporated into temple-based singing throughout India. The important Vaiṣṇava-oriented text Bhāgavata Purāṇa appeared, stressing the centrality of bhakti, identifying yoga as a form of bhakti, able to grant ultimate liberation, mokṣa.

The various elements described above in the brief overview of the Sants – critique of caste hierarchy, parallel yogic cultures, and emphasis on bhakti – are evident in the syncretic Sahajiyā milieu. Thus, an ongoing dialectical exchange throughout northern and northeast India flowed among tantric folk-poets, bhaktas, and heterodox Vaiṣṇavas.

Patton Burchett notes an important aspect of these exchanges, involving multivalent tensions:

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206 Ibid.
207 Ibid., 66-7.
208 For further, see T. S. Rukmani, "Siddhis in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and in the Yogasutras of Patanjali – a Comparison," In Alex Wayman, Researches in Indian and Buddhist philosophy: essays in honour of Professor Alex Wayman (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 217–226.
among the Sants, though there is clear influence from the Nāths' tantric orientation, they, along with other bhaktas, critiqued tantric methods as inferior relative to bhakti. Many medieval bhakti poems analogized the pain and yearning of viraha as a snakebite that has no cure. As Kabīr sang, “Once the snake of viraha is in the body, no mantra can control it. To live in separation from Rām is madness.”

Other bhakti hagiographies refer to both figurative and literal snakebites, which render tantric mantras and herbal medicines powerless, while only true devotion to Krṣṇa can cure such wounds.

Burchett argues:

In some sense, in the rapidly expanding sphere of bhakti in Mughal India, we can see the paradigmatic tantric verbal practice of mantra japa (often an individual practice) being supplanted by the (typically communal) bhakti verbal practices of performing poetry, telling stories, and singing songs to God. . .the medium of the critique – that is, the song or tale – was itself the antidote to the false medicine that was the object of the critique. . .Only the name of God – the one true mantra – had any power. Indeed, we have seen how this bhakti 'mantra' was sometimes explicitly contrasted with tantric mantras.

Burchett goes on to conclude that the esoteric and private, specialized knowledge associated with tantric practitioners gave way to the more communally accessible, publicly emotive performative contexts of bhakti in Mughal India, which grew increasingly popular during this era. While vernacular bhakti traditions certainly drew influence from tantric traditions during the medieval period, including esoteric physiology and subtle body practices alluded to in Sant poetry, a persistent tension and ambivalence about the efficacy and intentions of tantric practice also manifested. A parallel ambivalence exists among the Bāul performers I interviewed; while admitting deep influence from bhakti traditions and often equating “Bāuls” with bhaktas, opinions of tantric influence differed and

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210 Ibid., 10.

211 Ibid., 13-14.
were subject to similar critiques of tāntrikas’ obsession with power and abilities (siddhi), which can be selfish and counterproductive.

3.2 Buddhist Heteropraxy

Court sponsorship during the Pālā dynasty (8\textsuperscript{th} – 12\textsuperscript{th} centuries CE) enabled thriving Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist cultures throughout northeast and north India, including what is present-day West Bengal, Bihar, Bangladesh and Nepal. This generous sponsorship established the sociopolitical conditions for the legendary Siddhas or Siddhācāryas to exhibit considerable influence throughout the Pālā Empire. While the Gupta Empire marked the genesis of Hindu and Buddhist tantric systems, the Pālā Era produced a blossoming of syncretic tantric traditions, particularly throughout Bengal and Bihar. The Pālās also sponsored the renowned Nālandā University, where many early Vajrayāna scholar-monks emerged. The legendary Dipaṁkara Śrijñāna (Tib. Atiśa), abbot of Vikramaśila University, profoundly influenced the transmission of the Vajrayāna to Tibet; according to Tibetan sources, he was born in Bengal.\textsuperscript{212}

The new influx of heterodox tantric practitioners developed amid the backdrop of thriving Buddhist orthodoxy and monastic institutions. While the Siddhas may have been monastics themselves, the songs attributed to them are highly critical of monastic formalism, implying a peripheral position relative to the great Buddhist institutions. Ronald Davidson notes, “Buddhist siddhas’ language and literature were inherently destabilizing, for they challenged the ideological bond of Buddhist

\textsuperscript{212} Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, History of ancient Bengal (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj, 1971), 382.
institutions.” Nonetheless, the heterodox Siddhas eventually gained sufficient popularity and notoriety, with esoteric, transgressive tantric content eventually entering the purview of institutions such as Nālandā: “If institutional Buddhist esoterism was sociologically and historically defined by the person of the scepter-carrying monk. . .the siddha represents a new form in Indian Buddhism, one that ultimately came to mark a movement that began on the periphery and eventually worked its way into the heart of Buddhist institutions.”

It is rather difficult to determine whether the famed and semi-legendary Siddhācāryas existed historically, given the varying, contradictory and grandiose hagiographies attributed to them. It is probable that at least some of these individuals existed historically, and they thrived particularly in the regions of Bengal and Assam. The general trajectory of “Sahaja-siddhi,” with its rejection of institutional hierarchy, the Brahmanical elite and external ritualism, profoundly altered the religious landscape of northeast India, and its reverberations continue to echo throughout modern West Bengal and Bangladesh.

The composers of the Caryāpādas, a series of tantric Buddhist songs which orally transmitted esoteric teachings, polemically mocked institutionalized religious traditions, both Buddhist and Brahmanical. The hegemonic control exhibited by priestly and Brahmanical cultures, related to the reliance on Sanskritic scriptures and Vedic authority, was subject to thorough criticism. Buddhist institutions were criticized as being equally degenerate and subject to hypocrisy and corruption.

Given archaeological and historical accounts, early Vajrayāna practitioners engaged extensively with indigenous or “tribal” groups, generalized as “foreigners” or mleccha in early Sanskrit literature; sites of Vajrayāna practice, such as Sirpur and Malhar, have large populations of indigenous (Adivasi)

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214 Ibid.
Areas particularly dense with early Vajrayāna activity are inhabited by an array of indigenous groups, including Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, and Kashmir. The coded language of the Hevajra Tantra is also referred to as “mleccha language” (mleccha-bhāṣā). Various Siddhas also adopted the ethnonym “Śabara” as a prefix in their names (e.g. Śabarapāda), referring to a tribal group that may correspond with the modern Saora; Davidson argues that it is likely that these Siddhas took on such names to reflect a temporary habitation among these populations, which is plausible. In the Caryā songs, the word śabari is mentioned numerous times. Additionally, those of the lowest castes are mentioned frequently: ḍombī, caṇḍālī, and śuṇḍinī. These words often accompany the description of women who were potentially sexual consorts, though commentator Munidatta presents them as purely symbolic, metaphysical referents when they occur in the songs. The outcaste name caṇḍālī is significant, as it becomes the name for “inner/psychic heat” crucial for tantric yoga practices. This process of cultural diffusion and commingling, related to the critique of Brahmanical and institutional hegemonies through the active identification with outcaste and tribal peoples, marks yet another novel sociocultural development in the early medieval tantric synthesis. This engagement illustrates an affirmation of tribal and outcaste people unique in the history of Buddhism.

Following the critique of external ritualism and priestly hierarchies, ultimately, the locus of liberation and sacred powers is in the body itself, not dependent on priestly mediation or even tantric maṇḍala and mantras. Thus the great Buddhist Siddha and yoginī Lakṣmīñkarā boldly claimed in her Advayasiddhi, śloka 16: give pūjā – that is, worship – one's own body. Śloka 14 admonishes not to give

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215 Ibid., 225
217 Davidson, Indian Esoteric Buddhism, 227.
218 See HVT 1.1.32.
pūjā to/worship deities made of stone, clay, or wood: only your body is worthy of pūjā. This radical position and emphasis on embodiment set a transgressive tone that echoed the antinomian position of early Vajrayāna practitioners, and it is a potential point of influence for modern bartamān-panthīs.

3.3 The Goddess Reclaimed

An important development during this confluence of yogic cultures, around the eighth to eleventh centuries, is a series of pronouncedly transgressive goddess-centered Tantras, the Yoginī Tantras. Within this system include the Hevajra, Cakrasaṃvara, and Kālacakra Tantras. The Hevajra Tantra is often quoted by Munidatta in his Sanskrit exegesis of the Caryā songs as a way of contextualizing the esoteric tantric referents, and this Tantra makes continual references to musical performance and “vajra songs,” illustrating a shared cultural milieu among the Buddhist Siddha folk-poets and this tantric cycle, which I discuss in the last section of this chapter. All of these tantras contain rather explicit references to erotic-yogic and transgressive practices and descriptions of wrathful goddesses and yoginīs, connecting with the Śākta orientation developing in nondual Śaiva traditions of the same period, which I discuss below.

Elizabeth English’s study of the fierce tantric goddess Vajrayoginī analyzes the Śākta influence in the development of the Buddhist tantric yoginī cult. English describes the influence of śakti as feminine power within the Buddhist yoginī milieu:

The principle of śakti begins to emerge in these texts [yoginītantras] as a potency manifesting in powerful female deities. It comes to the fore through the figure of

the female consorts and the many types of goddesses, witches, or female spirits – yōginīs and ḍākinīs – who haunt the wilds and live in the cremation grounds. As śakti is increasingly emphasized, texts tend to redefine traditional Mahāyāna soteriology in the language of erotic-yogic techniques and mahāmudrā. . . It is these texts that form the direct basis for the cult of Vajrayoginī. Within the yōginītantras we see a growing preoccupation with the yōginī, or enlightened female deity.220

In the genesis of Śāiva tantric traditions, a pronounced blending with the Śākta “goddess cult” is evident, even making a differentiation between the two difficult at times. While the nondual Śāiva traditions initially focused on male deities, a transition gave way to what are considered “higher” traditions in terms of hierarchical advancement.221 Careful analysis of these transitions, along with intertextual exchanges between Hindu and Buddhist tantras, has been convincingly presented by Alexis Sanderson. These developments, culminating in the Trika and Kālī divisions, center on goddesses, wrathful female deities and yōginīs. Samuel comments on this progression, “(i)n the course of this movement from 'lower' to 'higher' teachings, the role of the female deities also changes, from an entourage surrounding the practitioner to being the primary objects of worship and identification in their own right.”222 Given the doctrinal and praxis-based permeability with the nondual Śāiva schools, a similar influence of goddess worship is also paralleled during the compilation of the Buddhist Yōginītantras. Samuel further notes that these “higher” tantras also introduced the internalization of external ritual praxis via embodiment through internal yogic practices and the mapping of subtle body physiologies.223 Kuṇḍalinī, the coiled goddess serpent, is another important facet of the Śākta orientation, though internalized as a deity living within the human body.

Within the nondual Śāiva sub-tradition known as the mantramārga, a further division entitled

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222 Samuel, The Origins, 255.
223 Ibid.
vidyāpittha developed. Related to the Vidyāpittha are cremation ground practices centered on goddess power, śakti. One of these goddess-centered traditions is the Krama, in which the wrathful goddess Kālī is extolled as a supreme form of śakti. Once depicted as the consort of Bhairava, the horrific, charnel ground-dwelling form of Śiva, Kālī emerges as an autonomous and fierce goddess, trampling the corpse of Śiva.

In Bengal, the devotion to śakti blossomed as deep reverence for the goddess Kālī. Rachel McDermott traces the historical development of court sponsorship by rajas and wealthy Hindu landlords, zamindars, in the eighteenth century, enabling an unprecedented flourishing of Śākta devotion throughout Bengal, as Śākta poets were patronized along with an influx of new temples dedicated to the Goddess. As the nineteenth century commenced, the British Raj capital of Calcutta became increasingly important for British political maneuvering. It was there that the East India Company eventually dissolved rural zamindars' property rights, altering the generous sponsorship of Śākta poets and temples.

Rāmprasād Sen (1718-1775) was the preeminent poet-devotee to emerge from this era, and his work deeply influenced the popularity of Kālī in Bengal. Little is known about his life, other than grandiose and contradictory hagiographies. A tantric sādhaka, numerous poems attributed to him advise to “to bathe at Tribeni,” – which is, rather than a physical location, the convergence of the three subtle body channels (nāḍīs), the susumnā in the center, idā on the left and the pingalā on the right – where Kālī and Śiva also sport within the microcosm of the human body. His poems also refer to sādhanā performed in cremation grounds. There are additional references to wrathful yoginīs and charnel

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224 Further discussion of tantric charnel ground practices is presented in Chapter Five.
225 Alexis Sanderson, "Śaivism and the Tantric traditions,” 668-70.
226 Ibid., 674-5.
228 Ibid., 51.
ground spirits, as well as the futility of sectarian religious boundaries – consistent themes in the poetry and songs of heterodox tantric practitioners. With a deeply inspired, inclusivist tone, equating the Goddess with the absolute Brahman, a poem attributed to him states:

Oh Kālī Full of Brahman! (Kālī Brahmamayī go)

I've searched them all
Vedas, Āgamas, Purāṇas

and found You:
Mahākālī
Krṣṇa
Śiva
Rāma—
they're all You
my Wild-Haired One.
As Śiva, You hold a horn,
Krṣṇa a flute,
Rāma a bow,
and Kālī a sword.
You're the Naked Goddess
with naked Śiva, and the passionate Lord
robbed in yellow.
Sometimes You live on burning grounds,
sometimes at Ayodhya, and also at Gokul.
Your friends are witches and terrifying spirits.
Just as, for the sake of the young archer
You took the form of Jānakī, greatest beauty,
so You do for any boy, Mā:
become a girl.

Prasād says,
Like the smile of a beast with bared teeth
ascertaining the nature of Brahman is impossible.
But the essence of my Goddess is Brahman,
and She lives in all forms.
The Ganges, Gaya, and Kashi
even they are arrayed at Her feet.\textsuperscript{229}

Shrouded in contradictory reports, idealizations and supernatural narratives, Sen was a particularly mysterious figure. Malcolm McLean argues that he was actually not a Vaiśṇava \textit{bhakta} at all, in terms of dualistic devotion for Deva and Devī– rather, he was a thoroughly tantric \textit{bhakta}.\textsuperscript{230} His contemporaries, with the agenda of invigorating the artistic and intellectual Bengali innovations of the nineteenth century, presented him as a \textit{bhakti} poet in an attempt to popularize a new Śākta Caitanya. With his denunciation of pilgrimage, scriptures, and icons, McLean argues that Sen's poetry is functionally closer to the esoteric content of Bāul songs than \textit{bhakti} devotional songs. As Bāul songs often employ Vaiśṇava and Islamic imagery and doctrine as symbolic, esoteric referents – double \textit{entendres} – so did Sen veil esoteric tantric references in the outward “garb” of Śākta imagery and devotion, according to McLean's argument. With the esoteric meanings of his poetry misunderstood or taken out of context, it was a simple step to aggrandize him as the new reformer of Bengali \textit{bhakti}. McLean's claim is plausible: Sen's poems certainly challenge the conception of dualistic devotion or \textit{saguṇa bhakti}, and the veiled content does correspond with esoteric themes recurrent in tantric vernacular poetry.

Sen, along with poet Kamalākānta, composed esoteric poems addressed to Kālī charged with tantric symbolism, revalorizing the status of the great tantric goddess. There is also a class of Kālī devotional songs attributed to him, \textit{rāmprasādī}, still currently sung in Bengal. This illustrates another example of the deep cultural impact resulting from vernacular, heterodox poetry throughout Bengal, which was able to influence an array of social classes and “popular” religious cultures

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\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 76-7.
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more effectively than high-caste, Sanskritic doctrinal transmissions. Regarding the widespread worship of Kālī, thoroughly adopted throughout Bengal, McDermott concludes:

. . .the Bengali commentarial world is correct in heralding Rāmprasād as the greatest poet of the genre. For what his poetry represents is a significant moment in the gradual democratization, popularization, and universalization of the Goddess Kālī. Still colored by her Tantric foundations in terms of both iconographic depiction and associated esoteric religious practice, she is nevertheless worshiped and sung about in language drawn from the vagaries of everyday life.²³¹

Thus Rāmprasād could compose Śākta songs using accessible, quotidian imagery while veiling further esoteric tantric content, similar to the strategies employed in composing the encrypted, multivalent lyrics of Bāul songs. In contemporary Bengal, there are numerous contexts in which devotees become possessed by Kālī Mā, what McDaniel refers to as the Śākta “shamanic strand.” According to her fieldwork in West Bengal, the most common possession she observed is Ben. bhor nāma, in which practitioners, primarily female, are possessed by Kālī; during these “descents” of the goddess, they attend to sick people and offer healings, offer predictions about the future, and give spiritual advice for the benefit of those visiting the sādhikā.²³² These experiences can be quite uncomfortable, with the practitioner screaming and writhing in pain. Another kind of possession involving a merger with the deity, āveśa, will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Śākta themes are also common in contemporary Bāul songs, and practitioners' interpretations carry a plurality of meanings. One semantic layer can refer to saguṇa, a surrender of devotion to the great goddess Kālī, echoing the content of devotional bhakti songs. This is one level of a multitude of

²³¹ McDermott, Mother of my Heart, 285.
possible understandings, as theistic imagery in Bāul songs often veils other esoteric referents, while outwardly appearing to align with Śākta or Vaiṣṇava theology. Another interpretive layer grounds these references in the material aspects of embodiment, specifically in relation to the symbols of sexual praxis. Lorea expands on these heterogeneous meanings thus:

'High' religious terms, such as proper names for gods and goddesses, are employed by Sahajiyā authors in order to refer to 'low' body-centered realities, physiological fluids, sexual substances etc. (thus in the song Pirī karā jāne kayjanā, Śiva is used as a metaphor for semen and in the last song of sādhanā Kālī's sickle is used as a clitoridean symbol). . .we can say that this is also true in the field of Śākta religious groups and literature: Sahajiyā composers adopt Śākta devotional terms and load them with multiple meanings: only one familiar with the doctrine could figure out the difference between a devotional song in honor of Kālī and a Sahajiyā song on yogic practices restricted to initiates.233

This again illustrates the oblique, subversive strategies employed by Sahajiyā and Bāul performers. Tantric-bodily references that may be considered depraved and carnally immoral by audience members are concealed with the outward appearance of other metaphorical meanings, preserving the intended content for initiates who are sufficiently trained to interpret such references in relation to body-centered practices. Thus the use of multi-layered metaphorical references functions as a social survival strategy, and a plurality of meanings can be extracted from the ambiguous nature of these songs, depending on how one chooses to interpret them, “according to the hermeneutic capacity of the listener.”234 This also illustrates how socially transgressive content is guarded for the understanding of initiates alone.

Bengali Śākta-tantra's “shamanic strand” and accompanying possession by goddesses, both wrathfully aggressive and peacefully beneficent, is a connecting thread between Bengali tantric

234 Ibid.
traditions and the spirit mediumship of Nepali mātās; sādhikās, female practitioners, are also spirit mediums for Devī throughout northern India and adjacent Himalayan regions. Āveśa, “pervasion” or complete merger with a deity, is a linking theme between Bengali sādhikās and Nepali mātās. The most common manifestations of Devī to invoke for protection – or be possessed by – among the mātās I interviewed are Kālī- Mā and Durgā. Though Śiva is the supreme deity for most jhākris, Devī is also a primary deuta invoked, often for protection in healing pūjās. The cremation ground practice described by Rāmprasād also connects to the “wrathful Śiva” tantric praxis employed by jhākris, which I discuss further in Chapter Five.

3.4 Ambivalence and Tantra

Tantric practitioners (Skt. Tāntrikas) have long been associated with itinerant sorcerers and healers. In the context of rural low-caste communities, David Gordon White situates possession, exorcism, divination, and healing as “the most pervasive forms of Tantric practice,” and it was in their role as healers “. . .and ground-level problem solvers that popular tantric specialists first established and have continued to maintain their closest ties with every level of South Asian society.”235 Because healers were often perceived as “polluted” due to their close contact with a variety of castes, Kenneth Zysk notes the affinity between heterodox yogis and healers, since the latter found shelter among heterodox renunciate communities. He argues that these wandering healers gradually became “. . .indistinguishable from the ascetics with whom they were in close contact.”236 A commingling of

235 White, Kiss of the Yoginī, 260.
236 Kenneth Zysk, Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery (New York: Oxford
techniques occurred among these communities, with the use of plant and herbal preparations, charged amulets and magical mantras. This relates to my discussion of “folk tantra” practice in Chapter Five, in which jhākris and mātās are similarly situated in low-caste rural communities, having close contact with all castes and genders and applying “tantra-mantra” and herbal and āyurvedic medicines; they are sometimes viewed suspiciously by local villagers as untrustworthy tāntrikas, particularly jhākris, who are rumored to revivify the dead and make pacts with spirits.

White also notes the “lack of center” in modern tantric practice, referring to the dissolution of monarchies that supported the center of tantric maṇḍala as “the galactic polity;” modern practice instead has generally devolved into “little more than black magic:” “On the one hand, the powerful Tantric rites of subjugation, immobilization, annihilation, and so on – the “Six Practices” or “Six Rites of Magic” – have become the sole province of individuals practicing for their own prestige and profit. . . It is in this context that many Hindus in India today deny the relevance of Tantra to their tradition, past or present, and identify what they call “tantra-mantra” as so much mumbo jumbo.237

This is undeniably the case, which I observed during fieldwork. In modern West Bengal, there is a deep ambivalence as to the societal role of tāntrikas. Among the bhadralok or middle-class Bengalis I spoke to regarding tāntrikas, they are typically viewed as shady and untrustworthy, whose motives are unknown and therefore questionable. Part of this suspicion relates to economics, as many so-called “tāntrikas” are viewed as greedy charlatans who capitalize by preying on the gullible. Throughout Kolkata, self-proclaiming tāntrikas rent advertisement space on large billboards, offering various services, including “black magic,” fortune-telling, astrological prediction and divination. Indeed, to

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these bhadralok, the very notion of “tantra” is synonymous with “black magic” and destructive power. However, in certain emergencies, their services are still needed. An older man I know in Kolkata, firmly entrenched in the middle-class gentry, prefaced a story by claiming his adherence to modern scientific reasoning rather than “mere superstition.” He then recounted a story about a nearby apartment where bizarre poltergeist-type phenomena occurred, with the power grid being shut off and on continuously while no one stayed at the apartment; these phenomena recurred so violently and continuously that the tenant refused to live there. One of the live-in maids (āyā) in this apartment complex, who grew up in a village in rural Bengal, instantly recognised what was going on and suggested that a specialist be called in to remove the spirit possession. At this point, the man recounting the story generically referred to a “Muslim tāntrika” who was called in to remove the disturbance in this apartment. After performing various purification pūjās, the poltergeist phenomena subsided soon after. Once the story was concluded, my interlocutor begrudgingly admitted that Western science still has much it cannot explain. This ambivalence was similar among other bhadralok I conversed with, who often denounced tāntrikas as greedy charlatans who are nonetheless helpful in dire circumstances.

This ambivalence continues among the Bāuls I conversed with. While interviewing Tarun das Bāul who was accompanied by a Nāga sādhu, further introduced in Chapter Four, both claimed that tantra focused on “complete control of every part of the body and gaining siddhi” (magical powers) while Bāul sādhanā is much more limited. Others denied any connection to tantra whatsoever, claiming that Bāul praxis is a completely autonomous path, while some admitted the tantric yoga influence in Bāul sādhāna and sexual control. An older sādhaka casually remarked that “tantra, Śakta, Sahajiyā – all lead to the same place.” Sibsundar das Bāul explained to me in a matter-of-fact tone, “Tantra is very
different, it has become commercialized. They just work with dead bodies and black magic.” Basu das Baul noted the connection with tantra insofar as the “reverse” way. Ben. urdha redha, is a central practice: “Same destination, but the way is different. Täntrikas have more power; they can eat and absorb anything. Both [täntrikas and Bauls] use the reverse path (urdha redha).”

3.5 “You Are Helpless and Hopeless:” Sahaja and Divine Madness

Khyāpā Baba, known also as Satpurānanda, self-designates as an avadhūta outside of sectarian boundaries, though this term is often associated with Nāth yogis. While I situate the convoluted historical interactions among heterodox practitioners in the early medieval period, arguing for a morphological connection among yogic cultures rather than a genealogical continuity, Khyāpā Baba argues for a historical continuity between Indic Vajrayāna and modern Bauls; the former were forced to “camouflage” themselves as Muslims after the Mughal invasion.

Born in West Bengal, Khyāpā Baba was initiated at an early age into śmaśāna sādhanā, cremation ground meditation practice at Tārāpīṭh, Birbhum district. He was also initiated by Sufi fakirs and Baul sādhakas, and he is now an initiator of Baul sādhakas throughout West Bengal. Khyāpā Baba additionally trained under Vajrayāna lamas in Gangtok, Sikkim. Because of this varied background he is in a unique position as a spiritual teacher, and his fluency in Sanskrit, Apabhraṃśa, Tibetan, and English enables his strong acquaintance with primary tantric texts and secondary literature related thereto.

I met Baba multiple times at the homes of disciples in Santiniketan and nearby villages. The visits at his disciples' homes were lively meetings, as disciples and various onlookers came and went,

238 Sibsundar das Baul, personal interview, Santiniketan, 1 March 2016.
intrigued to hear him speak. He is truly *khyāpā* – mad – and often riotously laughs, yells, and exclaims enthusiastically. Baba particularly enjoyed comparing tantric theories and praxis with modern biomedical theory, and he insisted that both Hindu and Buddhist tāntrikas focused on the merging of polarities partly because of a direct physiological correspondence: “when the two parietal lobes are equated, analysis is equated to experience and vice versa; wisdom is equated with compassion.”

During our conversations he would sometimes pause to laugh at himself thoroughly. We spent long hours conversing over multiple cups of tea and coffee, as disciples and friends came and went. Sharing this time with him was certainly an edifying and unusual experience!

He dresses only in blue, symbolic of the fifth element *akaśa*, which he calls the element of illusion, Skt. *māyā*: “Ma” means negation in Sanskrit. Next word is “ya” - this means *Prakṛti*, changefulness. Šūnya/void has become ya. One Bāul song says: those who see *māyā* as illusory, run away from the world. But some see this illusion as the great truth: Mahāmāyā, the ultimate paradox. One marches into it – the ya has dropped out and only Ma remains. “The connotation of *sahaja* as “easiness,” discussed below, means that one need not escape or hide from any worldly experience; *māyā* is simultaneously truth and sheer illusion. One directly “marches into” the suffering and changing appearances of the world, rather than running away.

While discussing the complex historical influences of the Bāuls, Khyāpā Baba argued for the direct connection with late medieval Vajrayāna, whose adepts were forced to “camouflage” themselves, chameleon-like, following the Muslim invasion of India in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries and its subsequent suppression of Buddha-dharma. They camouflaged themselves with various sectarian masks, including Vaiṣṇava and Sufi, among others:

*These 84 Siddhas are the renewal of the Śaivite system [Nāth], renewal of the Śākta Kaula system, renewal of Buddhism in the Vajrayāna. They are three styles of the same*
practice. When these crazy wisdom people [Siddhas] emerged, they said 'we will not fight publicly as Buddhists; they instead camouflaged themselves as Śaiva, Śākta, and Vaiṣṇava. From there came very important literatures. In the Vaiṣṇava track, love was worshiped as the essence. Caitayna was made to become its carrier. He camouflaged himself as a Hindu. The Vaiṣṇavas after Caitanya “married” the Buddhist Sahajiyās.

The Vajrayāna completes in Bāul. Maithuna [sexual union] is attaining the amoghasiddhi state.239 This state is not institutionalized, but the research is carrying on. That carrying on of research: one pure form, now dying, is the Bāul.

No need of a deity, no need of rituals, no need of chanting mantra. See your own mind – which is Dzogchen. Dzogchen is the ultimate faculty of Vajrayāna, what in Indian terms is Sahaja.

When your thirstiness has dropped out – that is compassion, that is love. When your emotions are dropped out because you are too tired – you are helpless and hopeless – then finally you are avadhūta. You are endless effulgence.

Caitanya (fifteenth century CE), considered an avatāra of Kṛṣṇa, powerfully influenced the religious atmosphere of Bengal, renewing Vaiṣṇavism with a strong emphasis on integrating the emotional fervor of bhakti and pure, divine love, prema, for Kṛṣṇa. The fixation on bhakti and prema is a strong current among Bāuls and practitioners. Bhakti as an overwhelming current of emotional fervor and devotion is expressed in the performative context as the ecstatic singing and dancing that Bāuls are particularly renowned for. Deeply affective outpouring is a key element in expressing divine prema and conveying the esoteric teachings of Bāul dehatattva, the theory of embodiment. Bāul song lyrics convey the bliss of union and freedom, while also expressing sorrowful yearning and pain.

Davidson notes that the medieval Siddhas employed “. . .versification most closely allied with folk theater, wandering poets and images of the countryside. . .” as wandering storytellers.240 Among Bāuls the use of first-person folk poetry continues, along with the influence of ecstatic bhakti in public.

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239 Amoghasiddhi is one of the five wisdom Buddhas or Tathāgatas, pañcatathāgata, in Vajrayāna.
240 Davidson, Indian Esoteric Buddhism, 237.
performances that often last the entire night through the early morning.

The essence of Caitanya's teachings are conveyed in the _dasa mula_, the ten roots, which have been interpreted in many ways, including esoteric applications by _bartamān-panthīs_. His teachings were received widely among numerous castes throughout Bengal, gaining him an incredible reputation. Khyāpā Baba's claim about Caitanya symbolically “marrying” the “Buddhist Sahajiyās” refers to the hidden tantric influence veiled in Caitanya's renaissance, potentially connecting to the late medieval “camouflaging” of the Siddhas.

Edward Dimock discusses this connection in relation to Caitanya's contemporary disciples, known as the Gosvāmins, “(t)he works of the great and irreproachable pillars of Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy, the Gosvāmins of Vṛndāvana, are full of allusions to and quotations from the tantras and Āgamas.”

He continues this argument by claiming that the Sahajiyās drew influence from the Gosvāmins' hidden teachings, those who “. . .taught in a secret and esoteric fashion the way of sahaja. . .the 'deep and hidden meaning of the līlā of Caitanya.”

This is a compelling argument, one that traces the seamless integration of numerous traditions, meeting at a confluence of rivers as the multifaceted Sahajiyā tantric-bhakti synthesis. The ambiguity and polysemic nature of _sahaja_ enables the term to be interpreted and applied in a vast array of praxis contexts, even adding to the Vaiṣṇava notion of divine _līlā_, as quoted above.

The emphasis on “supreme love,” _prema_, is particularly stressed among the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, and during field interviews, numerous Bāuls expressed that the major innovation among the Sahajiyās which distinguishes them from their tantric forebears is the emphasis on _bhakti_ and _prem_. As Khyāpā Baba notes, “love was worshiped as essence,” _prema_ being the ultimate, sublimest essence. The state of

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242 Ibid., 83
madness, of divine inspiration, is directly connected to the cultivation of prema. Both Bengali Śāktas
and Vaiṣṇavas refer to the culmination of divine madness as divyonmāda. June McDaniel explores this
notion of divine madness among Bengali ecstatic traditions; according to the great Āyurvedic text
Caraka Saṁhitā, “ordinary” madness, unmāda occurs when the doṣas are impure and their flow is
obstructed – “madness is basically an obstruction or blockage of proper flowing in the body.”

The divine madness of the Vaiṣṇava, however, is an overflowing of bhāva (Ben. bhāb) – an “ecstatic mood”
which overflows the body: “bhāva is a liquid that enters the heart and condenses into spiritual love
(prema).” Among Śāktas, divyonmāda accompanies an embodiment of Devī: “in the state of divine
madness (divyonmāda), love in union, the deity is achieved, and the worshiper is always with the
goddess, or has access to her.” This notion is further explained by Bengali Śāktas interviewed by
McDaniel:

The one who is mad for the goddess [divyonmāda] has only the awareness of the
goddess and no sense of body. He talks to deities and gestures to them; he gets along
well with animals, and he will play with snakes and they will not bite him. He
dedicates his food, and everything else, to Bhagavān. However, an ordinary madman
[pāgal] is without sense, he is ‘crack-minded,’ his brain has failed.

This almost oblivious state of ecstatic madness is also prized among Bāuls, who develop
varying “moods” or bhāvas in the cultivation of divine madness. Bāul singers often adopt the Bengali
surname of khyāpā, one who is mad.

243 McDaniel The Madness of the Saints, 77
244 Ibid.
246 Ibid., 146.
3.6 Singing Sahaja: Sahajayāna, Caryāgīti and Newari Cacā Songs

The encrypted language applied in the Caryāgīti, sandhyā bhāṣa (also spelled sandhā bhāṣā), translated as “twilight language” or “intentional language,” shows remarkable affinities between these medieval tantric songs and the imagery, symbols, and yogic references in modern Bāul songs. H.P. Śastri translated sandhyā bhāṣa as “twilight language,” language which is partially concealed. Paradoxical language reflects the paradoxical nature of mystical training. Attempts to describe mystical processes or experiences that defy conceptual representation via linguistic expression inevitably reach an impasse; experiences that are particularly subtle or powerful tend to be inexpressible – ineffable. One solution to this problem is simply to remain silent. However, another approach is to use poetic and oblique, paradoxical language to express that which defies conceptuality and the ability to express a given experience linguistically. Such poetic expressions shift the syntactic structures of language itself. From the perspective of non-dual Buddhist tantra, such poetic language may help to break down the rigid boundaries of dualistic thinking mired in conceptuality. Realizations may be inexpressible, but they can be hinted at and concealed in the guise of language. As tantric practices are secretive and orally transmitted, encrypted language also serves to veil the actual content from non-initiates.

As certain sections of tantric texts can be read as experiential manuals for sādhana rather than as philosophical śāstras, so can one layer of the Caryāgīti be interpreted as a technical manual to explain complex erotic-yogic processes – processes which must be carefully guided by a competent guru. These songs also depict everyday life experienced by the poets throughout medieval northeast India, including many references to deltas and riverine geography, and descriptions of the quotidian behavior of lower castes such as fishermen, boatmen, hunters and the ḍombī caste; such references may be interpreted literally, though they are interpreted figuratively in Munidatta’s commentary, and they may operate on both semantical levels. The frequent references to ḍombī women of the lowest caste,
for example, is a symbolic referent for the purified central channel avadhūti, which inverts expected social norms of what is “high” or “low.” These pādas continually critique caste hierarchy and Brahmanical authority, and indeed, whether or not the Siddhas were of low caste origin, the everyday activity described in these songs is focused on the social contexts of low caste communities. To this day, tāntrikas who practice charnel-ground or śmaśān sādhanā throughout Bengal are often accompanied by ḍombī- caste assistants, who prepare human skulls and other human body parts for sādhakas.

Both the Caryāgīti and Munidatta’s Sanskrit commentary are included in the Tibetan bsTan 'gyur, one major collection of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. While one could focus on these works and extrapolate meanings solely as a textual analysis, this decontextualizes the function of these songs, which is performative and thus directed toward a specific audience for specific reasons. Conveying complex ideas in musical form establishes a unique sonic structure that differs from didactic treatises.

An important tantric text for this milieu is the Hevajra Tantra, included in the so-called Highest Yoga Tantra or anuttarayogatantra class of texts, often quoted by Munidatta in his commentary. Chapter 6.10 of Part I reads, “If songs are sung from joy then let the supreme songs regarding the Vajra be sung. When joy arises, if the yogi dances for the sake of liberation, then let him dance the Vajra postures with full attention.” This illustrates the importance of “vajra songs,” sung with the proper intention of generating bliss (ānanda) and dancing the Vajra postures, which ostensibly refers to embodying the tantric deity Hevajra. Dancing “for the sake of liberation” (mokṣahetunā) invokes the proper orientation, which is ecstatic and liberative, rather than music for aesthetic pleasure alone. The next section, 6.11, interestingly analogizes means or upāya with a ḍamaru, the hand-drum associated

247 Yadi gītaṃ gīyata ānandāt tarhi vajrānvitāṃ param/ yady ānande samutpanne nṛyate mokṣahetunā//
tarhi vajrapade nātyaṃ kuryād yogī samāhiṭaḥ

with Śiva, used by yogis throughout South Asia. 6.13 is even more emphatic about the role of singing and dancing: the yogi must always (sāda sāda) sing and dance, as songs are mantra, and dancing is meditation (bhāvanā). This section of the HVT is apparently setting up the ritual, meditative context for the Caryā dance, also hinted at in the Caryāgīti.

The antinomian attitude of the Siddhācāryas, openly referring to transgressive sexual practices and mocking the elitism and formalism of religious institutions, was primarily conveyed in non-Sanskrit vernacular poetry and songs that could appeal to a wider audience lacking formal education. Again, who the Siddhācāryas “actually were” is impossible to determine, and indeed there may have been multiple adept-poets with the same name, or legends attributed to individuals who did not historically exist. As tāntrikas, they were not constrained by the morality or scholastic lifestyles of Buddhist monastics, and the polemical aspects of the pādas satirize Indic religious institutions unflinchingly. These songs chide the listener towards spontaneity, the uninhibited lifestyle and liberation of sahaja, and freedom from institutional restrictions. This performative context, anti-formalism, use of vernacular and obscure, encrypted language continues in modern Bāul song performance.

The invented scholarly category of “Sahajayāna” as a separate vehicle or yāna was particularly reified by twentieth century Indian scholars such as Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta and Benoytosh Bhattacharya, along with the so-called “Buddhist Sahajiyās;” there appears to be no historical evidence that shows the usage of this term during the early medieval period. Nonetheless, the term is still applied by modern practitioners and scholars to refer to those Siddhas who fixated on the notion of Sahaja. A Tibetan PhD student I met during fieldwork used the term as a meaningful referent, “If you

248 Ibid., 65.
249 See Ronald Davidson, Indian Esoteric Buddhism.
want to understand Sahajayāna, you must go to Varanasi and stay with the sādhus near the ghats. Only then will you understand the original Sahajayāna.”

Interestingly, the term persists among the Newar Buddhists of Kathmandu, Nepal. David Gellner interviewed a Newar Vajrācārya who commented on Sahajayāna as a subset of the Vajrayāna, “The second [type of Vajrayāna] is twofold. . .this is what is known as Tantryāna or Sahajayāna, in which a couple (strīpuruṣ) eat from the same plate. It is called Sahajayāna because they are united (‘saṃjog juye’) and eat each other's polluted food. The practice of Sahaja is Tantric Initiation.”

Here the meaning of “united” apparently refers to dual initiation or dīkṣā which is undertaken by both husband and wife as a couple. It may also be a veiled reference to the couples’ sexual tantric practice. Gellner further describes a Newari tantric consecration (jñānābhiṣek) undertaken by numerous married couples. This consecration is explained as being Sahajayāna, “a couple being together; this is the dharma of householders. Then they all eat, the couples eating a shared meal (sahabhojan) off one plate.”

Another intriguing aspect of the Newari continuation of “Sahajayāna” is reflected in a tantric musical system, which includes singing and dancing, entitled cacā in Nepali. This ostensibly derives from the Caryā-gītī; a manuscript of the Caryā songs is preserved in the Kathmandu National Archive. Richard Widdess argues that refugees fleeing from India brought the songs to Nepal around the 13th or 14th centuries. Widdess describes an incognito form of Buddhist Tantra that survived after fading from prominence in early medieval India:

251 Ibid., 277.
The influence of Buddhist Tantrism and of its Vaiṣṇava counterpart the saha-jyā tradition remained strong in Bengal, and may thence have affected the bhakti traditions of Mathurā and Vrindāvan, and the poetry of the Bauls of Bengal. The Bauls, a sect of heterodox itinerant mystics, appear to resemble in several aspects the Tantric yogīs or siddhas to whom the early caryā songs are attributed. They, too, sing, play and dance vernacular songs at religious fairs and festivals and at their own gatherings.  

Widdess aligns the Bāuls with what he terms “phase I,” which is the early medieval era of thriving Indian Buddhism, during which the caryā songs were composed; Bāul singers parallel the wandering folk-poet Siddhas who composed and performed these songs. Though the cacā songs share a historical continuity with the caryā, these songs are a uniquely Newari secretive tantric practice. Newar Buddhism is highly institutionalized and hierarchical, while the Bāuls and Siddhas strongly criticized religious hierarchy and institutions. Regarding social status, “(w)here Bauls draw converts from the lowest echelons of society, Vajrācāryas are the Buddhist equivalent of Hindu Brahmins. . .This apparent transformation in the context and musical style of caryā presumably reflects the transformation of Buddhist society from an ancient egalitarian, mercantile social class into a quasi-Brahminical caste hierarchy.” Over the centuries, the Vajrācārya composers of cacā songs transformed the ritual context and content of their songs to be a unique performative culture in itself.

The original caryā songs were disseminated among north Indian villagers in commonly known vernaculars, while the cacā are sung in Sanskrit or Newari and reserved for the learned elite. Regarding this process of historical transformation, he concludes, “. . .the historical evidence for caryā, and the tenor of Tantrism, indicate a process of transforming vernacular culture into classical, popular into elite, antinomian into normative, rather than the reverse: a process of Sanskritization rather than parochialisation.” One example of this already occurred by the 13th century in Munidatta's

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253 Ibid., 12
254 Ibid.
255 Ibid., fn 12.
Sanskrit commentary of the *Caryā-gūti*. His commentary reflects a learned, scholastic interpretation of the songs, and the highly ambiguous and paradoxical language of the *caryā* songs are interpreted within a coherent Buddhist framework that may or may not have been intended by the composers. Erotic references are interpreted figuratively rather than as literal sexo-yogic practices. Widdess relatedly mentions the example of Rabindranath Tagore's idealizing and popularization of Bāul songs for the educated urban Bengali elite in the 20th century.

This cursory analysis of music in relation to tantric revelation illustrates the use of quotidian imagery employed by Vajrayāna Siddhas and later by Bāul singers, which refers to tantric subtle body physiology and erotico-yogic techniques. The use of concealed languages, shared among heterodox yogic cultures in the early medieval period, often refers to lotuses as subtle body centers, lunar and solar terms referring to bodily channels, *nādiś*, and the “inward” Triveni symbolizing a juncture existing within the subtle body rather than an external pilgrimage site. The Siddhas’ vernacular songs continually stress direct experiential knowledge rather than pedantic, intellectual speculation, which is also a central theme in the Bāul notion of *bartamān*. This shared use of polysemic referents connects to the overall trajectory of this chapter, which was to situate the morphological cultural similarities among north Indian heterodox yogic practitioners in the early medieval period. Much of the cultural exchange occurred *via* the performative mediums of song and dance, wherein wandering folk-poets engaged dialectically in the performance of vernacular poem-songs. This performative context is key, as esoteric schemata and realizations were expressed aesthetically and orally as *song*, rather than in written didactic treatises. *Sahaja* was a key esoteric referent during this milieu, and the so-called Sahajayāna continues in institutional form among the Newaris in the performance of *cacā* songs, though the content seems quite distinct from that of the original *Caryā* songs.
The next chapter presents ethnographic fieldwork with Bāul performers in West Bengal, India. My analysis continues to focus on theories of embodiment and applied systems of bodily praxis.
Chapter Four: Ethnography: Bāuls and Bodily Praxis in Rural West Bengal

4.1 Situating Fieldwork

Bāul singers I met during fieldwork celebrated their idiosyncrasies and unique individual perspectives, and rarely did performers agree upon key terminologies or what specific lyrical passages mean. While general aspects about dehatattva and the unique orientation of bartamān-panthīs might be agreed upon, interpretations about the meaning of cryptic song lyrics varied widely. Indeed, Bāuls often enjoyed humorously contradicting themselves during the course of a conversation!

Among the older Bāul singers I interviewed, who ranged in age from sixty to eighty years old, a common agreement is that there are fewer and fewer “real” Bāuls left in West Bengal, as many have degenerated into mere artists, śilpi who perform music but neglect the rigorous training in sādhanā. These elder practitioners consistently bemoaned the current, younger generation of “Bāuls,” who learn lyrics second-hand from books and ignore the necessity of the guru-saṅga relationship, which is considered essential for the transmission of Bāul sādhanā. These younger “commercial Bāuls” are criticized as practicing improper bhakti insofar as they are oriented towards financial gain and social prestige. The late Tarak das Bāul described it thus during the Jayadev Melā, “They are weeds growing near the main crop. They look similar but it eats away and kills the main crop. Discomforts and sacrifices are necessary. Dehatattva is the main thing, not music. People can't even chant Hare once a day. Most Bāuls are just stage performers; their minds aren't fit.” Further interviews with Tarak are presented in 4.7.

The necessity of complete devotion to one's guru was emphasized many times. Most Bāuls have multiple gurus, including dīkśā and śikśā gurus; the latter teaches the secret meanings of Bāul songs and how to apply sādhanā properly. Learning the hidden meanings of Bāul songs is especially crucial, as these songs form a pragmatic and philosophical platform from which Bāul esoteric praxis is
derived, and Bāul singers preferred to discuss ideas by spontaneously singing a wide array of Bāul songs during conversations. Teachings are orally transmitted, with essential aspects of sādhanā conveyed secretly from guru to student; singers I conversed with continually derided śāstras and scriptures generally, including the Vedas and the Qu'ran, as only serving to cause more division and spiritual confusion. Orthodox Hindus are often referred to as baidik, “Vedic,” and they are criticized as wandering astray through life by focusing on scriptures and institutions rather than direct experience.

I quickly realized that approaching this fieldwork would not be a streamlined, systematic and linear process. I often set up initial meetings with Bāul singers who would disappear for days without explanation, making it very difficult to determine their whereabouts. I was referred by various people to a renowned sādhaka who roamed around West Bengal from āśram to āśram; he carried no mobile phone and was too elusive to track down. Numerous times, Bāuls did not agree to interviews initially, and instead insisted that I spend quality time with them and their families. Sharing this quotidian time and lowering formal pretensions by eating dāl and rice and drinking tea with singers’ families certainly shed unique insight into the daily village life of these singers. Throughout the day, Bāul songs would be performed continually, well into the late night and early morning, which had quite a delightful and entrancing effect. I was often asked about my personal background and family, and I was happy to discuss the spiritual training connected to my indigenous heritage, which includes singing and dancing as primary spiritual practices. One interlocutor responded that this is because bhakti is the one human religion.

The bhadralok or middle and upper-class gentry, primarily of metropolitan Kolkata, engage in an integral and ongoing dialogue with lower caste village-based Bāuls throughout rural Bengal. Indeed, many homes in Santiniketan are owned by Kolkata bhadralok who leave the city to stay in their rural homes for weekends or holidays. During my fieldwork in the Birbhum district, I learned of many
small gatherings sponsored by wealthy Kolkata patrons who organized multi-day, all-night Bāul performances in their Santiniketan homes.

Following the profound influence of Tagore, among the Kolkata-based bhadralok, perceptions regarding Bāul spiritual practice are ever contradictory: on one level, the preservation of esoteric sādhanā is essential, and practitioners, sādhakas, are often viewed as the essence of Bāul authenticity. On another level, the tantric and sexual aspects are either begrudgingly accepted or rejected as distasteful and abhorrent. I befriended the owner of a small house where I sometimes stayed on the outskirts of Santiniketan near the adjacent town of Prantik. Born into an affluent family, he owned multiple properties in both Kolkata and Santiniketan, and he was therefore quite familiar with Bāul music. While walking through an outdoor bājār in the fresh air of Kolkata following Spring rainfall, we discussed public perceptions of Bāuls: “I am disgusted with the sexual references in their songs. I don't understand them all, but I've been taught what a few of them mean. It is inappropriate – I don't know why they need to say this for everyone to hear, including young women in the audience.” I knew he enjoyed listening to modern American hip hop music, which often has violent and explicitly sexual content. I asked him – why is it acceptable in that kind of music, but not in Bāul lyrics? “I know it seems hypocritical,” he responded, “but I have no problem listening to that in hip hop. But Bāuls are Bengali and they know better than to sing about these topics in public – people shouldn't be hearing it.” This illustrates a common expectation and critique voiced by middle and upper-class Kolkata residents I spoke to. The influence of the sterilized “Tagorean Bāul” is a significant aspect of this discourse.

This depiction of being “free as the wind” and removed from traditional ties is deeply ingrained in bhadralok perceptions of the ideal “Bāul.” I spoke to various middle-class Bengalis in Kolkata about Bāuls, including those employed in civil service, academia, insurance firms and the medical field. Almost everyone I conversed with was familiar with Bāuls – if nothing else, seeing Bāul
performers beg on the train is a common occurrence – and these interlocutors generally had strong opinions about them. Again and again, I was told that Bāuls should be unaffected by all circumstances, “oblivious to being impoverished or not; they roam around if the weather is sunny or raining, scorching hot or freezing.” They should be ascetic (sannyās) wanderers, saintlike, and totally detached from social and caste conditions surrounding them. It is difficult to ascertain to what degree this stereotypical view was influenced by Tagore, but it solidified as a common perspective among affluent Bengalis. Many bhadralok bemoan the bygone golden days of the “real” Bāuls, who are quickly vanishing with the economic pressures of modern industrialized capitalism.

Bāul singers are predominantly based in low-caste communities, similar to many Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, which is a possible sociocultural connecting thread with medieval heterodox Bengali Buddhist practitioners. In a statistical survey conducted by Manas Ray, 83% of Bāul minstrels in the Birbhum district are “ex-untouchable.”256 There is a new categorization of rural folk singers as “other backward classes.”257

Throughout West Bengal, there is a consistent tension between Gauḍiyā Vaiṣṇavas, who often have the status of high caste Hindus, and low-caste Bāuls and Sahajiyās. The latter groups, known to apply esoteric tantric practices, are sometimes scorned by Gauḍiyā Vaiṣṇavas as using impure methods.258 This tension is reflected in the ambivalent attitudes of bhadralok discussions regarding Bāuls, who are extolled as representing “true” Bengali culture and also viewed as being “rustic” and employing scandalous methods.

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Picture 1: An ever-present sight in Kolkata: a mūrti, streetside altar, dedicated to Kālī Mā
I based my research both in Kolkata and the rural Birbhum district, where Santiniketan is the most populated and well-known city. While initially residing in the Santiniketan area of the Birbhum District, I attended numerous melās throughout the area where Bāul singers performed throughout the night with seemingly endless energy and fervor. During this process I met Gautam. Gautam studied Bengali literature and lived in the Birbhum District for years, slowly becoming acquainted with Bāul musical culture. He grew up in a village near Santiniketan where he often saw wandering Bāul performers. Gautam expressed an ambivalent attitude about Bāuls: he viewed them as important contributors to Bengali music and literature, but he also perceived local performers as generally disingenuous. His perspective was one of mixed aversion and cautious interest. Over time he’d grown increasingly skeptical and questioned the intentions of the majority of nearby Bāul singers. His knowledge of the byways connecting the villages scattered around Santiniketan was impeccable. He agreed to be my research assistant after sharing countless cups of tea and conversation over meals. Gautam helped with networking and navigating my way through the thoroughfares and villages of the Birbhum district. Starting from my base in Santiniketan, I visited nearby rural villages in a radius of about forty kilometers away from the Bolpur Police Station. Though the summer months in Santiniketan are particularly scorching due to the arid climate and iron-rich red soils of the Birbhum area, it is flanked by verdant forests of evergreen chhatim trees. The Kopai River flows through the edge of town, and Bāul singers often perform on the riverbanks at dusk, their songs alluding to the
deltas and waterways of the riverine Bengali countryside. As the sun sets on the gently flowing waters, it is as though the melodies are drifting by on the gentle currents of the evening breeze. These conditions establish a fairly tranquil environment, and compared to the constant, cacophonous noise and dense population of the nearest metropolis, Kolkata, it is indeed *santi*, a place of repose and serenity.

I gradually expanded my network of friends and associates who were interested in Bengali music and Bāul culture. Among these friends and locals in the Santiniketan-Bolpur area, I learned of singers and practitioners, *sādhakas*, disbursed throughout the Birbhum area. This was always accompanied by gossip, as locals discussed which singer was lecherous and untrustworthy, which “Bāul” was putting on an act simply to attract Western visitors for profit, who the best singers and
performers are – that is, who sings from the stomach rather than only from the throat and chest – and so on.

My status as a Western researcher – and thus, someone who is affluent relative to rural Bengali villagers – certainly affected my positionality within this fieldwork. Having learned I was in the area, a few well-established singers near Santiniketan asked for up to ₹2,000 for a meeting, assuming I was a Western spiritual seeker. Indeed, the popularization of “Bāuls” in the Birbhum District due to Tagore’s efforts and the annual *Pouṣ Melā* in Santiniketan have contributed to a thriving Bāul “spiritual market” in the area. Given the international success of renowned singers such as Purna das Bāul and Pavarthi das Bāul, there is certainly a growing interest among Bāul singers to achieve a level of monetary success so as to leave an impoverished life. Some of the more established Bāul performers in the Birbhum district tour various countries in Europe and North America and garner considerable popularity. The increase in commercial appeal and demand inevitably leads to the commodification of Bāul musical cultures. This only further invoked resentment and suspicion from locals who consider such activity to be contrary to the simplicity of the “real” Bāul lifestyle. This ongoing economic pressure causes a considerable amount of controversy and an obsession surrounding identity politics – do “real” Bāuls accept large amounts of money and tour other countries to attract fame and wealth? Gautam, who sometimes grew cynical about such commodifications, wryly remarked over tea, “These new ‘Bāuls’ can get easy money without working much – they don’t need to do menial labor now. They manipulate the spiritual hunger of Westerners. They can’t ignore materialist temptations and quick money.”

Bāul singers I interviewed were typically householders, though they insisted on a kind of “middle path” between the expectations of living as a householder and the life-denying renunciation of sannyās. An important distinction was repeatedly emphasized among the Bāuls I interviewed: that
between brahmacarya Bāuls who prevent seminal emission and sansāric or “worldly” Bāuls who do not retain semen. One singer even insisted that sahaja simply means “keeping Brahma” (semen). This dichotomy was also referred to as the gulf between sādhakas and “artist” (Ben. śilpi) Bāuls.

Many Bāul singers in this region earn income from performances as well as from disciples who offer donations, and some do earn a considerable income, which is not without controversy. Those who live in rural Bengali villages often subsist from growing vegetable and rice crops. Identity politics again relate to this economic tension – how appropriate is it for a “real” Bāul to gain a considerable income and be publicly established – is this not contradicting the simplicity and spontaneity of the Bāul lifestyle?

Sādhakas I interviewed insist that one can be a householder while still retaining sexual essence or birya; however, householders who continually procreate and do not reserve their sexual essences only achieve death, rather than continuance of life via procreation. Bearing children is acceptable if retention of the sexual essences is practiced after children are born. Kristin Hanssen describes the ritual ingestion of menstrual blood practiced among some Bāuls in West Bengal. This practice, along with esoteric four moons practice discussed in Chapter Three, recalls the ingestion of bodily fluids secreted in ritual sexual intercourse by the guru and his consort to ingest the “clan” (kula) essence among early medieval tantric Śaiva ascetics, as well as the offering of sexual and “impure” bodily substances given to wrathful yoginīs in the yoginī cult milieu shared by tantric Śaivites and Buddhists.259

In relation to the preservation of bodily fluids as seed, bij. Hanssen’s research participant, Tara, critiqued the effects of bearing too many children: “The more children people conceive, the less love remains in their bodies, and as a result, they grow unhealthy.” Thus, in Tara’s view, only holy men and women have gained the proper knowledge which enables them to regulate their sacred seed within their

259 Sanderson, "Śaivism and the Tantric traditions,” 671; White, Kiss of the Yoginī.
bodies.”

This critical attitude towards excessive procreation and lack of sexual control was shared among both Bāul singers and non-initiates in my field site, to the degree that many non-Bāuls insisted that “true” Bāuls ideally should not procreate, as a marker of practicing sādhanā.

According to practitioners I interviewed, explicitly described in 4.4 and 4.5, those who work with sādhanā properly never die. In this context, “never dying” refers to extending bodily longevity as well as to traversing beyond the mundane constraints and vicissitudes of living in sansāra, the cycle of inevitable life, death and rebirth. This perspective is particularly tied to tantric traditions that insist above all on the raising or sublimation of sexual energies as a means towards mokṣa, in contrast to losing sexual essences for the sake of pleasure or procreation.

After meeting a few of these singers and discussing aspects of sādhanā and sociopolitical issues unique to rural West Bengal, I was invited to spend more time simply sharing meals and meeting singers’ extended families. I also spent many hours at Bāul ākharās, communal spaces enclosed inside hay-thatched huts where Bāuls and various onlookers gathered. Inside the ākharā was often a persistent haze of smoke, as singers incessantly smoked charas (hashish) or gānjā while frenziedly talking and spontaneously singing as locals and family members came and went throughout the night. Gautam skeptically commented that locals came by only for free gānjā, not because they cared about Bāul music or spirituality. These ākharā conversations were particularly lively and far from cut-and-dry interviews, as Bāul singers preferred to explain dehatattva and philosophical principles through poetry recitation and singing Bāul songs, stopping after a few verses to explain the cryptic meanings therein.

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Picture 3: Bāul terracotta relief, Santiniketan
4.2 Tensions and Identity Politics

Commodification of Baul musical cultures, particularly in the “Tagorean Baul” capital of West Bengal, Santiniketan, inevitably results from the popularization of Baul music throughout Bengal and also outside of India, as Baul performers tour as musical troupes throughout Europe and North America. One example of this commodification is present in the famous Pouṣ Melā in Santiniketan, originally organized by the Tagore family, occurring during the month of Pouṣ (December – January). Once famous as a musical festival and meeting place for Baul performers, it now has the atmosphere of a large, commercial outdoor market or bājār. I attended this melā in 2016. The small streets and thoroughfares of Santiniketan, usually bearing a modest amount of foot and vehicle traffic, become completely flooded with a melee of cars – far too many for this small town to accommodate – electronic rickshaws, bicycles, pedestrians, large vehicles such as SUV’s full of tourists. An enormous amount of fumes, dirt, dust and air pollution bellow out – seemingly twenty four hours a day – from the central area of the Melā, where the traffic is maximal. Enormous amounts of tourists come for the open bazaar atmosphere, buying purses, leather handcrafts, clothes, wooden carvings of Tagore and Baul singers, and an unending array of various kitschy items. Teenagers and children busied themselves with the ferris wheel and other amusement park attractions.

Music is certainly not the focus. Tucked away in the periphery of the labyrinthine bazaar are two relatively small tents, with stages dedicated to musical performances. Only a minute fraction of the Melā attendees are interested enough to wander out to these tents, while the majority busy themselves with shopping and wandering through the markets. Few of the attendees seemed even remotely interested in the performances occurring in the back of the Melā grounds. Throughout the day, various Baul performers wander in and out of their separate lodging area in the Melā grounds, comprised of a set of communal tents. They mostly stay in their lodging area, housed in a perpetual haze of gānjā
smoke. Bāul performances begin in the evening and continue well into the night and early morning, hours after the majority of those attending the melā left. The Pouş Melā's atmosphere is blatantly that of a commercial fair, where entertainment and the purchasing of handcrafts and clothing are primary and music is tangential and secondary.

The response to Bāul cultural commodification, which includes increasing international commercial appeal, an integration of modern, electronic musical instruments, and ambivalent attitudes regarding the application of sādhanā, are varied among different social groups. Musicologist Benjamin Krakauer’s ethnographic findings accord with my own: middle and upper-class Bengalis, generalized as “affluent Bengalis” by Krakauer, insist on preserving “pure” Bāul musical and spiritual cultures, paralleling Tagore's attempts to connect to a rural, pre-colonial Bengali culture; Bāul performers thus appease such audiences by using traditional instruments such as the well-known string instruments ektārā and dotārā. Krakauer argues that the commodification of Bāul music, rather than being a deterrent, actually increases musical innovation: performers now employ electronic and modern instruments, large performance ensembles, and unique syntheses of musical styles. Rather than representing a decay of spiritual culture, as claimed by some Bāul music aficionados, Krakauer argues that these innovative elements actually make the message of Bāul songs more accessible to a wider number of audiences, which does not necessitate a dilution in the spiritual efficacy of esoteric praxis.  

Following the one-sided emphasis on tantric yoga and “materialist” (Ben. bastubādī) philosophical influence in the scholarship of Upendranath Bhattacarya, discourse among both non-initiates and scholars has increasingly tended towards an essentialism that identifies “true” Bāuls as preservers of an early medieval esoteric alchemical tradition, while non-practitioners are derided as

nakal, imitators. Lorea offers a compelling counter to this obsession with authenticity:

The recent emphasis on the esoteric side of Bauls as bastubādī (materialists) and bartamān-panthī has progressively led to a risky exoticization that marks only the practitioner Baul as the 'authentic' pursuer of the tradition, whereas the Baul performer is considered to be corrupted and contaminated by the laws imposed by the global market and gentrification. Such an approach could be as misleading as the idealized concept of the lonely minstrels stereotyped in the 19th century and embodied in the Tagorean Baul. . . Baul songs that are composed for the urban élite. . .should rather be interpreted as a sign of maturity, self-confidence and development of a tradition in process, which is responding to the new dynamics of consumerism and commodification of folklore with creativity and flexibility, thanks to its own 'traditional' linguistic devices: i.e. ambiguity and polysemy, inherent features of the songs' texts. 262

I agree with this claim: in the modern context, rather than the process of commodification leading to an inevitable degradation of esoteric praxis, Bāul performers have responded with new forms of adaptability, meeting newfound international appeal by employing the concealed ambiguity of song lyrics to tantalize audiences. Though my analytical focus is on Bāul esoteric praxis as a form of tantric bodily self-healing, approaching Bāuls as solitary yogis, isolated from public influence and devoted only to individual liberation, distorts the complex public roles and expectations demanded of them as musical performers. This nested set of discourses increases controversy regarding identity politics and authenticity, while adding to the popularization of Bāul musical cultures. Different kinds of performative contexts shift the performer-audience dynamic: in larger commercial events, rather than smaller, intimate gatherings, “. . many of the songs performed are of a 'lighter' variety, designed to foreground the playful and broadly humanistic aspects of Bāul-Fakir philosophy, while avoiding more explicit references to Tantric practices that might be inaccessible or repellent to casual listeners.” 263

Among Bāuls themselves, the opinions and perceptions of this process are ever varied, adding yet another layer to cultural discourse about what constitutes an authentic Bāul. A Bangladeshi friend I

know, who travels annually to the Jaydev Melā with her acoustic guitar on-hand, suggested that I meet Dindayal das Bāul, a dīkṣā guru. Dindayal is a sādhaka based in the Nadia district of West Bengal. He trains multiple disciples, including one in Siliguri in north Bengal, where he often travels. He performs in many utsavs and melās throughout Bengal, traveling constantly. After a series of back-and-forth e-mails, we agreed to meet at the Kolkata airport during one of his brief visits. I eventually met him at the airport, where he had massive suitcases filled with his instruments. We then traveled together to the flat I rented in Kolkata. During the drive to central Kolkata from the airport, he explained, “I want to spread Bāul philosophy internationally. The time is right for this – people are ready to hear about this.” We soon arrived at my rented flat, where I interviewed him after having general conversations over tea.

The topic of “performer” (gāyak) and “artist” (śilpi) Bāuls arose, and he added very impassioned comments regarding his opinions on this matter. Though he did not object to Bāuls who do not engage in bodily practices (deha sādhanā), he strongly objected to those performers who are interested only in memorizing lyrics, dressing as Bāuls, and performing for monetary gain – without the guidance of a guru. “Guru paramparā (lineage) is key. Šilpi don't take a guru, so they don't have knowledge – they are self-taught. This is not enough. Anyone can sing and dance. With the proper training, there are secrets in the rhythm of singing and dance that connect to sādhanā. There are inner meanings of our songs. The guru teaches everything – but Šilpi don't have any.”

Other Bāul performers approached these tensions playfully, not shying away from contradictions. After being introduced to Tarun das Bāul in his home ākharā, he was in a particularly loud and exuberant mood, and immediately yelled in English, “I am not a real Bāul; I am just an actor! I am pretending!” while riotously laughing at himself. He then continued, “There are no more true

264 Dindayal das Bāul, personal interview, 10 May 2018.
Bāuls around. Only Gaur Baba (a well-established local guru) is a real one. We are...what? We are just the remains or small fruits that fell from a tree – nothing much. Here, they are all Bāuls but basically singers or artist Bāuls (śilpi), not true practicing ones. These Bāuls around will give you many definitions of Bāuls, such as ‘Bāul’ means crazy or mad (etc.), but Bāul doesn’t mean that. I don’t care if you are a Bāul or not. You can sing Bāul songs, but that doesn't make you a Bāul. A Bāul should be a sādhaka and a Bāul’s way is sādhanā.  

4.3 Śakti as Feminine Power

Tarun das Bāul, further introduced later in this chapter in section 4.8, claimed that female practitioners are “born as sādhikās” as they are endowed with śakti and can more easily control their sexual essences. During sexual praxis, it is the woman's śakti that the male absorbs, and thus the woman has more inherent power than the man. The “natural person” (Ben. sahaja mānuṣ) that is to be extracted from menstrual fluid and drawn upwards to the crown sahasrār cakra descends within the female body, and thus sādhanā is contingent on the female practitioner. The title of Lisa Knight's book, *Contradictory Lives: Baul Women in India and Bangladesh* refers to the contradictory expectations placed on Bāul women: while praised as being perfected śakti, they are subject to the very real effects of Indic patriarchal constraints within Bāul communities. Knight refers to Bāul women as “encumbered actors:”

( u)like their male peers, they are never completely carefree and unencumbered by societal restraints and expectations. . .The Baul women I met faced many different types of obstacles, stemming form areas such as patriarchy, tradition, family, gurus, and patrons. . .For encumbered Baul women, resistance and defiance are not always the most useful or feasible ways to respond. Sometimes, the most effective response is to give the appearance of upholding norms. 

265 Tarun das Bāul, personal interview, Santiniketan, 5 March 2016.
Such expectations include the domestic duties of motherhood, while a Bāul husband is less bound by such obligations, able to at least give the appearance of a spontaneous and unencumbered life. The appearance of upholding norms is an oblique subversive strategy employed by Bāul performers as socially marginal, heterodox practitioners; as Knight notes, this form of subtle resistance is also adopted by Bāul women who are encumbered by social norms and patriarchal constraints. I agree with this claim, which was also reinforced during my interviews with Rina das Bāul.

Regarding the privileging of androcentric perspectives in tantric texts, in which a male viewpoint is often taken for granted, Miranda Shaw offers a different interpretation regarding the yoginī-tantras:

I argue that since these texts were not created by men in isolation from women, they do not express exclusively male views. These views grew out of communal exploration and practice and proceed from the insights of both women and men. . .I contend that the extensive descriptions of the interactions and shared practices of women and men are in themselves sufficient evidence that the yoginī-tantras are the products of circles consisting of both women and men. Therefore, I include women among the creators of the tantras and conclude that the texts reflect the views of women as well as those of men.267

Those who take an androcentric interpretation assume that tantric texts, including descriptions of subtle body physiology and female consorts in relation to sexual yogas, are written strictly from a male perspective for a male readership: “(t)his is not solely a matter of stylistic conventions in a patriarchal society but may also reflect tantra’s greater resonance for the male psyche and physiology in

Indian culture.”\textsuperscript{268} From such a perspective, women are viewed as passive agents, possibly even objectified for tantric praxis, rather than as active participants and contributors to the antinomian cultures of tantric traditions. One wonders if male physiology is the center of focus in the esoteric transmission of bodily theory and transformation in \textit{dehatattva} songs shared among Sufi \textit{fakirs} and Bāul singers. Carol Salomon asserted that among Bāuls, “. . .the sādhāna is largely male-oriented; it is described from the male point of view and done mainly for the benefit of the male practitioner.”\textsuperscript{269} Though there is certainly some validity in her conclusion, I conclude that gender complexities in relation to esoteric practice are more subtly nuanced.

There are distinct misogynistic and androcentric tendencies in some tantric traditions, echoing an ascetic rejection of attachment and interpersonal intimacy that correlate with householder life – for instance, \textit{Gorakh-bāni}, a text attributed to the great Nāth Siddha Gorakṣa, states “To sleep beside a woman is to enjoy Yam, one should not even drink water with a woman.”\textsuperscript{270} This statement mirrors one specific trajectory within renunciate traditions, wherein women are seen as temptresses or distractions from spiritual practice, who drain male practitioners' yogic power. Gender egalitarian responses to patriarchal power structures within tantric communities are also evident. Jeanne Openshaw notes joint female-male renunciation among Bengali Vaiṣṇavas, which challenges the patrilineal transmission of authority \textit{via} fathers and \textit{gurus} within householder and renouncer societies: “renunciation itself is seen by Bengali Vaishnavas as a 'feminine' state.”\textsuperscript{271} As previously mentioned, Vaiṣṇava-oriented Bāuls repeatedly told me that women and their śakti are inherently perfect, and that

\textsuperscript{269} Salomon, “Bāul Songs,” 195.
men must work to emulate their high attainments – in *sādhanā*, it is the female practitioner who lends her power to the male partner, and women do not need practice to be *sādhikās*. Female menstrual blood, rather than being perceived as impure and to be avoided per South Asian moral standards of purity, is seen as an *overflowing* of seed (*bīj*) and *śakti*, and as such, it is the male practitioner who absorbs the female's overabundance of power. This exemplifies a subversive attempt to dismantle Indic patriarchal male dominance.

Relatedly, Openshaw describes how Bengali Vaiṣṇavas distinguish themselves from tantric renunciates, “...many renouncers, especially Tantrics, have what Vaishnavas would consider to be exploitative relationships with women. Vaishnavas cite the occasional early morning sight of a naked woman, dead drunk or drugged in the cremation ground of Tantric sites, something I have witnessed myself.”

Such an exploitative practice illustrates an objectifying attitude towards women as ritual participants, rather than viewing women as embodied goddesses, *per* the ideal of Bengali Vaiṣṇavas.

Among married Bāuls, the wife is sometimes referred to as the husband's *guru*. Additionally, a plurality of *gurus* exists, including *dīkṣā*, *śīkṣā* and potentially *bhek* (renunciate) *gurus*. While maintaining the *guru paramparā* or lineage is expected, there is flexibility with how this proceeds. One practitioner described it thus, “Who will be my guru? The open sky is the guru. The wind itself is a guru. The Sun is my guru, the dark night is my guru. To whom shall I call my guru? Everyone is teaching. A Bāul can live with or without a guru: 'Give me one tidbit and I will figure out the practice.'”

This phenomenon inherently challenges the male-dominated structure of patrilineal *guru* lineages.

Lisa Knight, in *Contradictory Lives*, describes the subversive strategies employed by socially conscious Bāul women in their confrontation with male-centered power structures. One of her research...
participants, Rina das Bāul, performs songs with self-composed lyrics, some of which express sociopolitical critiques. As a Bāul performer, Rina considers herself to have a unique platform and responsibility to educate others in her community regarding social injustices.

I met Rina and her husband Dibakar in their home, located in the Birbhum district. They have both performed in village-based Bāul and fakir melās throughout India as well as in international music festivals. Rina comes from a familial lineage of Bāul singers which includes her father and grandfather, and she began musical training as a child. As a teenager, she started traveling to perform Bāul songs. After years of dedicated practice, she is well-known throughout the Birbhum district and is internationally recognized as well.

Rina discussed her perceptions of women within the Bāul community she is embedded in:

Women are śakti! Bāul women know all [because they are śakti]. But if they marry the wrong person, the śakti is no longer useful. Then these women need sādhanā. But if they marry the right person, śakti can grow. All women have śakti, but there are different amounts of this. All women are not able to do sādhanā. Those that do live a different lifestyle. [For practice] there must be a male and female. There is a compatibility test. This is during initiation when the guru gives a mālā.

“Women are śakti!” – this grounds śakti within the embodied presence of women, rather than an abstract or otherworldly principle. According to Rina’s argument, women indeed overflow with śakti, but if they marry the wrong person – ostensibly bearing children – then this śakti is drained, and they will need to cultivate this power again through sādhanā. Contrarily, in an effective partnership, “śakti can grow.” “Only some women are capable of practicing – and those that do live a different lifestyle;” she did not expand further on that claim. I interpret this as meaning that female practitioners may not be married, or if they are married, they must live a different kind of lifestyle than other householders. Since sexual practice or yugal sādhanā involves the dual cultivation of female and male practitioners, selection of these practitioners by a competent guru is essential.
Lisa Knight’s metaphors of “encumbered actors” and “contradictory lives” accurately depict the tensions and negotiations woven into the layered gender complexities among Bāuls in the Birbhum district. While women are viewed as the source of power, śakti, which is absorbed by male practitioners in yugal sādhanā, Bāul women still face entrenched gender roles typified in South Asian social norms. The use of musical performance nonetheless serves as a platform for sociopolitical critique, as exemplified by Rina. Rina conveyed the significance of Bāul musical culture thus: “Follow the way of the Mahājana and great gurus; they have wisdom directed towards all humanity. These pād are more than songs.”

4.4 Binod das Bāul

Accidents and misplans during fieldwork were a continual theme as well: when visiting Binod das Bāul’s home in a Birbhum district village, Gautam’s motorcycle stopped working, forcing us to spend a considerable time at Binod’s family house before his motorcycle could be fixed – much longer than I intended! Binod found the whole incident amusing, softly laughing to himself while remarking that the “Bāul way” was to accept anything and everything that happens, including what is not planned or expected.

Binod is from an older, established generation of singers in the Birbhum district. While he described his early years of poverty and hardship during interviews, he later gained social status as a well-known performer. Binod continues to perform at local melās as well as events throughout West Bengal, including the renowned annual Jaydev Melā; he also instructs disciples in Bāul musical training. He stressed that as an elder singer, while musical training and public performances are relevant, it is more important to delve more deeply into the inner meanings of Bāul songs and to work with bodily praxis, deha sādhanā: "only later in life did I understand Bāul lyrics, then I could begin
(proper) practice.” He reiterated that without first-hand experience with sādhanā, one cannot truly understand the practices of Bāuls and the concealed meanings of their songs.

When I initially met him, Binod’s wife fluttered about his home, carrying out domestic work with her granddaughter and preparing fresh chai. Binod smoked gānjā and handmade cigarettes or biri, while jumping among topics in conversation, including Indian politics, his health, familial relations, and the status of younger artist (śilpi) Bāuls in the local vicinity. We then took time to drink chai with biscuits while his wife joined us, entering in the conversation about “these young śilpi Bāuls,” often laughing and shaking her head.

While sitting outside his family home amid the cool breeze proceeding the Bengali sunset, Binod pointed at his clothing and scoffed at how Bāul singers felt pressured to wear ocher-colored clothing. Dressed entirely in white, he laughed while exclaiming, “I am a sādhu! Does it matter what color I wear?! Does that show what is in my heart?”

I spent this extended time at Binod’s home and shared meals with his family, including the marvelous dāl and fish curry prepared by his wife. As this was during the early Bengali summer, the heat was often scorching, and a lot of the time was spent relaxing in the shade attempting to avoid the piercing solar rays. Throughout the day, we took naps on his concrete floor to escape the heat, while whirring fans coursed through the room on full blast. He would occasionally disappear to wander through his village or to sit in a corner alone, singing to himself. Binod was happy to share cold water from his water pump to cool off from the heat, which he offered to me, insisting that I splash my face to keep cool. Binod has a strong sense of humor, and he enjoyed making jokes and speaking obliquely and indirectly. He would range from light-hearted amusement and playfulness to solemn intensity within seconds.
Elsewhere, when asked to explain what “Sahajiyā” means, he responded: “it means love. . .there is no greed in that love. There are infinite unknown worlds within nature.”274 As to the difference between Bāul sādhanā and Sahajiyā sādhanā, he responded, “(y)ou hear the birds singing and see the sun moving over the sky. From this a song spontaneously rises from your heart. This is Bāul sādhanā and also Sahajiyā.”275 Expanding on the notion of sahaj as naturalness or easiness in relation to yogic practices, he remarked, “We do it [japa] now and then only, we take it easy although our minds are focused all the time. . .No excess.”276

Like other elder practitioners, Binod lamented the new generation of Bāuls, who “only wear bright clothing and sing” but lack the dedication and discipline needed for sādhanā: “As a young singer, I had no understanding of what these songs meant. How can these young Bāuls understand anything? They don't know their origin. They come to me begging for teaching. Without Īśvara's help it is impossible to understand. Only later in life did I understand Bāul lyrics and their intricacies: then I could start practice properly. But I feel compassion for these young Bāuls. They may not know the way, but they are interested. They are doing what is best for them.”

While chatting over additional cups of tea, I asked Binod about the role of bodily practice or deha sādhanā, and if this connects to bodily rasāyana practice. After talking for a few minutes longer, he waited some time with a faraway gaze while we drank hot tea in silence. Loud fans blared inside his home to subdue the searing summer heat. He then responded slowly and carefully:

Apply yoga for everything. For eating, drinking water. How do you maintain yourself when going out? Learn what not to do, what to do. Achieve control...protecting the body isn’t easy.

275 Ibid., 151.
276 Ibid.
The body needs to be strong for practice. You’ll die midway otherwise. That distracts from the goal. A practitioner without body control gives up, becomes like a normal person.

Know the three nadīs. There is a great king inside your body. With sādhanā, siddhis [powers] are developed, you can read humans and animals and a new body is formed.

Soil [māṭi] is the excreta of humans. . .you can work with this and with body fluids(ras). The body has ras, which is composed of vitamins and chemicals (Ben. rāsāyaniKA). But this can be harmful – you can go insane. If you don’t know how these chemicals react, you won’t know the body. The body is made of the five elements, pañcabhūta. Akaśa is in the head; so is Birya [semen], which is Brahma.

When we do yoga, it creates heat [tapas] which creates rain for soil. From that soil comes food which our parents consumed. This is why parents are devas for Hindus. The elements [bhūta] in their bodies created us.

From the elements, chemicals flow. Bāuls work with the rāsas and even drink them at the proper time. But you can go insane if you don’t know the right way...you can even die. From ras, essence [sur] originates. There are tantras and mantras to calm the six emotions [chay ripu, literally “six enemies.”]277 Working properly with the body and rāsas, you can live healthily for over one hundred years.

Binod initially refers to “dying” if one gives up on bodily control and cultivation. Submitting to lust and losing excess ras is often referred to as a form of death among Bāuls; Binod in turn compares this to giving up on sādhanā, an immense squandering of potential if one begins training. I further discuss this below after Binod's discussion of bāṅkānadī.

Binod mentions the three nadīs of idā, piṅgala and suṣumṇā, subtle body “channels” or ducts, are recurring referents in tantric subtle physiology schemata, which are also commonly referred to in Bāul dehatattva songs. Only by knowing these directly and experientially through sādhanā can one unveil the “great king” (mahārāja) within the body, the discovery of which enables magical powers or siddhis. When I asked Binod about the role of siddhi among Bāuls, he nonchalantly replied, “This is

277 Skt. satripu.
more an interest for tantra. We Sahajiyās are not so interested.”

Referring to birya or semen residing in the head parallels the Nāth subtle physiological schemata, wherein the origin of seminal essence is within the cranium. Bāul singers I interviewed usually referred to the more general term “seed,” bīj, as existing within the cranial vault in both men and women, in or near the ājñā cakra. The term “Brahma” was also often referred to as being synonymous with birya, semen, among Bāul singers. In certain Bāul initiations, the guru intones an initiatory mantra, also known as bīj or a “seed mantra,” through the forehead – the area where bīj resides – thus completing a circuit that interweaves differing manifestations of bīj.

Binod further expanded on his discussion of the cyclical relationship among elements – fire, rain (water), and earth (soil) – which results in food and therefore nourishment and vitality, obliquely explaining how this relates to the ingestion of bodily substances such as urine. Bodily substances are compared to a kind of fertilizer or catalyst for vegetative growth, since they are composed of the same “vitamins and chemicals” which catalyze plants to grow. As ecologies have hydrologic cycles which include precipitation, evaporation and condensation, so does the human body mirror this process during yogic practice in the generation of inner heat (tapas) and resulting perspiration. Since human excreta is parallel with māṭi, soil, so too does the human body partake in the same fecund, regenerative powers of the Earth if excreta is ingested properly under exact ritual conditions. Another correspondence relates to sexual fluids: since “the elements (bhūta) in their bodies created us,” sexual fluids are powerful procreative agents composed of the five elements, and redirecting the sexual current upwards via the central channel suṣumnā or ingesting sexual fluids directly establishes a powerful “internal procreation” and regulated control of sexual essences.

Along with the satripu or “six enemies” that are to be calmed and subdued, a Lālan Fakir song, “Śaharē Śōlajan Bōmbētē,” mentions the “sixteen gangsters” or bandits. Many Bāul songs similarly
refer to a “thief” or a scoundrel who is always stealing the riches and treasures of the body. A Yogic analogy referring to the body as a system of nine or ten doors is commonly mentioned in Baul songs. This in turn is a reference to the Sāmkhya delineation of the five sensory organs, jñānendriya, the ears, eyes, nose, tongue and skin, and the five organs of action, karmendriya, the hands, genitals, feet, anus, and tongue. This alludes to yogic control of sexuality and lust, but also to general restraint in terms of not being overwhelmed by sensory perceptions or emotional fluctuations. Numerous Baul singers informed me that a yogi must always carefully guard the ten (or nine) doors. Careful awareness of the indriyas, in addition to gaining a direct awareness of the constituents of the internal flow of ras, mark significant aspects of bodily training and embodied praxis for Baul practitioners. As Binod remarked, proper cultivation of the body and preservation/ingestion of ras are keys to bodily longevity: “you can live healthily for over one hundred years.”

Binod then discussed the mysterious bodily “curving river,” the bāṅkāṇaḍī, and what danger results from a lack of proper sexual control:

The bāṅkāṇaḍī is in the female genitals. Water and chemicals flow here. This yoni is where all are born. But it is a risky, dangerous naḍī. People cannot cross it. Only a real sādhaka can sail through this naḍī. Usually birya [semen] dies in this torrential stream. There are sixteen by-lanes here. Rivers have two banks, but this naḍī has three banks. If you cross, go slowly and cautiously. Those who cross properly never die.278

Everything and everyone are the same. Duality is unreal. Puruṣa and prakṛti become one in the sarovara. This is bārtamān279 – it can't be

278 The reference to dying is a common discussion related to applying sādhanā. The emission of male sexual fluids is considered a kind of death. Not succeeding in the sexual practice of yugal sādhanā by submitting to lust is another kind of death, hence the bāṅkāṇaḍī being such a “risky, dangerous river.” However, “those who cross properly never die” refers to the longevity and bodily healing that occurs from properly engaging in this practice. Binod also mentions “dying midway,” apparently referring to not having proper sexual control or bodily strength gained from yoga. “Becoming like a normal person” is one who lacks bodily and mental control and is thus a non-practitioner.

279 Literally “the present,” this Bengali word refers to the immediacy of direct experience. See below in 4.9 for further discussion.
read about or studied.

The crux of Bāul sādhanā is how to alter and thus transform the material composition of one's body, understood as a configuration of the five elements, pañcabhūta, in addition to rarefying vastu (Ben. bastu), cosmic materiality, in and through the body. As stated by Binod, chemicals flow from the five elements; of these, the “four moons,” cāri candra or bodily secretions including excreta, urine, semen and menstrual blood are primary representatives of the four elements, which are to be properly and ritually ingested so as to effect an internal alchemical transmutation of one's elementary composition. Internal sublimation and reabsorption of bodily substances is thus a regimen for bodily rejuvenation, longevity, and healing. Another sādhaka remarked, “Bāuls must work with ras and māṭi (excreta), but I can't explain this to non-initiates without being hated.” It seems that much of the encrypted language employed in Bāul songs is to avoid the social stigmas associated with such transgressive practices.
Picture 4: Binod performing at Jaydev Melā, January 2017
I spent time with Binod again in early 2018. He was grief-stricken, as his wife had recently died when I visited him. He would occasionally cry out “Aah – Ma!” solemnly, mourning her passing. We began chatting at his residence, but he was restless and seemed uninterested in staying there. He asked me to follow him, and we roamed around rice patty fields and along nearby ponds, where he informed me that the British used to grow indigo plants there. We wandered around for quite some time, and he insisted that we stay outside to watch the sunset. As the sun descended, casting orange and vermilion rays among the fields and ponds, we stood silently, with the bustling of villagers and birdsong echoing through the landscape. He reminded me to never forget the beauty of nature. Then we slowly walked back to his home.

He prepared his clay chillum with gāñjā, saying that gāñjā “makes the mind very fine and able to focus, crystal clear.” After tea and chatting about his life experiences and travels for a while, he further shared his thoughts about Bāul practices.

Sādhana is based on all of oneself: body, mind, ātma. When we sing Bāul songs and do sādhana, we feel peace and solace in the body and mind. In this way it heals you.

Jñāna [knowledge/direct insight] is realization. Without this music is impossible. When suffering and material attachment gnaws at you, jñāna is the remedy.

When prāna flourishes, you feel happiness in all things. This varies from person to person. When two people have similar prāna, they feel the happiness of being together. For a spiritually immature person, he doesn’t see the beauty and happiness that is everywhere around us. . . in the beauty of nature, in the sunset. . .

Inside the body there is a flow of prem rasa. You have to feel this to understand it. Live a life devoted to understanding this. Singing is not Bāul. You have to attain prem rasa. Rup ras māṭī280 makes the body perfected – this perfects you. Chanting mantras and doing kriyas is part of the early discipline.

280 Rup is a coded reference that, according to Bāuls I interviewed, means either female menstrual fluid or male sexual secretions. He is referring to the various bodily fluids/excreta that are applied in sādhana, three of the “four moons,” which are able to perfect the body.
If semen is not released [during sexual practice], after that, the liquid that arises [rup], if both people ingest this you can see miracles. . .different worlds even with the eyes closed. It gives you sight into a different world. These are just sketches – nothing more can be said.

The highest cultures come from the finest minds. The finest minds always become Khyāpā. It is unavoidable. Look at Einstein or Tagore – they were khyāpā, because the highest minds are not sane. If you keep working with your mind, you too will be khyāpā soon!

The Buddhists use the word Śūnyatā. But we instead speak of pūrṇatā. Everything is full – everything is boundless.

Binod's ambivalence about the role of singing in Bāul culture reflects the ongoing discourse among both Bāuls and non-Bāuls regarding the centrality of bodily practice, sādhanā: “singing is not Bāul,” which seems to refer to the popularity of Bāuls as artistic performers. Yet, he initially remarks that singing is directly connected to sādhanā in the establishment of body-mind peace, śanti. He qualifies the role of singing by stating that jñāna, direct insight or realization, is required. The performer must have direct experiential knowledge – bartamān. This accords with Jean During's description of musical healing within Sufi and Islamic cultures: “It is perhaps within this difference, within one cultural setting, that the 'magical' effect of music [as opposed to entertainment/pleasure] can be discerned. . .In many traditions, the performer himself must have experienced these states; if he has not, he cannot feel what music is meant to communicate.”

Other performers give diametrically opposed claims, such as “Bāuls are only bhaktas:” music and dance are the central practices. The plurality of potential, often contradictory, positions and interpretations among performers in turn reflects the heterogeneous positions of differing lineages, paramparā, reinforcing the existence of loosely connected yet disparate groups subsumed under the

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umbrella term “Bāul.”

Binod describes *prem rasa* flowing within the body: perfection requires one to attain *prem rasa*. Literally translated as the “taste” of *prem*, divine love, this term refers to the eternal love shared between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in Vaiṣṇava contexts, which the *bhakta* can also share by “tasting” this essence in pure devotion. Among Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, the esoteric interpretation of *prem rasa* locates this essence within the human body, rather than it being co-experienced in a dualistic manner; as Edward Dimock describes in his analysis of the Sahajiyā text *Sahajatattva*: “. . .a stream of rasa flows perpetually from the eternal Vṛndāvana to the earth, manifested as the stream of rasa flowing to and between men and women. . .The eternal Vṛndāvana is known within the *sahaja-manuṣa* as he worships the united Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, says the *Sahaja-tattva*. The heavenly paradisal realm of Vṛndāvana is brought into direct embodiment, shared in the embrace of *yugal-sādhanā*, as male and female practitioner taste this “eternal stream of rasa” shared between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. This again illustrates the principle of *bartamān* discussed in 4.9: the crux of practice lies in direct, unmediated experience rather than hearsay or inference, and thus interpretations of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa’s love-play turn focus towards the mystery of the human body, in which their love-play occurs non-dualistically within and between the lived bodies of Bāul practitioners.

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Picture 5: Binod das Baul
4.5 Biswanath das Bāul

During my initial fieldwork visits in Santiniketan and adjacent villages, I stayed within a fairly limited radius of 10km before eventually traveling further out into the Birbhum district. During this initial period, my expanding network of local Bāul aficionados continually referred me to older, more established performers, as an ostensible hallmark of reputable authenticity. I met a filmmaker in Kolkata who had filmed a documentary on Bāul singers. I befriended Dipankar, who has a strong passion for Bāul-fakir musical cultures, through the documentarian. Dipankar attends most Bāul utsavs in Kolkata, and we attended the Jaydev Melā together in 2017. Dipankar insisted that the younger gāyak Bāuls rarely had direct, practical knowledge regarding sādhanā, and I should contact older performers for an understanding of bodily practices and the hidden meanings of Bāul songs.

Biswanath das Bāul was repeatedly mentioned as a performer who represented an older generation of Bāul culture that contrasted greatly with younger contemporaries. This again relates to the discourse and rhetoric surrounding a bygone “Golden Age” of authentic Bāul practitioners. I met Biswanath at his home in a Birbhum district village during my first visit with him. This was during lunchtime, the peak heat of the day, and I was naïve to try to visit him at this time, since the local custom is to take a mid-day nap. Indeed, he did eventually answer the door but was quite groggy and dazed, having just woken up from a nap. He happily invited me into a small bedroom, where we sat as huge fans blared at full capacity. Having informed him that I am from the United States, he grew quite excited and brought out a series of correspondences as well as small journals and lists of phone numbers. He had family members in the United States and Australia, and he spoke at length about them, wondering if there was any chance I might cross their paths. Spontaneously and with a non-linear stream of consciousness, he talked about extended family, changing social and political conditions in West Bengal, food he enjoys, his youth and upbringing as a young Bāul, and changes among the newer
generation of local Bāul performers. He was particularly skeptical and critical of the new influx of Bāul singers; he perceived them as being strictly commercial and a threat to the transmission of genuine Bāul musical culture.

Bāul is only for singing, bhakti. Prem bhakti is the main goal of humans. Singing sādhanā is full of profound knowledge [bidyā]. Deha sādhanā is to keep the body calm, vibrant. Singing is the most important sādhanā. Not everyone is eligible for Bāul sādhanā. Only those in a heritage/lineage can.

Sahaj is to accept everything easily.

Prem for humanity is Prem for God [Bhagavān]. God is formless [nirākāra], so you love all through humans. Bhagavān was also human, and appears through humans.

Ras is realization [upalabdhi]. The Body is the universe, which is made of the elements: air, fire, water, earth, ākāśa. The body is also the five elements [upadam]. There is no difference between the two.

Man [mind] is the king of the body. Man and the body separate when required, though they are the same.

There are two types of kām: niskām and sakām. Niskām is not desiring. Sakām is lustful desire and only leads to suffering, it is illusory. But from sakām, prem can grow.

Bāul is not sannyāsi [renunciate], Bāuls stay close to home. There are many fake, commercial Bāuls, i.e. begging on trains. Bāul lineages are authentic. Now that Bāuls influenced Tagore, they are very regarded. Modern Bāuls do not practice sādhanā however. They need dīkṣā, initiation with a guru. My guru is Maner Khyapa. Some Bāuls have no guru and are fake [nakala].

Bhakti is our main sādhanā. No need of mantra and tantra. Just as Rāmprasād [Sen] didn't need any. Other sādhanā are not so important...only bhakti is.

Biswa’s seemingly contradictory attitude towards sādhanā recurred among Bāul performers I interviewed. He is critical towards “fake” Bāuls who do not practice sādhanā, yet he repeatedly
emphasized that the key practice is actually singing and music rather than esoteric bodily practice, *deha sādhanā*: “*bhakti* is our main *sādhanā*.“ *Prem bhakti*, the *bhakti* of “divine love” or *prem*, refers to the unconditional devotion of sublimest love cultivated towards Kṛṣṇa among Vaiṣṇavas. Among Bāul practitioners, this is cultivated intra- and interpersonally between partners in *sādhanā*. This relates to Biswanath's further statement: *prem* for humans, *mānuṣ*, is identical to *prem* for Bhagavān, as the latter is without form.

The description of Bāuls as “humanistic,” an adjective commonly used in the mid twentieth-century surrounding the construction of the Tagorean Bāul, connects to Biswanath's initial comments about the highest love, *prem*. It is only through loving humans, *mānuṣ*, that one loves God – in fact there is no distinction between these two kinds of loving. Biswanath's claim of “no need of mantra and tantra” recalls the ambivalent attitude of *bhaktas* relative to tantric practice, which I discussed in Chapter Three; *bhakti* is instead a central necessity, as “other *sādhanā* are not so important...only *bhakti* is.” It is through song and dance that practice is cultivated, as relevant as the application of esoteric bodily praxis. This also reflects the adoption of *sahaj* as a “natural” or “easy” attitude – not overstraining or obsessing with bodily refinement.

Biswanath quoted the recurring maxim among Bāul singers, a conception of the relational equivalence between self and universe shared in other tantric traditions: *Yā āche brahmānde, tāi āche ei deha bhānde*: whatever is in the universe is in the body-receptacle. He then identifies the constituents of the cosmos, *Brahmānda*, as being the five primary elements, which also compose the human body – they therefore share an equivalent composition. This analysis of bodily and universal material compositions corresponds with the importance of transforming material substance, *vastu* (Ben. *Bastu*) in Bāul bodily praxis, which was overstressed by Upendranath Bhattacharya as being the *sine qua non* feature of Bāul praxis. I now turn to the notion of *vastu* in relation to Bāul bodily practices, with a
further discussion of the role of sexual desire, kām, aided by Biswanath’s oral exegesis.

4.6 Vastu and Transformation of Lust, Kām

Vastu is refined by “knowing how these chemicals react” as Binod das Bāul described the process, via working with the rasas, and by reversing the energetic current in utta-sādhanā. While the body is composed of the five elements, it is in the sexual fluids that the most rarefied vastu exists, a premise aligned with the tantric emphasis on the essential role of bodily fluids and the sublimation of sexual essences in sādhanā.

The inversion of sexual essences results in a body made out of an entirely new kind of material composition, refined vastu. Vastu is the primordial substance from which the cosmos originates – and it also indwells within the human body. The perfected body, returned to ultimate unity and remolded by the sublimation of sexual essences, is coterminous with Sahaja. Salomon notes that Skt. vastu/Ben. bastu is “made up of two elements, light (nūr; a symbolic word for semen) and water (nīr, a symbolic word for menstrual blood).”283 As such, the commingling and transmutation of male and female sexual essences is crucial for the transformation of vastu. This strongly accords with the alchemical attempt to purify “matter” through matter itself, which the Latin-writing alchemists referred to as prima materia, the first matter. This primary matter is to be continually purified and refined without fail to obtain perfection and liberation from the bonds of materiality.

The ontology of vastu-vāda occurs among so-called “materialist” Indian schools such as the Mīmāmsakas, who argue for the objective existence of inhering entities, vastu.284 Jha argues that the

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284 “That is why other schools of philosophy in India called Buddhism materialist: vastu-vāda, because it is nothing imaginary or philosophical away from the basic reality, the grounded reality of the structure of what is happening.” Baba Khyāpā, personal interview, 27 December 2016, Santiniketan, West Bengal.
Bāuls' primary focus on vastu aligns them with the Lokayata materialist tradition, insofar as the body and universe are understood as being composed of material constituents which are to be reconfigured in sādhanā. Biswanath das Bāul commented thus on the equivalence between the human body and the cosmos: “Deha (body) is Brahmāṇḍa. Brahmāṇḍa is made of the five elements. Deha is made of the five elements. There is no difference between them at all.”

The refinement and transformation of vastu is directly linked with the ability to temper the effects of desirous lust, kāma. Kāma is the raw material from which unconditional, divine love or prem is forged; the latter depends entirely on the former. Among Bāul practitioners, it is essential to work with the various aspects of kāma, lust; an ascetic denial of sexual desire – or overindulgence in sensual pleasures – are both strongly rejected. Rather than denying kāma, with the proper orientation and disciplined attitude, kāma as sexual lust can be transformed into the highest vistas of prem, the sublime love shared between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. It is crucial to note that these deities are not considered as external or separate entities: they are instead lived realities as the most exalted aspects of man and woman. This is another facet of direct embodiment, as the divine play or līlā between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā becomes a process that is enacted within the body in conjugal union, enabling the practitioner to enter the heavenly realm of Vṛndāvana directly and viscerally. This can only occur with the gradual purification of gross sexual lust under the careful guidance of a guru.

Biswanath das Bāul stressed the importance of being able to work with kām:

*Kām* is an attractor from both ways [for men and women]… they are attracted to the other. But they don’t look at themselves, at their own beauty. Mesmerized by female

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286 Biswanath das Bāul, personal interview, Birbhum District, 15 March 2017.
beauty, they both consume each other. To meet with a woman sexually is a desire to relish the female body. They’re using each other for pleasure. It is random, not properly selected. That is only kām. Kām is the primary force that precedes prema.

Desirous lust or sakām leads to death. Niskām leads to life – but requires the guru’s guidance. Sakām is illusion: it only leads to suffering. But sakām can become prema. You must start with kām. Prem bhakti is the true goal of humans.

If you touch a woman and get excited, then it’s not niskām…have to be patient. You have to know. Understand this female/male body is made of clay. Two different beings made of soil. One is Lakṣmī, one is Gaṇeśa. Our bodies are made of rajah and bīja (menstrual blood and semen). Puruṣa and prakṛti made this body. Our bodies have both [Puruṣa and prakṛti].

Kām therefore must be transformed from gross lust to a burning devotion. Thus the sexual impulse, connected to the powerful biological imperative to procreate, cannot be denied or suppressed in an ascetic manner. It cannot be indulged either – rather, it must be properly tempered, like a potent fuel that is potentially volatile and dangerous. With this proper orientation, kāma is the underlying substratum that makes the inner alchemical transformation possible in Bāul bodily praxis, the movement from a mortal body subject to decay and disease to an incorruptible one, filled with divine prema. This corresponds with the gradual refinement of bodily substance, vastu. Khyāpā Baba expanded on this movement thus, “To transmute the sexual energy into compassion – and then love. It will become love in ulṭa-sādhanā. Urdha redha (the reverse way) is when you have transcended sexuality – not escaped or abstained.”

A Bāul song refers to the indwelling, secretive substance within human beings:

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287 These terms, commonly used as the primary ontological polarity in Śāmkhya metaphysics, are referents to “male” and “female” among Bāuls.

288 Baba Khyāpā, personal interview, Santiniketan, 27 December 2017.
On the other shore
of the ocean
of one's own self,
quivers a drop of fluid –
as the origin of all.
But who can cross the seas
to reach it?

The root of all \([Mūlādhāra cakra]\)
is based in you.
Explore the base
To reach the essence. . .  

This song employs commonly appearing imagery in Bāul songs – a faraway shore of a hidden, unknown river or ocean, where it is treacherous or even fatal to navigate. The other shore of the ocean conceals the mysterious, latent powers of oneself, the potentiality of bindu. The drop of fluid refers to bindu, as the primordial substance which enlivens and originates the cosmos itself. Here bindu aligns with vastu as the origin of all. The root, ostensibly referring to the base or Mūlādhāra cakra, is where the processes of bodily refinement and transformation begin, as bodily fluids stemming from the single bindu drop refine and sublimate vertically through the spinal column.

4.7 The Sleeping Goddess

The intention to arouse the dormant serpent goddess kunḍalinī in sādhanā was repeatedly stressed by Bāul sādhakas I interviewed. During the 2017 Jayadev Melā, I spoke to the late Tarak das Bāul in a communal ākharā while nearby musical performances deafeningly blared throughout the night. We sat on a bed of straw while a group of onlookers sat nearby, curious about our dialogue. I stayed at a small home owned by his family during the Melā and was fortunate to also spend time with

his son Sadho, who is also a Bāul performer.

While discussing sādhanā, Tarak repeatedly pointed towards his lower abdomen – this is an important seat of kunḍalinī, as it is in this region where she initially awakens. This awakening can only occur by living a disciplined life in an āśram under a guru’s proper guidance and blessing. This blessing is key, as Tarak claimed that these practices can lead to harm and potential madness without the proper blessing and instruction. Once the kunḍalinī arises upwardly and pierces the various regions of the body, everything in this person’s life changes, and the vibrancy in one’s eyes intensifies.

“Kunḍalinī is the root of creation. She must move through the eight cakras. When the Ājñā cakra\textsuperscript{290} is fully opened – this is the level of Sāi.\textsuperscript{291} The guru opens this. If you relate with women only sexually, you are going backwards in practice. Guru determines when and where [to conduct sexual practice].”

Tarak then took out his single-stringed lute [ektārā] and sang a Lālan Fakir song, “Cāndra gāy cānd legeche.” This is an example of a riddle (Ben. heyāli) song. The third line cryptically states, “In the womb of the daughter, the mother is born. What do you call her?” Tarak explained that the “mother” refers to kulakuṇḍalinī, which appears in the “womb” or mūlādhāra cakra. Solo bahu battriś māthā / garbhe chele kay go kathā: Sixteen arms, thirty-two heads, the child speaks in the womb.”

“Sixteen arms” refers to a commonly recurrent bodily theory (dehatattva) in Bāul songs: the Sāṃkhya delineation of the five sensory organs, jñānendriya, the ears, eyes, nose, tongue and skin, and the five organs of action, karmendriya, the hands, genitals, feet, anus, and tongue, in addition to the six “enemies” (ripus), the emotions of desire, anger, attachment, greed, pride and envy. These components are sixteen in total, and they keep human beings in bondage, mesmerized by the limitations of their sensory perceptions and emotional responses. Thirty-two heads refers to the thirty-

\textsuperscript{290}Located behind the center of the eyebrows.
\textsuperscript{291}The highest level of achievement among practitioners.
two nāḍīs, the channels of the subtle body, which are also limitations if one does not apply the proper diligence to discover the concealed energies and potencies of the body. The song continues to describe a six month year old girl who conceived at nine months and had three children at eleven months. These “three children” are the three guṇas or “qualities” delineated in Sāṃkhya: rajas, tamas, and sattva, though there are a multitude of possible interpretations for the three offspring, as well as the other numerical references throughout the song. Tarak claimed that śukra or semen, which relates directly to the power or śakti or kuṇḍalinī, begins to form when a child is eleven months old; it is likely that “eleven months” is not a literal duration of time but has further symbolic meaning. This veiled language illustrates multiple processes: on one level, the inner meaning of the song can only be explained from guru to student. On another level, pragmatic instruction on how to work directly with the energies of kuṇḍalinī is also dependent on proper guidance and training. Another level is that of protection and secrecy: similar to tantric traditions, practices which are esoteric or deemed socially taboo must be kept hidden within the community, and this abstruse language certainly sounds like an indecipherable riddle to non-initiates. After he stopped singing and offering exegesis, Tarak was quiet for a while as he smoked a hand-rolled cigarette or biri. He then concluded, “The actual way is deha sādhanā (bodily practice). Singing is not the whole way.”

References to Kuṇḍalinī appear throughout numerous Bāul songs. In a song composed by Sanatan das Bāul, he sings:

...Sarba siddha sṛī guru charan
Kula kuṇḍalinī mūl...
Khepā ulto dol komol jetā, sethā je tor prāṇo sokhā
All powers (siddha) are under the guru's feet
The root of Kula kuṇḍalinī -
Where the lotus goes backward, that is your prāṇa, friend.292

These lyrics illustrate how a tersely phrased stanza can still convey multilayered content: indeed, this stanza summarizes what is essential to ulṭa-sādhanā, and indeed ulṭa as the way of reversal is explicitly mentioned. The dependence on a guru's blessing for effective practice is reiterated; only with the guru's grace can the immense power of Kulakuṇḍalinī awaken within the body. Sanatan describes the “backward lotus” (komol), a word often applied by Bāuls as corresponding with cakra centers. This backwards momentum is another veiled reference to the reversal of the energetic current, which occurs in the upwards sublimation of sexual essences.

According to Tarak, once this powerful energy is aroused and properly directed with a guru's expert guidance, only then can sexual practice, yugal sādhanā, begin. “It is totally apparent if you follow the guru, it is in your eyes. The guru is the driving force of the Bāul. Eyes never open up without one. If you have the guru's blessings and grace, you are protected from all harm; you will succeed.” He expanded on this by quoting a song: “there is a frog dancing on the head of a snake in a dry river. The riverbed floods once a month.”293 He explained the song thus, “If unsuccessful you will die there [in the “riverbed”]. If you emit (semen) then you fail. . . No one comes out alive.”

Tumi ānanda-triveṇir snāne, śital hao nā mūlādhāre
Why not cool yourself in the blissful bath of mūlādhāra?294

This Bengali devotional song attributed to Kamalākānta admonishes the listener to not fret over external pilgrimage sites: paralleling Saraha's dohā, the Triveṇi is to be discovered inside the body

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293 This refers to a woman's menstrual flow.

294 Sures Chandra Banerji, Tantra in Bengal: A study in its origin, development, and influence (South Asia Books, 1992, 224).
itself. This song explicitly refers to the \textit{mūlādhāra cakra} where the three internal “rivers” or \textit{nāḍis}, \textit{Iḍa}, \textit{piṅgalā} and \textit{suṣumnā} converge; this \textit{cakra} is also where the dormant goddess-energy \textit{kulakūṇḍalinī} resides.

Among the Bāuls, Triveṇi is a referent with further meanings: one is the female genitalia, and another is the confluence of three “rivers” (\textit{nāḍis}) that converge during a woman's menstruation; at this confluence is where a fish (Ben. \textit{mīn-rūpa}) swims downward, to be caught or reversed in sexual union, \textit{mahāyoga}, during the third day of menstruation. Here the “sahaj person,” \textit{sahaj mānuṣ} is irresistibly drawn to the overflowing power of \textit{śakti} present in the menstrual blood, and it descends from the \textit{sahasrār} crown cakra to the Triveṇi, which subsequently returns to the \textit{sahasrār} in the central subtle body channel after meeting at this confluence.

Each individual has a masculine and feminine essence; among Vaiṣṇava oriented Bāuls, the former is often called \textit{Brahma}, residing in the crown of the head and indwelling in male sperm, while the feminine essence is \textit{kūṇḍalinī}. \textit{Kūṇḍalinī} is also associated with a woman’s menstrual flow. The tension between the cosmic feminine and masculine is bound by \textit{prema} as the most sublime and divinizéd love, and Bāul \textit{kūṇḍalinī} practice aims to awaken the slumbering goddess to unite these cosmic polarities; the movement from duality to non-dual unity results in the highest bliss and of \textit{sahaja}.

This process is crucial in the refinement and transformation of bodily-materiality as \textit{vastu}, understood primarily as being composed of the \textit{bīj-rajah} polarity, semen and menstrual blood, also referred to as \textit{nūr} and \textit{nīr}, light and water. This has a striking similarity with the importance of commingling \textit{bindu/śukra} and \textit{rajah} in Nāth and Vajrayāna bodily praxis.
4.8 Plant Teachers

In the *curanderismo* tradition, certain plants are considered to be, and are revered as, healers. Such plants are sometimes generalized as the Spanish word *medicinas*; they are a special kind of medicine, capable of healing the totality of oneself. The plant healers particularly regarded among the Nahua peoples are depicted on the famous statue of Xochipilli, the deity adorned with flowers; these include the *psilocybe aztecorum* mushroom *teonanácatl*, the morning glory *ololíüqui*, tobacco, and the sun-plant *sinicuichi*. Not depicted on this statue is another crucial Mexica sacrament, the cactus *peyōtl*. Xochipilli is the patron of flowers, *xochitl*; this word refers to blooming and blossoming, in the literal sense of a flower blooming, and also in the sense of one's inmost body-flower blossoming. One who enters the space of inspired intoxication is in *temicxoch*, “the flowery dream.” Healing flowers thus provide an opening for the latent potential in the human body, allowing it to bloom from the soil of oneself. A certain class of singer-poets, able to express hidden and sacred powers, are known as Xochitlahtoane, literally “flower-speakers.” Nahuatl poetry often refers to the multivalent meanings of flowers; indeed, there is a distinct genre of songs literally known as flower-songs, *xochicuicatl*.

I was taught that these plants are teachers. They purify the blood and wash away poisons that churn inside the body-mind. The teachers carry medicine directly from soil and Earth and are far wiser and older than humans – in fact, we are children in comparison. With the proper relationship of respect and humility, we can learn from these teachers if we know how to listen to their songs in stillness. Among the Quechua of Andean Peru, they speak of a dense, obstructing energy called *hucha*. An overabundance of *hucha* may lead to illnesses and harmful blockages in one's bioenergetic circuitry. Chewing the sacred plant *Erythroxylum coca* or coca leaf can transform and clear *hucha* that may
contribute to depression and physical maladies by infusing the body with a subtle, healing energy, sami. This is another example of how plant medicines are healers and guides to their children, human beings.

It is well-known that sādhus throughout South Asia rely on copious amounts of cannabis, gānjā, and cannabis preparations such as hashish for their bodily practices. I visited the Gangasagar Melā in Kolkata, where hundreds of nāga sādhus gathered, continually applying ash to their naked bodies while sitting near massive, blazing fires. I sat and spoke to one sādu while he continually stoked and tended to his fire, adding pieces of wood and applying ash to his face as we spoke. He insisted that gānjā and hashish are essential for sādhanā and yoga practice; every morning he wakes up early, douses himself with ice-cold water, and smokes an enormous amount of hashish in order to cultivate an effective sādhanā – the practice of Śiva himself.

In this spirit, I asked Bāul singers if there is a parallel relationship in their practices – are certain plants, such as gānjā, related to as teachers or healers? Among many Bāuls, smoking gānjā from clay chillums is incessant. During melās and other Bāul-related gatherings, there is a perpetual haze of gānjā smoke surrounding performance areas and living quarters throughout the day and night. It was explained to me that proper inhalation of gānjā relates to effective prāṇāyāma practice, and one can mimic the circular motion of prāṇā within the body via prāṇāyāma by exhaling the smoke through the nose, which directs a circular current throughout the lungs, throat, and head. Also, Tarun das Bāul, introduced below, explained that the five internal winds (prānās) can be slowed and stabilized, desires calmed, and the sensory organs can be effectively tamed with the proper use of gānjā.

One older singer claimed that an excess of gānjā is abusive to the body and dries up one's śukra (semen), which exemplifies modern hedonistic “Bāuls.” He argued that sansāric, “worldly” people only know how to indulge in gānjā, which simply clouds the mind rather than being applied properly. Others, such as Tarun das Bāul, claimed that gānjā is essential for concentrating the mind and aiding in
śādhanā by calming desire and cooling down bodily lust.

Tarun, who lives on the edge of Santiniketan, certainly gives the appearance of being mad, khyāpā. When introduced to him in his home ākharā, he was loudly exclaiming and laughing hysterically, making non-sequitur claims and immediately contradicting himself. As I described earlier in this chapter, he immediately announced in English, “I am an actor – I am pretending!” insofar as he is a Bāul. He seemed to thrill in describing aspects of śādhanā he is experienced with, while then claiming that he knows nothing and is a mere actor, “like every other Bāul in Santiniketan.” Resting on his concrete floor, he sat completely immersed in an impenetrable fog of gāñjā smoke, which he continued to smoke incessantly. A nāga sādhu sat nearby in padmāsana, delighting in debating and arguing with Tarun. The nāga Baba scrolled through his mobile phone, boasting about his ability to control his liṅga: he then showed everyone in the room pictures of himself stretching his penis and carrying large objects with it at a recent Kumbha Melā. Gautam, who was sitting near me, was quite unimpressed.

Tarun soon proceeded to describe the practical benefits of ingesting gāñjā, qualifying its usage:

We Bāuls are like Mahādeva [Śiva] and Mahādeva is very strong mentally and in everything because he is the Parama-brahmacarya [supreme practitioner of celibacy]. If any one can manage to smoke gāñjā keeping his Brahma [semen] intact, then he is suited to smoke gāñjā.

But someone who smokes gāñjā just for pleasure [bhogi] and useless fun, that means one who misuses his Brahma by smoking it, he shouldn’t have it. A practicing brahmacari Bāul can consume it. It’s not that easy to hold semen, only Śiva could do that. So a brahmacari Bāul can have it, but the sansāric Bāul [one who has a family life], his śādhanā is only the music, he doesn’t do much with his body [controlling sexual energy]. The other people other than brahmacari bāuls, even if they smoke it, they won’t be able to bear it or control it.
The nāga Baba accompanying Tarun interjected with:

It shouldn’t be called gānjā but ‘Siddhi,’ [since it gives one powers/siddhip] it’s called ‘Prasāda.’ Whenever we pray or worship Mahādeva [Śiva/Bholanāth] we have this gānjā as prasāda from him as his blessing.

We do sādhanā with the help of it and so it's called ‘siddhi.’ It helps on our way to sādhanā, as for example: it stops cravings for hunger, thirst, sleep or fatigue and it gets hold of the distractions of our mind. That’s why we consume it as it helps to bring us near to our sādhanā. It’s not for the common family people.

Their discussion again illustrates the distinction between practitioner, brahmacarya Bāuls and “worldly” or family-oriented sansāric Bāuls. Tarun's position assumes that most people revert to mere hedonism when ingesting gānjā unless they are properly trained and disciplined; they therefore miss out on the benefits completely. Cannabis is known as an aphrodisiac by heightening sensory perceptions, and it may affect the flow of kuṇḍalinī, which a sādhaka should be able to work properly with; Bāuls claim that this plant is able to raise the energetic current upward, which is essential for Bāul praxis. Referring to cannabis as siddhi, able to grant magical powers, recalls Patañjali’s cryptic reference to ausadhi, “herbs,” as capable of granting yogic siddhayah and the inner heat of yogic tapas in the Yogasūtras IV.1295

Biswanath das Bāul praised gānjā for allowing the mind to concentrate and focus single-pointedly rather than wandering as it typically does. The euphoric atmosphere surrounding performances and the frenzy of bhakti is enhanced by gānjā ingestion among some Bāuls; older practitioners were often more critical, claiming that it is too easy to over-rely or depend on gānjā’s euphoric effects, when this can be properly cultivated through singing and the bliss of sādhanā.

295 janmausadhi-mantra-tapah-samādhijāh siddhayah.
Aside from gānjā aiding in bodily praxis and sensory control, Fabrizio Ferrari argues that the openly public indulgence of gānjā among Bāuls is yet another subversive political strategy employed by them: “(a)lthough Bauls are not marginalised for the use of drugs per se. . .the combination of illicit substances with illicit behaviour generates blame. . .The notorious anti-social behaviour of many Bauls can be interpreted as a political and strategic statement constructed on aesthetic ritual patterns.” He aligns such behavior with the revolutionary actions of insurrectionary anarchists, who oppose state-structures or “superstructural forms” by establishing their own informal, secretive organizations.296

The very open nature of copious gānjā use in large, public melās and more commercial gatherings certainly appears to be a form of rebellion, or a disregard for social propriety so crucial to South Asian social mores – another aspect of Bāuls' unencumbered madness (divyan māda). This may be why certain performers are more ambivalent about consuming gānjā: public perceptions about this behavior may lead to further stereotyping and expectations of the strange, unpredictable behavior associated with Bāuls.

Among jhākris and mātās I interviewed during fieldwork, psychoactive plants are generally not used during healing pūjās. The one exception is during the festival of Śivarātri, when large amounts of gānjā and datura are ingested, as these plants are revered as being Śiva's sacraments or prasād.

Throughout the Darjeeling district and in Nepal, gānjā was often referred to as “Śiva prasād” during fieldwork interviews. Other plants such as marigold flowers, betel nut and tobacco are commonly ingested or presented as offerings during healing pūjās. Martino Nicoletti observed an interesting practice among Kulunge Rāi jhākris who attempt to nullify the psychoactive effects of cannabis: “the

reciting of specific mantras before taking the drug has, always according to the shamans, the aim of 'killing' the gaja, thus stopping it from causing 'inebriation'...[which is] deemed aberrant and obfuscatory for the consciousness.”

4.9 Bartamān

When discussing more in-depth details about bodily sādhana with Bāul practitioners, I would inevitably reach an impasse. I was told that if I wanted to understand these details, there was no option other than being initiated by a proper Bāul guru. By the very nature of secretive tantric transmissions, sādhakas are unable and unwilling to discuss inner details of the practices. I also have an ethical obligation to not publish secretive, hidden aspects of practices, which by their nature must remain secretive and concealed from the public domain.

Another point regarding practices was always emphasized: “this is bartamān,” after which nothing further could be discussed. In this context, bartamān refers to immediacy and direct experience. Any understanding about sādhana that is derived from inference and abstraction is anumān – mere speculation and second-hand knowledge. From this perspective, verbal discussion and scholarly knowledge about sādhana are futile endeavors.

A Lālan Fakir song was explained by Khyāpā Baba thus: a chatak bird gave an oath that it will only drink water falling from the Heavens. Though it was near the ocean, it died of thirst anyway. While dying, he cursed God, saying: “you sent me to this world, but I could not enjoy your ocean. I waited for a drop of your tears to fall from your eyes.”

In Bāul terminology, anumān/speculation is Brahman: it is all speculation and perception of the human mind. It is like the ocean: but it is salty water. It is not

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drinkable. You cannot survive your life in imagining God or Brahman – neither can 100,000 books with their words. My mind is the bird of paradise...it is not waiting for the ocean of divinity. It is waiting for human love.

Bartamān is the present. Brahman is speculation – a fantasy, but the guru's love is bartamān. Lālan said, one who has fallen in love – only this person knows the trouble, nobody else knows it!

Here the example of love – prem – shared between human beings and between guru and disciple is an ultimate exemplar of bartamān, as it is directly, powerfully experiential, rather than inferential and speculative, which is symbolized as an ocean filled with undrinkable salt water. The ever-present icons and depictions of Hindu devas scattered throughout India are derided by Bāuls as mere anumān, leading one away from the immediacy of bartamān:

Knowing that Bhagavān is inside the body comes from sādhanā. Sādhanā is bartamān. Yā āche brahmānde, tāi āche ei deha bhānde: whatever is in the universe is in the body-receptacle. This only comes from bhakti and biswas [faith]. These efforts are missing now, so we make clay idols.298

Bartamān as relating to immediate experience and concrete practices again relates to embodiment: true knowledge is only possible through a diligent engagement with bodily praxis, a praxis that explores and gains direct insight into the totality of one's body-place. Direct experience is inherently tied to immediate sensory perception, which precedes conceptuality. Only subsequent to direct, unmediated experience do concepts about our experiences arise, filtered via language and memory. The stress placed on bartamān as the only path towards realization is pragmatic, as the locus of insight derives from concrete, embodied experience. Any theological debates as to the nature of an ultimate reality or divinity are thus rejected as anumān, as are abstract, intangible absolutes such as Brahman.

In terms of how the adoption of bartamān relates to theological orientations, as opposed to

external worship and reliance on priesthoods and scriptural authority, anumān, I quote a conversation between Rina das Bāul and her neighbor: Rina said: "We believe Thākur [Lord] is a human being. Have you ever seen a Thākur (pointing to the sky)? No." Then, turning to her neighbor who was leaning close to us against the doorway, listening, Rina asked, "Will Thākur help you when you're sick?" The woman grinned but did not reply, so Rina continued, "No. But humans will help; they will help take care of you when you're ill. They bring you food, medicine, and take care of you. We don't do any pūjās here in this house. Have you ever seen us do pūjā? The woman replied, shaking her head and her hands to suggest a negative response, "No, you don't do any pūjās. No Lakṣmī-pūjā, nothing.” "What's the point?” asked Rina. "Have you ever seen Lakṣmī? No, never.”299

A Lālan song entitled “āche ādi makkā ei mānab dehe” refers to this concrete immediacy – Mecca is in the human body. Transcendental deities are not bartamān: only that which is physically palpable and experienced within the body is. The Divine, which is referred to as “uncatchable” (adhar mānuṣ) in Bāul songs, must nonetheless be “caught” in the sexual transmutation techniques employed in sādhanā. Where can temples reside other than within the human body (deho mandire) itself? This is another reason why external ritualism and dualistic devotion is abandoned as anumān. This illustrates yet another morphological connection between the Buddhist Siddhas and Bāul conceptions of the central primacy of embodiment – one of Saraha's most renowned dohās refers to pilgrimage sites (pīṭhas) and shrines as all existent within the body, where true bliss (suha) resides:

| Holy places, shrines, and lesser shrines:   |
| are all right here –                      |
| I've been there in my travels,            |

but I've seen

This chapter illustrated the heterogeneous, often contradictory perspectives held by Bāul performers. Due to oral transmission of teachings, a lack of centralized authoritative structure and no singular originating guru, differing Bāul lineages approach bodily praxis and the interpretation of encrypted song lyrics in varied ways; there is no “proper” or authoritative way to interpret the esoteric references concealed within songs. Since the body is coterminous with the cosmos itself, transforming and attending to the constituents of the body, particularly sexual fluids and sublimated essences, are primary concerns and related to the pragmatic immediacy of bartamān. Among practitioners, the awakening of kundalini and the transformation and refinement of bodily substance, vastu, is paramount. The application and deciphering of dehatattva songs, providing a shared theory of embodiment, is also instrumental in engaging with esoteric bodily praxis. As an analogy with alchemical practice, desirous lust, kām, is the supreme alchemical agent which is to be transmuted into divine love, prem.

Following the oral exegeses generously offered by Bāul performers in this chapter – albeit, these were often qualified as tiny sketches, since more specific details are reserved for initiates – I analyze the connected practices of bodily praxis, deha sādhanā, and musical training/performance, gān sādhanā, as modalities of embodied healing in Chapter Six.

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300 Dohā 48, in Roger Jackson, Tantric treasures: three collections of mystical verse from Buddhist India (Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 2004), 81.
Chapter Five: Himalayan Traditional Healing and Spirit Possession

The physical endurance required for rural Himalayan village life is considerable. As I generally conducted fieldwork during winter, the temperatures and wind-chill were often piercingly cold. I stayed in cottages that had numerous holes in the walls for wind to course through freely, dropping the ambient temperature inside the cottage even further. When walking to adjacent villages with my research assistant Tashi and inquiring where a certain village is, he would often simply reply “it is up,” which is a literal response, as the next village often was a three or four kilometer vertical climb upward! Given these upward climbs and the freezing temperatures, this was some of the most physically challenging travels I've experienced.

During the night amid the bone-chillingly frigid Himalayan winter weather, residents in a village just a few kilometers outside Darjeeling gather around barrels of burning coal to keep warm. Small lumps of coal are gradually added while the flame is continually stoked to maintain a brief flicker of warmth in simple cottages with minimal insulation and paper-thin walls. Various topics are discussed, and inevitably village gossip enters the conversation. Topics range from mishaps with local livestock, recent marriages and unsanctioned romantic trysts, to political tensions and general frustrations with local government policies. Those in the village who are greedy or unwilling to assist fellow residents are inevitably bashed and scorned. Some women in this village are particularly frustrated with their social status and forced expectation to marry, even when it is against their wishes. Discussed with more subdued tones, the topic of boksīs (translated as the English word “witch”) often arises during these conversations. Apparently it is common knowledge among the villagers as to whom boksīs are, but it is inappropriate to openly and explicitly reveal their identities. This is deeply woven with social tensions, and alleged boksīs may simply be women who are reclusive or seen as straying from social norms. Divorced or unmarried women are sometimes viewed suspiciously. Boksīs travel at
night secretly, sometimes attacking various individuals in a kind of psychic predation. According to Bidya, whom I befriended during fieldwork, at night “they come and bite – they leave bite marks” which reveal themselves as bruises or other small abrasions. Mātās I interviewed remarked that mātās can themselves act as boksīs if they are corrupted during their course of training.

The gossiping continues as locals shift to a new location to drink raksi covertly, illegal grain alcohol which is locally distilled. Others drink tongba, a Nepali fermented millet drink that can be powerfully intoxicating. Tongba is considered a specialty of the Limbu, and as there are many Limbu residents in this village, the supply of tongba is seemingly endless. Villagers play cards and continually smoke cigarettes throughout the night, while some cook various meats or momo dumplings for the enjoyment of everyone present. Hindi and Nepali gān blare from small, portable speakers, and some spontaneously sing along with the chorus while in the middle of a conversation. I lost track of how many bottles of alcohol were offered to me which I never accepted, since I do not drink alcohol; this often dumbfounded them! Conversations continue, venting frustrations and touching on various issues and tensions that occur throughout the village, often centered on financial struggle and conflict. Some become loud and riotously drunk, exclaiming excitedly and growing increasingly affectionate.

B., a resident of this village whom I befriended during fieldwork, confided in me that she often becomes hopeless and depressed, even wondering if there is any reason she should be alive. “I have my son, and he is everything. . .if it wasn't for him – I don't know. . .” She paused, pensively. “Yes – I smile to local people. Yes, I look happy on the outside because I have to be – what other choice do I have? I laugh and seem to enjoy being with others. I can't look sad. But inside I am so, so sad and sometimes I cry day after day. So many tensions, my husband is far away (in the Indian military), and I am always struggling with money. As a woman, I feel stuck. I can't move somewhere else or start a new life. What is there to do? On some mornings, I chant both Hindu and Buddhist mantras. I meditate. I enjoy
chanting to Mā Tārā for protection. This helps me very much and then I feel at peace – santi. Then I feel happy and strong enough to go on.”

5.1 Introduction

The Darjeeling Hills area, situated at the border of India and Nepal in the upper reaches of West Bengal, has a complex array of borderland influences, including Bengali, Nepali, and Tibetan cultural influences. The Mahākāla Temple in the city centre of Darjeeling is widely attended by both Hindus and Buddhists. Originally housing a Buddhist monastery, the main attractions at the temple complex are now a sacred cave and a Śiva lingam attended by Hindu brahmins. It is commonly explained that Mahākāla as a dharmapāla or wrathful Vajrayāna protective deity manifests in this location as Śiva, encompassing both Hindu and Buddhist traditions without any sense of dissonance.

The name Darjeeling itself shows a Tibetan Buddhist influence: the word is purportedly of Tibetan origin, rDo rje gling, “region of the Dorje” (vajra). Originally included in the kingdom of Sikkim with a large population of Lepcha inhabitants, it was invaded in the 19th century by the Gorkhas of western Nepal. The area was later subsumed into the British Empire in India and further claimed as a district of West Bengal after Indian independence. Following the People's Liberation Army's annexation of Tibet in the early 1950's, many Tibetan refugees fled to the Darjeeling area. These many mergers and invasions resulted in a particularly vibrant sociocultural diversity and a wide array of religious practices, both institutionalized and “folk” traditions. 301

The Darjeeling Hills area illustrates a particularly unique confluence of ethnic, cultural and


For a highly relevant ethnography relating to “scheduled tribes of India” multicultural tensions in Darjeeling, see Townsend, C. Middleton, "Across the interface of state ethnography: Rethinking ethnology and its subjects in multicultural India," American Ethnologist 38, no. 2 (2011): 249-266.
religious communities due to its geographical positioning as a borderland. Though located in West Bengal and called the “crown of West Bengal,” its majority Nepali inhabitants distinguish themselves ethnoculturally and call for the establishment of a new Indian state – Gorkhaland. There is a plethora of Nepali ethnic groups, including the Tamang, Gurung, Limbu, Newar and Rāi, as well as Sikkimese Tibetan groups such as the Bhutia.

The cultural confluence flows from several directions, both from the Gangetic plain regions of northern India as well as from Nepal and Tibet. The immediate effect of the physical geographical conditions of quotidian life in the Himalayan region of Darjeeling and adjacent areas is striking, as the climate limits what vegetable crops can be grown and the rugged mountainous terrain provides geographical seclusion while limiting the influx of goods from other regions of India. Winters can be profoundly cold, and village residents often live in poorly insulated cottages while relying on the burning of coal as a heating source. The nearest urban center relative to the Darjeeling district is Siliguri, West Bengal, located in a valley just below the mountainous terrain of the district. A large region straddling the Indo-Nepali border along north Bengal and Sikkim depends on Siliguri for the supply of goods, petroleum and general supplies; many local residents referred to the rest of India generically as the “plains,” illustrating a distinct rift between the Himalayan and Gangetic plain areas, both topographically and socioculturally.

Shortly after I left the area, beginning in June 2017, massive riots and protests regarding the creation of Gorkhaland as a separate Indian state erupted throughout the Darjeeling Hills district. A West Bengal governmental order to establish Bengali as a compulsory language study in schools throughout West Bengal sparked this agitation. This district is administered by the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, which called for a complete strike and shutdown of the area after violence erupted, resulting in the deployment of Indian military forces. Commerce and tourism slowed to a standstill, while
telecommunications in the area were also blocked. After sporadic violence and continual tensions, the strike was called off in September 2017. This illustrates ongoing multicultural conflicts and tensions within the region. One Gorkha resident I met in Mirik frustratingly expressed his resentments, “Do we [Gorkhas] speak the same language, do we look similarly, do we act the same way or follow the same customs and culture? We are very different! Then why should we be considered 'Bengali?'”

5.2 Himalayan Traditional Healers

The ritual practitioners I engaged with during my ethnography often self-designated as the general Nepali appellation *jhākri*, while others self-designated using a term specific to their ethnocultural group, such as *bijuwa* among the Rāi people. *Jhākris* are traditional healers, ritual specialists who work part-time as psycho-physiological healers, intermediaries between human beings and local spirits, and assistants in funerary rites. *Jhākris* in my field site also worked as agrarian laborers, tending to livestock or tilling the land for local vegetable crops, with minimal monetary income other than what is given from patients during healing *pūjās*. *Jhākris* can be of any gender, though female practitioners who follow a related yet distinct healing repertoire are known as *mātājis*. *Mātās* informed me that while men do get possessed by the goddess Devī, only women can be *mātās*.
The practitioners I interviewed saw themselves as fitting within the larger Indo-Nepali Hindu community, yet they tended to avoid a specific religious identity, having no issue with integrating Buddhist devas and sādhanā as well as incorporating a vast ecology of local spirits and incorporeal entities.

I initially met Tashi Bhutia while staying at his familial cottage in a village adjacent to the Takdah Tea Estate. We soon became friends, and he grew interested in the early developing stages of my research. “Why would you come so far to research this?!” he bewilderingly asked. Tashi and his family are devout Vajrayāna Buddhists, and he expressed ambivalence and confusion about the practices of local jhākris: “They use Hindu mantras which only work sometimes.” His family nonetheless consulted local traditional healers during health crises, and a nearby jhākri assisted his sister-in-law when she experienced symptoms of mental instability. He was simultaneously open to the healing abilities of jhākris while being suspicious of non-Buddhist traditional healers. Tashi admitted the healing efficacy of local jhākris and mātās but was thoroughly convinced that Buddhist healers had more effective practices.

After traveling through villages adjacent to his familial home in the Takdah area, Tashi offered to assist me with research. His help proved invaluable, as the high-altitude villages in the rural Darjeeling District are often unnavigable, with circuitous dirt roads often unmarked with road signs. Becoming exposed to novel aspects of Nepali traditional healing, he later came to appreciate learning of local cultural practices he was previously unfamiliar with. He also accompanied me during my brief fieldwork in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.

I interviewed jhākris, mātās and bijuwas, observed their healing pūjās, and also received divination and healing pūjās. The fieldwork research area was in a radius of about 50 km, stretching from Darjeeling and nearby rural villages, to the Takdah, Teesta and Lopchu Tea Estate areas and the
adjacent village of Lamahatta, also including the villages adjacent to Pakyong in southeast Sikkim. The majority of villagers in this area are from the Nepali Limbu, Rāi, Gurung and Newar ethnocultural groups, as well as Lepcha, an ethnocultural group indigenous to Sikkim. The people referred to as *jhākris* in my field area are called into their vocation via an initiatory crisis, typically occurring at an early age, after which they are often trained by a *guru* into a modality of traditional healing. This initiatory crisis manifests as a debilitating sickness or a chronic state of mental imbalance, appearing as a kind of madness. A villager I befriended in the *gaun* (village) of Lopchu described this initiation which occurred with his uncle Gopal:

At first, my uncle would disappear at night. It didn't seem too strange. But then he would go into the jungle for long stretches at a time, and we knew something was wrong with him. He acted like a completely wild animal. I would go with my family members to talk to him, but he was not making any sense and seemed like a madman. His clothes were all torn. He would shake and mumble strange things. He would go through rages and destroy things around him. It took me and a few other men to subdue him and calm him down – that is how strong he was! We took him back to our village, but he was still abnormal. Then we realized the *deutā* were calling him to be a *jhākri*.

Nima Sherpa, a *jhākri* who lives outside of Pakyong, Sikkim, described his initiation and subsequent experiences thus, “*Kul* [family] *deutā* called to me as a child, and I began shaking. I started having visits in dreams. I grew my hair out to keep it up, but cut it all because of being visited in dreams; instructions came in my dreams. Now, I see in my dream if someone is coming for a healing. Everything is taught by my *kul* in dreams...medicine, healing waters and so on. All plants are shown. What to give, what not to give. Only through my *kul* am I able to heal. I give medicine based on dreams.” The role of visions and dreams is significant, and numerous traditional healers I interviewed described learning nearly all of their training, including entire mantra cycles, through dreams alone.
A consistent narrative shared among jhākris and mātās is that the only way to heal and regain sanity after this initiatory crisis is to train under a guru, thus becoming a healer; it is also necessary to discover how to appease ancestor spirits and Devīs, and to change one's lifestyle in order to maintain this balance. This is usually reflected in a change of diet, a change of sexual habits and daily hygienic practices, maintaining daily pūjās, and building concentration and meditative practice.

When speaking to locals about their experiences or lack thereof regarding jhākris and mātās, some were unimpressed, saying “they're ordinary people like you and I,” contrasting them to Vajrayāna monks and nuns who hold a higher social status (and who are thus “not ordinary people”). Villagers almost always responded to my question by shaking their bodies, mimicking the trembling convulsions that are a sine qua non feature of jhākris.

One Rāi woman I spoke to, who personally knows Rāi bijuwas, was particularly skeptical and even warned me, “They are fake people. If they say anything to you, don't believe it. Way back, in our ancestors' time, they used to be real, but nowadays they are just fake.” I replied: I am sure this is true for some, but do you really think this is the case for every single one of them? “Yes, they all are. Some rituals they perform, but don't believe their predictions. They are crooks. Jhākris and bijuwas of this generation are all fake. They feed the nonsense to the people for money.” A Newari taxi driver, having a more charitable attitude, remarked that “there are too many jhākris now (in Nepal), some are good but most aren't,” and the sheer number of them shows that one should be at least partially skeptical and cautious about their claims.

Hearing this kind of denunciation was all too familiar. Among both Bāul singers and villagers in rural West Bengal, it was often proclaimed that a kind of “golden era” had come and gone with the passing of the twentieth century, as “real” Bāul sādhakas disappear, fading away into forgotten obscurity. Similar economic critiques were also stated constantly, denouncing Bāul singers as greedy
frauds and spiritual charlatans, preying on gullible (particularly Western) audiences. Dipankar, a friend who lives in Kolkata, cynically remarked that “donation and offering prasād is one thing, but anyone who asks for money is no Bāul or sādhaka. So that means there are almost no Bāuls – they should be living without anything, without possessions and definitely without needing money.” This tension regarding the so-called “spiritual marketplace” and the fierce insider/outsider debates surrounding identity politics are lively, ongoing controversies among both Bāuls and Nepali traditional healers.

The term Šaman, referring to practitioners of a specific spiritual vocation, derives from the Tungusic, a Siberian language of the Altaic-Turkic linguistic group. While there are certainly similarities with Nepali traditional healers and North Asian Šaman, there are persistent issues, including semantic ambiguity and cultural impositions, with positing the equation “jhākri = shaman.” The word šaman literally means “to shake” or “to move,” referring to the convulsive movements of an entranced šaman; this aspect certainly bears a striking similarity, as jhākris are well known for their convulsive shaking and shivering during healing pūjās and spirit possession.

In the 1930s, Sergei Shirokogoroff conducted ethnography with Tungusic šaman in Siberia. Given his observations, he hypothesized that so-called “shamanism,” or at least the North Asian “folk religion” practices correlative with the Tungus šaman, is a recent development, beginning in the medieval period through a blending of indigenous practices and Buddhist Lamaism. This implies that Central and North Asian Buddhist and shamanic practitioners engaged in some kind of mutual influence regarding healing repertoires and techniques. A corollary to this hypothesis is the etymological hypothesis that šaman is derived, potentially via Indo-European languages such as Tocharian, from the Sanskrit śramana, a term often applied to Buddhist practitioners. Todd Gibson conjectures that the parallels in Turkic languages regarding Inner Asian Buddhists and shamanic practitioners add weight to this hypothesis: “. . .that several different Buddhist words are used to refer
to the shaman (śramana-shaman, vira—dpa'.bo, burxan, and bakshi) indicates that Buddhism's effects cannot be explained by positing a single wave of cultural influence, but must be seen as a process that was repeated several times. Had Buddhism not been intimately concerned with the special qualities that distinguish the shaman, it is highly unlikely that Buddhist terms would have come into widespread use in this context, and that these terms would have been preserved even after all trace of scriptural Buddhism had disappeared among the Turks and Tunguz.\textsuperscript{303}

While I find it useful to apply the word “shamanic” as a heuristic adjective when describing traditional healers within my field site, I am restricting my descriptive vocabulary to the terms employed by practitioners themselves, and I hesitate to use the word “shaman” or “shamanism(s)” as reified nouns within this context. My restricted usage of “shamanic” as a heuristic adjective aligns with this pragmatic orientation: such practitioners are able to travel to various incorporeal domains or to contact or embody non-visible entities/powers in order to mediate between human beings and other corporeal or incorporeal entities, often for the benefit or healing of those within the local community. I do not constrain this term to refer solely to the North Asian/Siberian context. Such “shamanic” activity may include spirit possession, a variety of embodied healing techniques, spirit mediumship, and a wide array of methods with which a ritual specialist interfaces with unseen entities and domains.

Charles Tart popularized the notion of “altered states” of consciousness in the 1960’s,\textsuperscript{304} and this terminology is still generally used in scholarship related to Nepali traditional healers to refer to the shift in awareness needed to undertake shamanic work.\textsuperscript{305} I purposely do not use the terminologies of “trance” and “altered states” for the same reason that I describe the problematic overemphasis on

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“mental states” regarding dissociation and spirit possession.\(^{306}\) Firstly, it is seemingly impossible to establish what is baseline, “normal,” “non-altered” consciousness. Secondly, positing discrete “mental states” is strongly interwoven with psychological privileging of mentation over embodiment, with Cartesian dualistic underpinnings. Though I do use Western academic terms for taxonomical or analytical purposes, I find it overreaching and culturally imposing to rely on the framework of “altered states” or gradations of mental states generally. No research participant I spoke to used any Nepali term or phrase similar or equivalent to “trance” or “altered” / “non-altered states.” Instead, indigenous descriptions of what occurs during spirit possession or healing pūjās refer to spirits, ghosts (bhūt, pret) and deities (deutā) entering or leaving the body of the practitioner or ill patient, causing the sudden and dramatic shift in behavior.\(^{306}\) Susan Wadley similarly notes that malevolent spirits are described as “riding” or “adhering” to victims in her fieldwork conducted in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Wadley analyzes “Hindu patterns of possession” by dividing this phenomenon into two main categories: harmful and harmless possession, the former requiring the meditation of a ritual specialist or exorcist.\(^{307}\) She argues that the nuanced communication between human beings and the spirit domain follows a recurring, coherent set of rules; communication varies depending on whether a specialist or victim is possessed. I further discuss these recurring categories of harmful and benign possession in this chapter, while presenting recurring structures of spirit-human communication observed during fieldwork.

As I consciously do not depend on the scholarly imagined concept of “shaman,” so I avoid related reliance on mental states as dualistic, overly psychological conceptions. There are certainly activities that induce a shift among Nepali traditional healers, allowing the entry and embodiment of

\(^{306}\) This orientation is inspired by the thoughtful considerations provided by Geoffrey Samuel in personal communication.

spirits and deities: *jhākris* rhythmically pound the frame drum, *dhyāngro*, often while chanting invocationary *mantras*, which grants the ability to contact and invite incorporeal beings. *Mātās* in my field site generally use the hand-drum *ḍamaru*, associated with Śiva, to invoke possession by Devī. Other instruments such as bells and conches are also used. I will further explore the role of instruments, *mantra*, and music in my analysis of sonic healing in Chapter Six.

This next section explores the varied relationships among Nepali traditional healers and institutional religious practitioners, beginning with a discussion of Geoffrey Samuel's notion of the “pragmatic orientation” in relation to the quotidian necessities of village-based healthcare in the Darjeeling Hills and rural Sikkim.
5.3 Pragmatic Dialogues and Negotiations

There is a ubiquitous presence of village-based and urban Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim, and tension between the primarily low-caste, agrarian based *jhākris* and the higher social status granted to Tibetan lamas is ongoing. Geoffrey Samuel, in relation to his influential model of shamanic Buddhism within Tibetan religion, defines the “pragmatic orientation” as
“...concerned with this-worldly goals such as health and prosperity,” in contrast to the bodhi orientation, which is concerned with ultimate soteriological liberation: Buddhahood.

Jhākris are visited by local villagers for such pragmatic ends as the healing of sickness or to mediate in cases involving possible black magic or harmful spirits, bhūt. Throughout the many discussions with rural villagers during my fieldwork, “this-worldly goals” are the primary concern among them, and the most pressing issues involve psycho-physical health crises and suspicions of black magic affliction. As Samuel also notes, there is overlap between the general bodhi and pragmatic orientations, and lamas are often called for these pragmatic mediations as well throughout rural villages in the Darjeeling district. David Holmberg’s ethnographic work with western Tamang shamanic practitioners prompted him to discuss “multi-faceted ritual systems” being commonplace in South and Southeast Asia. This implies that different kinds of healing practitioners often collaborate – or at least engage in dialogue with – other ritual specialists, generating a multi-faceted, nuanced ritual system. Thus a jhākri may contact a village lama for assistance during an especially difficult situation and vice versa.

Regarding the interaction among multiple healing specialists, Holmberg conducted fieldwork with the western Tamang, the largest Tibeto-Burmese population in Nepal. Having originally migrated from Tibet, the Tamang have a unique tradition of Buddhist lamas who are householders rather than celibate monastics, in addition to an array of religious specialists. Lambus, who Holmberg refers to as “sacrificers,” are specialists who appease terrestrial powers and replace each other for most as “sacrificers,” are specialists who appease terrestrial powers and

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divinities to prevent violent weather, and they also exorcise harmful spirits and ghosts who are responsible for disease and strife. For healing rituals, lamas chant Tibetan texts while lambus chant texts in Tamang:

Lamas and lambu, in fact, can replace each other for most propitiatory and exorcistic functions; together, they fix the cosmos and assure measured relations between humans and the divine and malevolent forces, confirming that, despite significant differences... [they] are both concerned with determining order.

Tamang “shamanic” practitioners, bombo, “counter or deconstruct” the balanced, determined order established by lama and lambu. While bombo in Holmberg's research locale are able to determine the origin of disease or determine the effects of malignant entities, they rarely heal afflicted patients – which is the specialty of lamas and lambu. Instead, they “unveil' an aspect of the cosmos that lamas and lambu attempt to displace.” This involves making direct contact with those entities blamed for establishing communal dissonance and sickness. Bombo shake and convulse when possessed by the spirits of deceased bombo termed lenTe, entities viewed with suspicion by lamas, according to Holmberg. In death rites, lamas aim to appease the bla of those recently deceased, what Holmberg translates as “shadow souls,” lest they become restless, haunting spirits, as is quite possible if they are not satisfied during the intermediary postmortem state. In an interesting division of labor, bombo cannot touch corpses or be in houses where a recent death occurred; it is the lamas who have the sole duty of presiding over death rites, which would pollute the bombo as they are known to “revive the

311 Ibid.
312 Ibid.
313 Ibid.
314 Ibid., 708.

Ibid., 699.
living,” according to Holmberg’s translation.315

While there is certainly a division of labor among Buddhist lamas and jhākris in my field site, the tensions and relationships differ from the context of the western Tamang as described by Holmberg. Both lamas and jhākris may preside over the postmortem journey of the recently deceased to assure a successful rebirth – though the techniques therein differ widely – and lamas have a much higher social status for such an important rite. The distinction of duties between lambu and bombo noted by Holmberg, including contacting and embodying incorporeal entities – both benevolent and malicious – for diagnosis of afflicted patients and subsequent release and healing, is integrated into a singular set of techniques by jhākris. The wandering spirits of those recently diseased, variously referred to as ātma or sāto by jhākris, must also be successfully pacified by jhākris, or there is the dangerous risk of them becoming malignant bhūt.

To stress the importance of the pragmatic need to visit local traditional healers, those who fall deeply or suddenly ill in remote Himalayan villages have little recourse, as the nearest hospital may be too far away or too costly to afford. For example, Tashi lives in a small village or gaun adjacent to the Takdah Tea Estate, where the majority of my fieldwork occurred. His tooth became rotten and terribly infected, leading to tremendous pain, and he could not afford the cost of dental extraction, nor is a dentist easy to reach given where his home is located. As I previously mentioned, he is not opposed to jhākris but prefers to visit a Buddhist lama for any health or spiritual crisis. No local lamas were available during this situation, and so he walked to a local jhākri in a nearby village, somewhat skeptically and reluctantly. Though the tooth is no longer viable, the jhākri quite easily removed the pain instantly with a healing pūjā, and Tashi was shocked at how effective the cure was. This shifted his sense of trust, and he now visits jhākris if there are persistent issues with himself or his family. He

315 Ibid.
insists that Buddhist healers are the most effective, since “they use Vajrayāna mantras, not Hindu ones, and everyone knows the Vajrayāna mantras are the most powerful.”

Healers I spoke to were often busying themselves with subsistence labor. This included chopping logs for firewood, farming and gardening, tending to animals such as pigs, chickens, sheep and goats, cooking and cleaning and attending to quotidian manual labor to maintain their households. According to some village laypeople I spoke to, living as “everyday” villagers in this way lowers their hierarchical position as spiritual practitioners, only adding to the general suspicion/skepticism common among local residents. Anna Balikci's fieldwork, described in *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors*, addresses the tensions and varied relationships between Lepcha bongthings and village lamas in rural Sikkim, and these relationships closely parallel the dynamic between *jhākris* and village lamas in the rural Darjeeling district: “their ritual co-operation and division of labour revealed that together their seemingly contradictory practices form a single ritual complex based on a shared shamanic view of the universe.”

Referring to Buddhist authorities in Sikkim, Balikci continues, “(t)he shamans' understanding of Buddhism, the only form of real knowledge by which their rituals could be properly interpreted, was not considered sufficient for local authorities to hold their views in some esteem.”

I often encountered a similar mistrust and bias when speaking to Buddhist laypeople or lamas. As discussed in the interviews with Tibetan Buddhist lamas in 5.7, *jhākris* and shamanic practitioners were sometimes viewed as “superstitious,” outdated or misleading, perhaps providing temporary relief but not able to help others to the degree that Vajrayāna specialists are able to. Multiple lamas I spoke to argued that though *jhākris* are most likely born with inherent tantric powers or abilities, since they do not undergo a proper Buddhist training, their moral intentions are questionable and they may end up

317 Ibid., 35.
doing more harm than good with these abilities.

Stan Mumford conducted fieldwork with Tibetan communities in Nepal. He refers to what is variously called “shamanic” or “folk religious” traditions as “the ancient matrix,” implying older indigenous Himalayan traditions which predate Buddhism.\(^{318}\) Mumford describes this “ancient matrix” as being where “personal identity is relational, defined in terms of connections between person and the landmarks of local space.”\(^{319}\) This is an important definition, and the “landmarks of local space” encompass a vast array of relationships, interpersonal and ecological, crucial to the healing modalities of Nepali traditional healers. Relationality is of utmost importance, as sickness and imbalances are understood as deeply connected with how individuals relate to their social and ecological environments within the healing worldviews of jhākris. Sherry Ortner, in her work regarding shamanic-Buddhist tensions in Sherpa societies, rejects a common assumption that establishes a false dichotomy by associating Buddhism with individual spiritual development and shamanic practice with social relationships; these seemingly opposing worldviews need not conflict with each other at all.\(^{320}\) Vincanne Adams, in relation to Sherpa-Tibetan societies, argues that Tibetan Buddhism “...aimed to produce subjectivity: individuality where there had been collective identities,” which ultimately allowed individuals to “obtain self-perfection” (enlightenment).\(^{321}\) This was one attempt to control Tibet’s population through clerical-political power. In theory, this would replace the Himalayan “folk religious” orientations toward demonic possession and sickness resulting from social transgressions. However, Adams concludes that “Buddhism was really only successful at posing alternatives to pre-

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\(^{319}\) Ibid.


Buddhist notions of the self and the supernatural.”\textsuperscript{322} Thus in Himalayan Buddhist societies, the shamanic orientation is deeply interwoven into the cosmologies and everyday worldviews taken for granted among both rural and urban residents.

Samuel discusses the “ancient matrix” concept within the context of Buddhist state governance: “(t)hey [shamanic practitioners] were generally tolerated in premodern Buddhist states, but they were kept firmly subordinate to state power, and were seen as inferior and marginal in relation to the Buddhism that reinforced the state power,”\textsuperscript{323} which Samuel associates with Theravādin states such as pre-colonial Burma and Thailand. In the rural Nepali communities dispersed throughout the Darjeeling Hills district and eastern Sikkim, where political rulership and monarchies have been in continual flux and fragmentation for centuries, shamanic practice is far from marginal, and this “ancient matrix” is firmly interwoven with Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies and praxis.

As intercessors of Himalayan “folk” traditions, jhākris have a multivalent relationship with Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and institutions. One analogous position is that of Tibetan pawos (\textit{dpa'.bo}), mediums who are possessed by local non-Buddhist deities.\textsuperscript{324} Though marginal compared to state-sanctioned oracles, the pawo is still included within the Tibetan religious hierarchy after their calling and abilities are confirmed by a lama. Since the possessing entities are not Tantric deities, their status is marginal in relation to those mediums possessed by high-ranking deities. The pawo is thus, in a sense, both within and without the constraints of Tibetan Buddhist religious hierarchy; jhākris, though certainly in dialogue with Tibetan Buddhists, work entirely within their own autonomous system of validation and authority. Todd Gibson notes that this is the same word used in canonical Tibetan Buddhist texts to translate the Sanskrit \textit{vira}, or tantric “hero,” which often refers to an

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 165.  
\textsuperscript{323} Samuel, \textit{Civilized Shamans}, 7.  
\textsuperscript{324} See Samuel \textit{Civilized Shamans}, Sidky 2011.
accomplished Vajrayāna adept. Gibson further argues that the connection between these two separate meanings for pawo may correspond with a cultural interrelatedness that connects Inner Asian shamanic practitioners with Buddhism; for instance, the Turkmen and Karakalpaks refer to shamans as porkhan and parkhon, possibly relating to an early Turkic term for the Buddha, burxan. Gibson also discusses tertons, major figures in Tibetan Buddhism who are famous as “treasure revealers.” The biographies of tertons depict them as undergoing the classic “shamanic sickness” as children and sometimes being disregarded as psychopathological, only to be later legitimized as genuine tertons; this again shows a complex cultural dynamic, wherein localized shamanic practitioners' calling falls outside the purview of Tibetan Buddhist institutional hierarchy, yet they are later integrated into the institutional structure.

Among the Newari, who are based primarily in the Kathmandu Valley area of Nepal, the uniquely syncretic institutionalized Buddhism practiced by lineages of Vajrācāryas adds to the ongoing, dynamic fluidity that connects Himalayan traditional healing systems and clerical religious institutions. During my brief fieldwork in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, I met one Newari Vajrācārya, a title meaning “master (or teacher) of the Vajra,” named Śri Jñāna. Like many Newari Vajrācāryas, he is a married householder. I met him at his home in a predominantly Newari neighborhood walking distance from the famous Swayambhunāth or “Monkey Temple,” a Vajrayāna temple central to Newar Buddhism. He lives in a two story home with his wife and children, with a personal mandir set aside in the first floor to meet ill patients and other visitors, which is where we spoke. He described the unique monastic context of Newar Vajrācāryas, a caste-bound vocation in which a period of monastic celibacy is common; however, being a married householder is the norm, as long as “the mind is totally devoted,”

326 Ibid.
327 Ibid., 48.
as he claimed. Sifting through dozens of Sanskrit and Newari texts, he proudly remarked that only the Newar Buddhists have preserved the Indic Sanskrit Buddhist tradition in the original language. Many local Newar Buddhists visit him for healing, along with those from Hindu communities. Śri Jñāna conceives of the ability to heal as being a vital component of Vajrācāryas' clerical duties.

The guru above all is needed. Dīkṣā mantra is given, dhyāna [meditation] instructions are given [by the guru].

First, I check the pulse for diagnosis when a sick person comes. This is the same with an āyurvedic or Western doctor. I can tell instantly if it is issues with bhūts, if it is a haunting or black magic. There’s no way to 'prove' this. I also get the birthday, jāt, normal and God given name.

Then I do dhyāna with eyes open or closed and use a mantra to heal.

The main practice is to keep the guru as protector, then invoke all the mātās and Devīs. [This includes] Yoginī Devi, Kul devtā [kept in one's house], Bija suryī?

I travel for work, but home mandir is the most effective [for healing].

Paramparā (the lineage) is continued via kul. Anyone of any gender can enter this.

People who visit are afflicted by bhūt and black magic.

I determine their birthday and figure out birth graha. Graha devas determine sickness as well as date of birth. Astrology is declining in practice, however.

Dhyān is the main way. Main sādhanā is japa, dhyāna, and mantra. This is the true yoga – which is jñāna. Vajrācāryas are influenced by Hinduism but there is only one dharma.

Astrology is divined with rice: jokhānā [Nepali] or jok kur kashio [Newari].

God does nothing without humans, as we do nothing without God. We depend on God; God depends on us. I was first a Theravada bhikṣu then later instructed in tantra.

Brahmins are the same as Vajrācāryas.

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328 At this point, he paused for a moment to enter a yoga āsana, laughing and humorously imitating those who think this is the summation of yoga.
Śri Jñāna's initial comment regarding his etiologies – there is “no way to prove this” – related to a point he made multiple times, in which he contrasted his work with modern scientific understandings. He emphasized that his employed methods cannot be “proven” to those who are skeptical of what cannot be established outside of empirical biomedical standards. This point was important to him, as he explained that multiple visitors and afflicted patients expressed skepticism regarding his methods, which differ from allopathic medicinal remedies and biomedical conceptions of human anatomy and physiology. Nonetheless, he also repeatedly mentioned his affinities with both āyurvedic and Western physicians, as the first step in his diagnoses is to check the pulse of ill patients.

Parallel to the diagnostic approaches expressed by other Nepali traditional healers in this chapter, crucial factors regarding susceptibility to chronic illness include: 1.) exposure to harmful spirits, bhūt, and/or malignant witchcraft; 2.) “weak” astrological alignment, graha, leaving one vulnerable to attacks from malignant influences. His tutelary guru is a main protector, along with the devas and devīs he invokes for protection. Similar to the descriptions provided by Nepali traditional healers in my ethnography, he likewise divines with rice, jokhānā. Though the work of Vajrācāryas is reserved for high-caste Buddhist practitioners – analogous with Brahmins, as Śri Jñāna described – the healing repertoires employed show a fluid permeability with Himalayan traditional healing practices.

I asked if he could further describe the multivalent influences within Vajrācāryas' practices:

J: It sounds like you draw from both Hindu and Buddhist dharma in your practices – can you explain that?
Ś: Śivajī is the top [deva] for Hindus...That is true for us too, though we are Buddhist. Vajrācāryas don't separate [Hinduism and Buddhism]. *Dharma is nature.* Śri Jñāna then contrasted tantric methods from non-tantric Buddhism, explaining that it was necessary for him to first be a Theravada bhikṣu before he was capable of applying tantric methods. He further lamented how the “difficult tantric practices,” such as cremation ground practice or other advanced methods, are fading, even among local yogis and renunciates. Regarding śmaśān sādhanā or charnel ground practice, section 5.9 briefly discusses the role of this practice in relation to Himalayan traditional healing praxis.

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329 Quoted verbatim, as he said this in English.
Picture 8: A cave where jhākris conduct nocturnal practices. Near Lopchu Tea Estate
5.4 Diagnosis and Cure

The diagnostic techniques I observed during fieldwork rely on pūjā and a kind of divination in which the healer can see directly into the sick person's body-mind-soul; this is accomplished by reading uncooked grains of rice or slicing into fresh ginger and divining. This pūjā is accompanied by wearing ceremonial clothing and mālās, the playing of a dama hand-drum among jhākris, burning incense, chanting mantra, and playing bells and small instruments.

Etiologies consistently fell into the following categories:

1. “natural” sicknesses that can be treated with Western medicine, such as the common flu and other viruses, broken bones and other common maladies.
2. Contamination by bhūt and other malignant spirits. This can happen among those whose graha or astrological chart is weak and thus more susceptible and vulnerable to harmful spirits.
3. Witchcraft: this results from intentionally harmful actions conducted by “witches,” boksī.
4. Kul deutā imbalance: every family or “clan” has a presiding deity who looks after and protects a given family lineage. Not giving sufficient respect or pūjā to this deity can create deep familial imbalance and sicknesses. Also, a sudden and violent death, especially suicide, can result in lost or restless bhūts who haunt their family, causing disturbances.
5. Ecological offences: causing a disturbance or contaminating the forest can invoke wrath among the forest deities, shikari deutā, leading to potentially serious illnesses. Nāgs live underground and preside over water sources such as springs and creeks and can also be disturbed by humans, provoking their wrath. Riverbeds are particularly delicate places for shikari. This deutā can take any form, appearing as a bird or other nonhuman animal, and acting disrespectfully in the forest at dusktime is especially disturbing. Infants and children are more vulnerable to these local deities.
Regarding those sicknesses that respond to Western biomedical approaches and pharmacological agents, traditional healers in my field site expressed frustration about being continually pushed to the margins as the scientific precision of Western biomedicine holds a higher status, providing relief from major sicknesses and disease as well as common headaches and gastric issues. As David Gellner notes regarding the Kathmandu Valley area, “Biomedicine is one further tradition - though one with certain unique characteristics - which has been added to, and has achieved a hegemonic position within, what was already a pluralistic situation including Ayurveda, astrology, herbal remedies, magic and religion.” All of the healing strategies he mention are also primary among traditional healers in the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim, while biomedicine has undoubtedly reached hegemonic dominance. Brandon Kohrt and Ian Harper associate this biomedical prestige with the more general marginalization of mental health treatment: “(w)hereas illnesses of the body require modern biomedical doctors, dhami-jhankri (traditional healers) are described as having therapeutic value for neurotic illnesses, as they allow the patient a spiritual construct to explain the symptoms. This logic may well link mental illness with superstition and 'backward' forms of healing.” During their interviews with psychiatrists in Kathmandu, one physician explained that he decided not to pursue psychiatry because “(f)or families, it is a bigger shame to have a child who is a psychiatrist than to have a child who is not a doctor at all.”

Kohrt and Harper also note that Cartesian biomedical privileging of the body over mind – what they refer to as “Cartesian hegemony” – reinforces the stigma of traditional healers being “backwards,” and the World Health Organization even has a category in the International Classification of Diseases

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332 Ibid., 480.
(ICD-10) labeled “Trance and Possession Disorders,” a category sometimes applied by psychiatrists when treating traditional healers as patients, thus referring to traditional healers as being inherently psychopathological. Since physical issues are much more tangible in relation to the amorphous nature of psycho-spiritual distress, biomedical approaches to sickness represent a modality that is seemingly more effective, which reinforces the ongoing Nepali stigmatization of mental health as well as the distrust in traditional healers, viewed suspiciously as being charlatans. As I discuss throughout this chapter, however, this stigmatizing relationship is nuanced, and many villagers throughout rural Nepal, Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills continue to visit traditional healers at the first sign of sicknesses, or when Western biomedicine proves to be ineffective.

As Monkumari Tamang described in an interview presented in section 5.7, “People come to me because they have no option...we jhākris are practical and we help!” Villagers in my field site who have few health care options thus rely on physicians, allopathic medicine and Nepali traditional healers during health crises, though the latter may be the most expedient option.

Among diagnoses, contamination by bhūt or other entities was by far the most prevalent. This usually occurs while visiting graveyards or from the influence of a recently deceased family member. Symptoms often include convulsions, loss of sleep, listlessness and a general sense of malaise. Those who die violently, from suicide, or who are lost and roaming in the postmortem state will attach to a physical place, entering the body of people who pass through these locations, particularly those who are more vulnerable, frail, or have weak astrological alignment – Nep. graha. The fragility and vulnerability of the postmortem journey, that intersection of immense potential for future rebirth and for becoming lost between worlds, was a repeated refrain during conversations with jhākris. Jitindra Kumar commented thus during a conversation at a hotel in Gangtok, “At funerals people get touched

333 Ibid., 478.
by bhūt and can become very sick. They come to me to be freed of them. These bhūt are lost after death. I try to make their path right by giving a sacrifice and the proper mantras.”³³⁴

5.5 “The Total Situation”

As Samuel notes in the context of Tibetan medicine, “. . .the first priority is the restoration of balance and harmony within the organism as a whole. Individual symptoms are interpreted as a consequence of the organism being out of balance. Treatment therefore depends much more on the total situation than on the individual symptom.”³³⁵ This aligns with my central argument: that the healing modalities of Nepali shamanic practitioners approach the dynamic process of healing as a totality. Western biomedical approaches isolate specific symptoms, addressing whatever localized organ or physiological mechanism may be affected, which is often remedied with “allopathic” or pharmacological agents which may target microbes or affect other localized physiological activity. A worldview that is at least partially shared by Nepali traditional healers instead views the human organism as much more than a single entity: one organism is in continual feedback – in a nexus of complex relationships – and these dynamic relationships deeply affect one's balance or lack thereof. These connections include interpersonal relations as well as one's relationship with nonhuman animals, ancestral spirits, nature deutil and the land itself. Samuel's description of “harmony within the organism as a whole” refers to how an individual relates to him or herself, which is also a fundamental relationship; substance abuse or chronic anxiety and self-doubt may be understood as a destructive, disharmonious relationship with oneself. All of these relationships, the “total situation,” must be carefully evaluated by the shamanic practitioner before insight and the possibility for healing can

³³⁴ Personal interview with Jitindra Kumar, near Gangtok, Sikkim, 16 April 2018. ³³⁵ Samuel, Civilized Shamans, 192.
manifest. A specific symptom, such as bodily pain, or a mental disturbance such as anxiety and depression, is thus understood as resulting from a systemic imbalance and disharmony among these relationships. According to the Nepali traditional healers I spoke to, it is generally the case that harmful entities such as bhūt do not randomly appear without reason – instead, they are drawn to certain energies, magnetically attracted to destructive emotions such as chronic depression and hateful intentions. This illustrates how a psychological disturbance can provoke a greater disharmony which in turn reinforces the intensity of the sickness.

Within this ecological framework, the local ecology encompasses the physical environment, human and nonhuman animals, incorporeal entities and deities that preside over natural sites; the various relationships among this ecology are crucial, forming a dynamic feedback loop that can lead to harmonious thriving or serious injury or illness within human beings. While it is easy to categorize this orientation toward the natural world as “animism,” that term is particularly loaded and misleading as a general analytical category.

Features of the environment which are perceived as “inanimate” may not be animate to human perception, but that does not preclude this capacity to metamorphose among seemingly inert objects. Referring to jhākris as “animists” is similarly problematic, as is relying on the highly loaded English word “spirits” to refer to the sentience or entities that exist throughout the physical environment. Indeed, the natural world displays a multitude of dynamic complexities, and as explained in my field interviews, there are subtle or non-visible relationships apparent only to jhākris and other traditional healers. A major aspect of their healing practice is to correct the disturbances or disharmonies that exist among this nexus of ecological relationships.

One way this dynamic complexity manifests is in the way that the deutā themselves appear. The shikari forest deity, as noted above, can appear as a human being, as a bird, or as other
manifestations; there is a fluidity in outward appearance, and in one sense, the shikari is all and none of these forms. Dusk is considered a liminal time, one of potential danger and disorder, and so the appearance of shikari is varied and unpredictable, particularly during this time of the day. The forest during dusk and nighttime is the ultimate liminal, unpredictable space. Beings residing within natural sites are often capricious and can be easily offended, causing sickness or transforming into wrathful forms. Nāg and other entities, some of which are usually incorporeal, such as bhūt, can appear as flesh-and-blood human beings. While walking near the Takdah Tea Estate during sunset with a friend, he expressed concern about walking through the forest at that time of the day. He recounted an eerie story about a local teenager who enjoyed solitary night-time walks in the forest, and he fell deeply in love with a woman who always greeted him near a specific tree. They only met in this same forest at night. Over time, this young man appeared to go progressively mad, and his face became sunken in while he grew increasingly weaker and sick. He would speak to himself for hours on end, while claiming he was speaking to his love. After his concerned family took him to a lama for consulting, he was diagnosed as falling under the spell of a ghost, who was gradually stealing his jīvan bal or life-force. This again shows the capricious, potentially dangerous beings who roam the forests, as well as their ability to take on any form that is sensible to human beings.

Several jhākris I spoke to bemoaned human pollution and their disrespectful destruction of the physical environment throughout the planet. They argued that much of the malaise shared throughout all inhabited continents, including physical disease and debilitating depression and anxiety, is a direct result of the wrath inflicted by the terrestrial powers of Earth. During an interview in Gangtok, Jitendra Kumar Jhākri commented solemnly and also in a matter-of-fact tone, “The Earth is slowly taking revenge. We will grow more and more sick and suffer even more. It is our karma as humans – it is all being balanced.”
The next section addresses salient features among healing pūjās conducted by jhākris in my field site. I then discuss “soul loss” or sāto gayo, a common occurrence relating to traumatic experiences in which a bit of one's incorporeal essence is believed to leave the physical body, requiring the mediation of a traditional healer to recover this last sāto.

5.6 Pūjās and “Soul Loss”

Prior to the healing pūjā, divination (jokhānā) is performed, which often involves “reading” grains of uncooked rice or slicing fresh ginger root and divining what is perceived in the slices. This allows the jhākri to have a sense of one's graha or astrological alignment, as well as other information needed before the pūjā can be performed. During the healing pūjā itself, the jhākri invokes his or her helper spirits (guru-deutā) and Devas or Devīs while fiercely pounding a frame drum, the dhyāngro. It is above all the rhythmic pulsation of the dhyāngro, instrument of Śiva, that allows jhākris to contact spirits and deutā; once he or she embodies these entities with the pounding of the dhyāngro, the quotidian self of the jhākri ceases to be, becoming instead an interpreter between spirits and human beings. This drumming occurs near a home-altar (Nep. thān), replete with images of major Hindu or Buddhist Devas and adorned with ritual paraphernalia. Pūjās are usually public events, and family members of the patient or jhākri and other villagers will stay to observe, often talking throughout the pūjā and even making jokes despite the somber and dramatic ambiance of the ritual.

The pūjās I observed often followed a similar pattern: The jhākri initially spends time attending to the home-altar, burning incense and preparing ritual instruments. The jhākri chants the mantras of his or her tutelary deities which can take a considerable amount of time. Eyes glossed over, the jhākri’s face takes on a faraway expression as new energies enter and emerge. As the spirits enter the jhākri’s body, he or she begins to convulse and shake quite dramatically, with the head flailing violently from
left to right. One of the *sine qua non* features of *jhākris* is the convulsions and shaking that occur when a *deutā* firmly inhabits his or her body.

One *pūjā* I observed was performed by Gopal Jhākri. With eyes closed, mumbled and unintelligible sounds emit from his mouth. Before the *pūjā*, Gopal informed me that languages unknown to him, such as Tibetan or other local languages, may spontaneously pour forth: “this is when lamas speak through me.” Continuing with odd sounds and panting, the drumming intensifies while he swings the *dhyāngro* and its handle around with intense energy and poise. *Mantras* intensify in volume and intonation as his head swings from left to right, sometimes forward and backward. It is no longer the individual speaking or singing – it is now the tutelary deity or spirit inhabiting the *jhākri’s* body in command, and the *jhākri* is then a mouthpiece for the inhabiting entity. Patients offer plates of rice and money near the altar, and the *jhākri* throws these grains of rice on the altar and later on the patient while chanting *mantras*. What follows this is often *jokhānā* or divination, while the *jhākri* is still possessed. The inhabiting spirit or deity directly diagnoses what is causing the afflicted patient to suffer, asking: is this a *bhūt*, *pret*, or other harmful spirit causing sickness? What is the cause of this? Gopal gradually begins to breathe deeper and slower without panting, chanting a new string of *mantras*. Eyes still closed with a newfound sense of calmness, he gradually returns to himself.

Affliction is usually caused by *bhūt* possession or harmful witchcraft inflicted by a *boksī*. At this point while still possessed by the tutelary deity, the *jhākri* may chant protective or destructive *mantras* to directly remove the afflicting spirits. At this point, spiritual warfare with a harmful entity may occur, which is a highly energetic process, involving an array of powerful *mantras* and consistent ingestion of alcohol and tobacco, often lasting all night; it is extremely dangerous, and there are many stories of *jhākris* dying during these battles. Among both *jhākris* and *mātās*, the identity of the *boksī* is only obliquely revealed, with references to the person's village or other imprecise details, but the
specific name is never mentioned. The offered cure may involve a change in diet, a prescribed series of purificatory pūjās, wearing a consecrated mālā or amulet, or ingesting consecrated grains of rice or other food items. One's present predicament is explained and analyzed, and often, predictions about the future are given. Āyurvedic medicines may be prescribed. Patients sometimes spontaneously confess wrongdoing or harmful actions they've engaged in, providing a socially sanctioned, purificatory catharsis.

The question as to how such healings work is considerably complex. Though not every healing ritual conducted by jhākris is effective, by and large and pragmatically speaking, they do seem to work for many ailing patients in my field site. It is tempting to explain the cathartic effects of social ritual in a psychologically reductionist manner, concluding that resulting relief is little more than the “placebo effect.” Winkelman argues that ritual corresponds with a deep mammalian instinct for social belonging and integration, and it meets “fundamental human needs for belonging, comfort, and bonding with others. Rituals integrate people, enhancing social-support systems, group identity, and self-development. Community bonding heals through eliciting neurobiologically mediated forms of attachment.” Thus if one is suffering psychologically from listlessness, depression, or anxiety, underlying causes may relate to feeling isolated and alienated, and therefore removed from and not belonging to the local community. A compassionate and empathetic attitude between healer and patient is itself therapeutic. Healing pūjās, being highly public and performative, allow a reintegration into the bonding structure of one's local community, wherein suffering is no longer hidden or endured secretly as a private condition – it becomes a public concern. By naming and calling out the afflictive condition as a spirit or sentient entity, the sickness now has a form that can be related to and understood within a

larger social framework. Those aspects of the self which are hidden, repressed, or shamefully denied must come to the surface and be exposed and confronted. On some level, witnessing and directly experiencing the dramatic extraction of a harmful spirit during a healing pūjā is itself immensely cathartic, regardless of what may be occurring in an objectively ontological sense.

Among some Spanish speaking cultures, including the healing tradition of curanderismo practiced by my ancestry, the word susto relates to soul loss, which may result from a multitude of causes. The general English terms “soul loss/soul recovery” are widely used throughout indigenous American traditions. Soul loss may occur suddenly through an intense fright, accident, or psychophysiological trauma, or from ongoing situations of violence, warfare, and abuse, leading to posttraumatic stress disorder and other traumatic disorders.\(^{338}\) The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) now lists susto within the category of “culture bound syndromes.” Intergenerational trauma resulting from cultural displacement, loss of land and relationship to place, ancestral genocide and diaspora are major causes of being born with susto; such afflictions reside within the core of one's being, and psychotherapeutic approaches or psychiatric intervention may treat the symptoms, but rarely heal this fundamental wound. This listlessness can manifest as an all-consuming sense of despair and meaninglessness.

Patricia Gonzales gives an account of susto as a collective, cultural phenomenon occurring throughout differing indigenous American communities, while focusing on indigenous Mexica/Nahua orientations to the etiology and healing of susto. “Susto and related aforementioned Indigenous etiologies are more than somatic occurrences. They are not 'magical' illnesses and carry their own internal logic as part of coherent meaning systems with expansive concepts of the body, nature, spirit

\(^{338}\) For further discussion of soul loss from a cross-cultural perspective, see Jeanne Achterberg, Imagery in Healing: Shamanism and Modern Medicine (Boston: New Science Library, 1985).
and place. . .These frameworks are often invisible or hidden from providers of allopathic medicine.”

Laurence Kirmayer, discussing a model of embodiment regarding psycho-physiological healing, argues:

The basic premise of psychosomatic medicine is that the meaning of events influences the regulation of physiological systems to give rise to disease and modulate the course of illness and response to treatment. Meaning may be cognitive (involving dissonance reduction, causal explanation, completeness, coherence, reference to core values and beliefs, tacit assumptions, and creative efficacy), affective (related to strongly held or felt emotions); and social performative (resulting in rhetorical force, social value, interpersonal effectiveness, social positioning).

Extending from the arguments presented by Gonzales and Kirmayer, I stress the crucial importance of local cultural meanings in relation to understandings of embodiment, disease, and healing. This corresponds with how one's bodily integrity and immunological function can be affected and even afflicted by cultural symbols, intra- and inter-personal relationships. For instance, among villagers in the rural Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim, even suspecting that one may be affected by harmful witchcraft is enough to fall gravely ill. Even if this is an imagined fabrication, worrying about potential witchcraft may still cause deep malaise and illness. Relatedly, accusing a woman of being a boksī has profound social consequences, strongly altering social status and perceptions of this person, and she may even be forcefully removed from a village if this accusation is agreed upon. Here the cultural symbol of the “witch,” boksī, has an embodied potency that can affect one's health and sense of well-being.

The way one interprets or processes – or represses – a deeply traumatic experience corresponds with the meaning one assigns to such experiences, which may then result in chronic illnesses or mental disturbances and anxiety. Thus Patrisia Gonzales, describing her interviews with traditional Mexica

healers or *curanderas*, notes that “traditional healers hold that this deep untreated trauma may 'mature' into chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and depression.” This again illustrates the important role of how one assigns meaning to a traumatic or painful event. The affective dimension of “holding” onto unrelieved traumatic emotions may be conducive to physiological harm and disease.

“Soul loss” is therefore an underlying affliction of one's underlying body-and-mind essence, which can manifest as a wide array of psycho-physiological illnesses and disease. Traditional healers work to diagnose what underlies this loss, and attempt to recover and bring back those bits of lost vital essence that have scattered from *susto*; this relates to the social performative aspect of assigning meaning to a traumatic or painful event in a public healing ceremony, wherein the inability to express deeply held pain and emotional grief can prompt alienation.

Social alienation, or feeling a fundamental disconnect with one's local society and the larger universe, may result from or be connected to the dynamics of *susto*. There is a palpable effect on one's health and disposition when surrounded by caring family members and supported by warm interpersonal relationships; conversely, the lack of social connectivity and trusted confidants may harm one's psychological well-being. I also include connection with one's local “biotic community” and terrestrial energies as an aspect in psycho-physiological health; the increasingly impersonal nature of existing in sprawling metropolises in industrialized societies, with individuals isolated from each other and from the visceral, embodied connection with the natural world, contributes to a larger, collective *susto*. As already stressed, the orientation of “living in place,” of paying close attention to the reciprocal relationships and sacred connection between human and biotic communities, is integral throughout indigenous American nations, and it is also crucial to the cosmology shared by Nepali *jhākris*, who often work as mediators for wrathful terrestrial powers, offended and vengeful from

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human pollution and disrespect.

Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, “flourishing” or “well-being” rests upon the claim that human beings are inherently social animals, whose physical and psychological health fluctuate with the quality of interpersonal relationships. Psychologists Ryff et al. also discuss ongoing quantitative research that presents the well-known physiological correlation between the increase in oxytocin, associated with positive mood and affect, and supportive personal relationships. Communal soul retrieval rituals, including the public attendance of *jhākri* healing *pūjās*, serve to reaffirm and reintegrate social connectivity that may have been damaged or limited during the patient's struggle with sickness.

Among traditional Nepali healers, a parallel to the notion of soul loss is *sāto gayo*, which is considered a common occurrence in my field site and in rural Nepal. *Sāto* is an important component of human beings, and it is often translated as “spirit” or “consciousness.” This loss of soul-vitality and accompanying listlessness and depression is usually attributed to *lāgo*, spiritual affliction from harmful spirits or malignant witchcraft. In soul retrieval rituals, it is the lost *sāto* that is called back to the afflicted patient. It is the *sāto* that is often the focus of attention during healing rituals conducted by Nepali traditional healers. Loss of *sāto* is recurring among children who become disoriented from a sudden fright, or from being exposed to *deutā*, especially the unpredictable spirits that roam the forests at dusk and night.

Winkelman concludes that the neurological correlate of shamanic healing is “integrative” functioning: parasympathetic dominance, interhemispheric synchronization, and limbic-frontal integration. Healings that affect the nervous system in this way can have lasting and ongoing

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physiological and therapeutic effects. Interhemispheric synchronization refers to so-called “altered states of consciousness” simultaneously activating the limbic and neocortical structures, integrating information from the whole organism, which can lead to feelings of oneness, enlightenment, personal integration and a deeply therapeutic sense of relief. Integration of the paleomammalian brain with neocortical functions via alteration of serotonin transmission may also lead to a higher degree of socio-empathic awareness, which correlates with the cathartic healing of social relationships, both intra- and inter-personally, within shamanic rituals.  

5.7 Buddhist-Jhākri Division of Labor

5.71 “We jhākris are practical and we help!”

As the shared Nepali historical and cosmological framework is transmitted through oral narratives among jhākris, one commonly repeated story, with numerous iterations, describes a kind of division of labor between Tibetan Buddhists and jhākris. Śiva or Mahādeu is the archetypal, first jhākri. A.W. MacDonald recounts a story describing Śiva and a Tibetan lama meeting on auspicious Mount Kailaś. They raced toward the sun, both relying on ritual instruments such as books of mantra and Śiva's famed rudracchēmālā. The lama reached the sun while Mahādeu was only halfway there; the latter then built a drum which allowed him to fly to the sun. It was agreed upon that the lama would conduct pūjās during the day while Mahādeu would perform his at night. They then separated, settling into different areas on Mount Kailaś. This then set the precedent for the nocturnal healing rituals of jhākris, as well as an attempt to establish mutual cultural respect between jhākris and Tibetan Buddhists.

As I observed during fieldwork in the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim, a division of labor between Buddhists and *jhākris* regarding healing and important rituals, such as funerary rites, establishes a nuanced relationship in terms of social prestige in the Darjeeling Hills. According to Tashi and his wife Dawa Lamu, there are rituals needed proceeding the death of a family member among local villagers, whether Hindu or Buddhist, and funerary rites conducted by Buddhist lamas confer a high status; these rites are also conducted by *jhākris*.

Sankar Chamgling, a Rāi *bijuwa* who lives near the Takdah Tea Estate, was the first participant to explain his or her role in conducting local funerary rites. When I initially visited Sankar at his home, he was performing a healing *pūjā* for a sick infant, shown below in Picture 10. Sankar and Tashi told me that infants and young children who fall sick in the remote villages of the Darjeeling Hills are often initially taken to a local healer, as access to medical physicians may be limited, and allopathic medicine may not help the condition. Sankar took his work especially serious and had a certain earnestness about his approach to healing practices. After our first conversation, I asked if he could perform a healing *pūjā* for me, as I was having ongoing stomach issues which seemed to worsen during the harsh weather and physical conditions of the Himalayan winter.

I stayed at Tashi's cottage in a village adjacent to the Takdah Tea Estate at the time, and Sankar and I agreed to meet there in the morning. He walked the three to four kilometer journey – a considerably difficult and often uphill walk – early in the morning. Sankar carried a few items, including a small bamboo basket or *doko* with a few pieces of whole, local ginger. I explained to him that I was seeking help regarding my stomach issues, telling him that Western medicine had been partially helpful so far. I also asked for his counsel relating to my life-path and any imminent dangerous circumstances he might discern. After offering him tea and briefly conversing about his journey to Tashi's home, he performed a divination or *jokhānā*, slicing into the fresh ginger slices and examining
the patterned cross-sections. He immediately told me that my body rejects anything with garlic and onion, and I need to stop eating them both; attempting to avoid those spices in rural India is truly a difficult feat in itself. Intriguingly, I'd recently been tested for food allergens and sensitivities and garlic and onion were primary issues. He found this interesting, as he follows a similar diet. As I was drinking *aduvā chai*, ginger tea, at the time, I asked him if ginger is also included. He laughed and jokingly declared, *aduvā rāmrō cha*, “ginger is good!”

Sankar then turned to my *graha* or astrological alignment, saying that I have a favorable and strong *graha*, which is a good sign for my future life events. He also said that I am followed by spirits from my *kul*, who will offer protection as long as I follow certain hygienic practices, such as adhering to a plain, healthy diet and avoiding contaminated areas such as graveyards. I briefly discussed the importance of maintaining connection with ancestors in the belief system of my indigenous familial heritage. Sankar spoke further about how spirits linger in one's *kul*, and how this relates to the funerary rites he conducts:

I pray to my *kul* – the spirits of my forefathers – constantly, and I summon their spirits twice a year.

When someone dies, I visit their family immediately. I guide the body to burial. After burial, I visit their home and the males all cut their hair. Then the son of the deceased stays in retreat, only eating fruit, rice, and milk for seven days. They wear white and eat ginger. After purifying, they go to the burial site. We take things the dead person liked, such as their favorite meat or alcohol. I put these on the ground with my left hand while other witnesses watch. I call the spirit, announcing these offerings in their own language [specific to their ethnocultural group]. We pray that the deceased person will eat these items and be happy.

Then, I call their *ātma* and speak to them. If the person was old, they are kept in the *kul*. If the person was young, they are kept outside of the *kul*. An infant's *ātma* is kept near a flower vase.

I summon the *ātma* to stay there. The *ātma* is served food to stay satisfied. If they are unhappy, they will haunt the family. Otherwise they do not give trouble.
The ātma is kept inside of a structure built from the leaves of a tree [unclear which tree]. It is contained there; if not, it will cause trouble with the family or with others.

The ātma that remains from an unnatural death [e.g. murder, suicide, or other violent situations] will infect others and harm them... We have to please Devī and give the proper pūjā after someone dies violently.

As Sankar describes, in addition to the connotation of kul as ancestral spirits, the kul is also contained within a physical location in one's home. He showed me his house kul when I first visited him, a small enclosed area near the front entrance of his house adorned with paintings of devas and devīs; he also recites jap, mantra recitation, adjacent to the home kul.

Once the deceased family member dwells within the ancestral kul, this timing is extremely precarious. If unsettled, disturbed, or overly attached to Earthly affairs, their ātma can cause serious havoc, disrupting the harmonious structure of the kul and possibly haunting the family or others. It is during this crucial time that jhākris must act deftly, calling upon helper devīs/devas and tutelary spirits to guide the process properly and safely. As Sankar discussed, there are also local cultural patterns that dictate how the funerary rites and prohibitions are to be conducted. Once within the kul, it is the family's responsibility to keep the ancestor's memory intact and to respect them with regular offerings and pūjās, or serious injury or illness is likely to occur. Sankar mentions using his left hand – a body part symbolizing pollution throughout South Asia – to offer food items to the recently deceased. Offering food, parallel to the offering of chicken blood to harmful spirits, is seen as a form of appeasement, since Sankar and other practitioners I interviewed described wandering spirits as voraciously, insatiably hungry.
Violent deaths, such as those resulting from murder and suicide, are especially dangerous; not only do such spirits often cause harm for family members or others, the events surrounding these deaths can also traumatize or pollute the physical place itself, and these areas should be avoided, as Duma Mātājī informed me. Much of Sankar's work, similar to other Nepali traditional healers in my ethnography, is concerned with maintaining the precarious balance of reciprocity between local residents and unpredictable spirits; the ātma of those recently deceased may easily become harmful and vengeful pret or bhūt.

After our conversation and Sankar's performance of jokhānā, I offered him money as a sign of gratitude. Smiling modestly, he repeatedly refused any donation. He then pointed towards his doko basket while placing his hands together in the añjali mudrā, implying that I should place any money there instead of handing it to him: Ma paisā svīkāra gardaina; yō mērō lāgi hō'ina – “I won't accept money; that isn't for me.”
One pragmatic constraint that affects who conducts funerary rites is economic.

Picture 9: Sankar performing pūjā for a sick infant: Takdah Tea Estate
According to the villagers I interviewed who live in or adjacent to the Takdah Tea Estate, hiring a Buddhist lama to conduct funerary rites is seen as more prestigious and potentially more effective for the safety of the deceased family member's ātma during the postmortem journey. However, funerary rites conducted by lamas – which are considerably elaborate and involve a large gathering of monks – are becoming increasingly expensive, and many villagers simply cannot afford the cost. In contrast, as Tashi explained in relation to seeking help for his painfully rotting tooth, local jhākris are much more accessible to hire with short notice, and they are more affordable than hiring lamas. Some jhākris do not ask for money upfront at all, and instead accept whatever donation is available from the family. Thus, even Buddhist families often have little choice but to hire a jhākri for the funerary rites and procession.

Monkumari Tamang, a jhākri I interviewed, expressed her frustration with the encroachment of Buddhism in the area insofar as it can affect the transmission of jhākri lineages. I met her after attending a large public lecture given by traveling Hindu pânditas in the Takdah Tea Estate during fieldwork in early 2017. The pânditas recited verses from the Vedas followed by commentary on the verses, concluding the lecture with the recitation of Vedic mantras. Throughout the event, fresh and piping hot Nepali food was distributed, along with warming cups of chai, which was quite welcome on a chill winter day. While leaving the lecture hall I passed Duma Mātājī, introduced in section 5.10, who warmly greeted me. I was informed about a nearby jhākri while conversing with friends of Tashi after the lecture and advised to visit her, as she is an established and well-respected practitioner.

Along with Tashi and his friend, I began a long, steep and spiral descent to the adjacent village where Monkumari lives. The lecture was held at the peak of a range of hills just above Takdah Tea Estate itself, so both the downward and upward climbs were particularly tiresome, and I had to jump to avoid walking through stagnant pools of frigid water. We eventually reached Monkumari's home about
thirty minutes later. We greeted her, and she was initially quite skeptical, questioning my intentions:

Monkumari: Why me? Do you need something from me?

Me: I am sorry to intrude. I am doing fieldwork and my goal is to document your practices and those of jhākris in the area. I hope to give back to your community in whatever small way possible by describing your healing practices, if you are interested in this.

Monkumari: Achha, fine, yes I understand now. Come join my husband and I and we will talk, though I have only a little time to give.

I thereafter realized that I had left my backpack, audio recorder and field notes at the lecture hall! Since I was not sure how to make my way back to the makeshift lecture hall and Monkumari had limited time, I pleaded Tashi's friend to return to the hall for my belongings, offering him a payment. He luckily accepted.

While waiting for him, Monkumari's husband joined us, along with neighbors who filed in and out, quizzically curious about who these visitors were and why they were there. On the wall of her cottage was a massive poster of Śiva, a photograph of the famous towering statue at Namchi, Sikkim. “Śiva, Mahādeu is the first jhākri. We gain power [śakti] through him. Every jhākri must give pūjā to Mahādeu.” She then described some of the processes affecting the transmission of her family lineage or kul, connecting this with her calling to be a jhākri.

I worship my father and grandfathers' ātmas, not devī.\textsuperscript{345} They speak through me. Then I have powers. It is hereditary, though not always carried down.

\textit{Jhākris} are becoming extinct. It [the transmission] is genetic. People are following

\textsuperscript{345} She spent a few minutes contrasting herself as a jhākri, rather than being a mātā.
Buddhism...so people are not worshiping their *kul*; they are neglecting it so their forefathers are not choosing them. They are not being appointed. Buddhism is making them forget their *kul*. This is true in Nepal also. Proper attention is not given to *jhākris* after they die.

I use the hand drum [ḍāmaru], bells, cymbals and morning and evening *pūjās*. A plate can be used instead. I pray during the full moon and fifteen days after the full moon.

If bad spirits come, you have to pray and pacify the bad spirit to be left alone. You have to give something in return. You also have to pacify your ancestors [*kul*]. Give pān [Betel] leaf, incense, sindur, sweets and flowers.

If you go to the forest, there is a god and hunter god [*shikari*]. They also need to be served. If offerings are not satisfying them, then chicken blood is offered. In the forest, the spirit will enter one with a “weak shadow” [*graha*]. *Shikari* is protecting the forest...

I acted crazy [pāgala] as a child. I wandered through the forest until I found a guru. Sometimes I cry endlessly, sometimes I laugh endlessly.

I examine beads or grains of rice [for divination].

I learn guidance and how to heal through dreams. People come to me because they have no option...we *jhākris* are practical and we help! Medicines are more effective with *pūjā*. Boksī are like *jhākris* but their goal is to hurt others. I have to pray and ask them for an exchange. Leave the person alone. I respect and pray to them.

With *jhākris*, it depends person to person on what is proper to do. My lineage cannot eat pork or garlic. But it depends on the *kul*. If other clans come here, they follow my *kul's* rules. For *pūjā* I use a bamboo staff; certain flowers are required for certain *pūjās*, it depends on the circumstances.

A common frustration expressed by traditional healers throughout my fieldwork relates to the perception that local ancestral ways, *via* the reverence and appeasement of one's familial *kul*, are being neglected. This is accompanied by an increase in sickness, depression, and other ailments in local villagers, as the *ātmas* of deceased family members feel disrespected, and therefore those within the family become sick and listless. Those traditional healers whom I interviewed expressed no qualms about the prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism in the area; it is only when local *kuls* and traditional healing
lineages become disrupted that issues arise. Monkumari remarks that the transmission is hereditary “though not always carried down.” How or why one is chosen by familial spirits to be a healer is difficult to determine, though the mātās I visited agreed that a pure, almost childlike heart and nature are required.

Monkumari’s reference to practicality relates to the immediate circumstances of living in a rural area with few options for medical care: “people come because they have no option.” She mentions that “medicines” – allopathic medicines prescribed by medical doctors – work better if accompanied by healing pūjā. This pragmatic attitude manifests in an eclectic approach to healing, which incorporates local shamanic techniques with Hindu and Buddhist mantras and sādhanā. “We jhākris are practical and we help!” – therefore, through a multitude of diagnostic tools and healing methods, whatever works is acceptable. The pragmatic approach of jhākris also includes referring patients to medical doctors when the sickness is determined as being “natural” or microbial, not resulting from spiritual attacks or lāgo. This matter-of-fact statement – “people come because they have no option...we jhākris are practical” – captures Monkumari’s attitude and demeanor well. She expressed respect for other traditions and healing modalities, including Buddhists, and felt no need to defend her work or to criticize other approaches, while acknowledging that she may be able to help some people but not others.

As for respecting, appeasing, and asking for an exchange with a boksī, who are almost always described as female, jhākris explained a well-known duality during interviews by saying, often in English, “with God there is a Devil; with jhākris (or mātās) there are boksīs,” and though traditional healers work to remove the affliction caused by a harmful boksī, a position of reciprocal respect is
maintained. This recalls the well-known oral narrative of the “Song of the Nine Witch Sisters”\textsuperscript{346} which describes a primordial time in which Śiva/Mahādeu grants a couple with nine female children, who end up being destructive, malevolent witches. A shamanic practitioner is summoned to kill them and end their destruction, and they are slain one by one; one sister, killed by cholera, becomes the witch associated with cholera, and this association continues with every slain sister. Eight of the nine sisters are killed, until the final sister, depicted as the most sexually attractive of the sisters, remains; the erotic overtones and seductive potential of this final boksī are open to interpretation. This final witch reminds the shaman that without her witchcraft, he will have no one to help, and so he depends on her; they then strike a reciprocal deal in which her life will be spared if she ceases afflicting people when the proper offering and pūjā are given. This orientation of mutual interdependence continues; Monkumari described the process of appeasing a malicious boksī thus, “I have to pray and ask them for an exchange. Leave the person alone. I respect and pray to them.” Such a relationship also relates to the appeasement of harmful spirits with offerings and prayers, again illustrating a reciprocal exchange and respect. Thus Monkumari describes pacifying harmful spirits and the necessity of giving something in return.

Mumford\textsuperscript{347} describes a ritual among Gurung shamanic practitioners which draws back lost la or “life force” into the body of suffering patients. This is closely related to the Tibetan ts'ewang empowerment ritual conducted by Tibetan Buddhist lamas, though the latter draws from the Tibetan Vajrayāna yidam rather than local deities.\textsuperscript{348} Samuel comments on this overlap of healing repertoires, “(w)hat is at issue is more the restoration of a general state of well-being, harmony, and balance in the order of the universe. In bringing this about, the lama is performing an essentially shamanic role, while

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{346} Maskarinec, Rulings of the Night, 79.
\textsuperscript{347} Stan Mumford, Himalayan dialogue, 168-179.
\textsuperscript{348} Samuel, Civilized Shamans, 268.
\end{flushleft}
the state of harmony and balance involved, as K'amtrul Rimpoch'e's comments remind us, is also open to interpretation in terms of the general Buddhist goal of Enlightenment. Indeed, as I observed in fieldwork, lamas often perform this role to establish a new state of harmony and social balance, and at times they creatively engage with the worldviews and methods of local shamanic practitioners to assist this work. This is precisely what occurs in my field site, which I describe below. Establishment of a new sense of internal and external harmonious balance is crucial to my conception of healing as a dynamic totality.

5.72 Tibetan Buddhist Practitioners

Since there is a multivalent relationship between jhākris and Vajrayāna Buddhist monks and laypeople throughout the Indo-Nepali borderland area, I also engaged with Tibetan Buddhist lamas and lay yogis during my fieldwork. While searching for non-monastic yogis and practitioners, I was inevitably vetted through lamas, typically in urban monastic hubs such as Darjeeling and Gangtok, who acted as gatekeepers. At times, rather than referring me to actual practitioners, lamas often spoke authoritatively on behalf of the yogis.

Villagers throughout my field site insisted that since I was interested in the healing practices of jhākris, I need to also consult with “Buddhist jhākris.” This was a general term applied to lamas or monks who specialize in healing sicknesses and spiritual emergencies, such as possession. When interviewing lamas or yogis, I mentioned my fieldwork with jhākris, who often have to confront or remove harmful spirits that cause debilitating sicknesses. I then asked how such crises were approached and how healing is understood from the perspective of Vajrayāna practitioners.

One of these healing specialists is Nyhma Holser, who was born into a Hindu family of the

349 Ibid., 269.
Chetri ethnocultural group, though his mother is Tibetan Buddhist. As a child, he was often debilitated and extremely sick. He visited many jhākris and mātās to no avail. He was eventually revealed as a reincarnate tikula at age 11, a Nepali term related to the Tibetan word tulku. Only after finding a Buddhist guru did his sickness dissolve, along with the gaining of clairvoyant powers and healing abilities. Though versed in Hindu dharma, he learned the main tenets and tantric practices of Vajrayāna Buddhism at an early age. He is able to use astrology to predict outcomes in others' lives, and he is also a successful healer. Quite iconoclastic and practicing within the margins of the Tibetan Buddhist community, he has his own monastery behind his home in Darjeeling, where a handful of monks live. Inside the monastery, along with depictions of Vajrayāna devas, is a plethora of Hindu iconography and statues. He stays extremely busy, as many visitors come to him who suffer from various ailments and potential black magic or spiritual sickness.

The tikula was open about how much he was personally influenced by Hindu sādhanā and the healing methods of local traditional healers, including jhākris. One of his assistants explained, “As Siddhartha Gautama was originally Hindu, we respect this by including both Hindu and Buddhist dharma.” I visited Nyhma at his home monastery, while he was accompanied by a group of monks and assistants.

When an ill person comes to see me, it is to be seen whether this person is afflicted by bhūt [ghosts], by gods or goddesses, or nāg [serpents] or the gods and goddesses of the world [samsāric devī/deutā], or the gods/goddesses of the forests [shikari] or the forefathers (kul) or the gods/goddesses residing near water bodies, or the spirits of people who have committed suicide, or had unnatural deaths. The healing has to be done according to what has afflicted them. This affliction happens when any of the above follow or stick to the person in question.

The choi pūjā is the foremost pūjā that is done to relieve the afflicted person. It is done with concentration with the beat of the ḍamaru. Some pūjās are done using tormas [barley dough statuettes] which are then placed at crossroads to placate the spirits that feed on them. There are many types of pūjā done to help the afflicted,
but they cannot be all told about here. These pūjās are done to chase the demon [Nep. shindey], and the spirits of people who have died unnatural deaths [Nep. akāl mrityu].

The spirit of the people who have committed suicide or have died unnatural deaths chose to inhabit or possess the bodies of persons who are weak-minded (halkaa chāyā) or have negative planetary influences [graha] on them. They possess these bodies and speak through the person afflicted during the pūjā. They ask for things they want to eat, or request for a pūjā and what can be done for them to be taken to the path of salvation. So we perform the pūjās and pray that they find the path to redemption or a good rebirth. This is done through the choi pūjā during which the chedum drum is beaten.

How do we explain this? Just as there is an evening to a morning, a day to a night, so there are demons to God. If there was no God why would there be worship? Since there is good, there is bad too.

A body is prone to diseases. We sit for meditation and through meditation we understand death and where we go after death. Meditation does not ensure a healthy body. Even though the Buddha attained Buddhahood, he suffered from dysentery and vomiting. The body is prone to diseases. However, even within a diseased body, the ātma can be strengthened through this practice. I cannot disclose this [fully]. The sexual energy [bindu] in males is sent downwards in the body because of negative tendencies.

However with the help of this practice, we have to push the energy upwards towards the high cakras. There are seven cakras. As the energy ascends upwards towards the crown cakra, the revelation of creation (shrishti) occurs. The ātma becomes strong even if the body is diseased. If the ātma is strong, we are capable of doing anything. The mind remains fresh and youthful, just like that of a 15/16 year old. The sexual energy [bindu] must be directed towards the raising of the cakras. These things cannot be disclosed. We do not meditate [only] to achieve a healthy/disease-free body. Yabyum is the blue colored Buddha and the white colored Devī.

When the sexual energy energy reaches the upper cakras, the consciousness [chetna] begins opening up. Sometimes we see an old monk doing his pūjā, but his mind is youthful and fresh because of this practice of sending up the bindu. If you place your hands against your abdomen in dhyān mudrā, you can push the bindu upwards. [He stopped speaking for a short while to demonstrate the mudrā].

The period of Vajrayāna is dawning. Kali Yuga is the period of Vajrayāna. Wisdom can be achieved only through difficulties. Tribulations open up the path of wisdom. But this wisdom cannot be revealed immediately.

Vipassanā meditation is of prime importance. The first step is breathing. Who am I? I
breathe to live. Breathing is to purify the heart. Water purifies the body. Breathing purifies the heart. In about a week, there is a vibration in the body. From the left side of the cranium, we move our awareness downwards towards the left side of the foot. This is practiced for a week. Then the awareness is shifted to the Mūlādhāra cakra and slowly upwards to the higher cakras. These are simple methods. The cakras have to be activated slowly, step by step. It is not possible to open up the cakras altogether. It can be complicated.

There are 4 sects [in Tibetan Buddhism.] And there are subsects of these sects. Just as there are subject specialists to teach different subjects in schools, and just as Jarrod is doing a PhD which can be done in different subjects, we too have our own specializations. We have our secret knowledge that we have pledged to protect. Therefore to learn these secrets, a person needs dīkṣā [initiation] from a Guru who will expound wisdom to the disciple. When the wisdom is unfolded by the Guru, it can slowly be brought to light by the aspirant.

His initial comments illustrate the shared cosmological framework applied by both jhākris and Nyhmas as a Buddhist healer, including nearly identical diagnostic methods. This includes using the ḍamaru drum with specific mantras to diagnose – which often involves uncovering the actions of a harmful spirit – and to cure the afflicted person. Placing an offering at crossroads for spirits who are wandering due to violent or “unnatural” deaths (akāl mrityu) is also practiced by the jhākris I interviewed, discussed earlier in this chapter. As Nyhmas described, such spirits are drawn to those with inauspicious astrological alignments (graha). This shared cosmology is crucial in understanding the social climate’s orientation towards sickness and psychopathology, in which it is taken for granted that this most likely results from contact with harmful ghosts or having inauspicious astrological alignment, graha. Nyhna applies a Vajrayāna approach to sickness and healing while relying on the starting premises of shamanic practitioners. He does not see his work as conflicting with jhākris’ healing techniques; rather, he integrates a Vajrayāna perspective regarding how to conceptualize and approach sicknesses and spiritual crises. There is a clear division of labor among Buddhist monks, lamas and traditional healers, and those patients who cannot be healed by jhākris or mātās are referred to Nyhna. According to Tashi’s first-hand experience, his ability to heal is particularly effective and trusted.
Jhākris also feed restless spirits to appease them – often sacrificing chickens towards this end – and ask what can be done for them to move on peacefully without haunting human beings. When needed, Nyhma relies on the Tibetan Buddhist practice of offering torma to obstructing spirits. Offering torma at crossroads is nearly identical to the practice engaged by jhākris, who also give offerings at crossroads to appease malignant spirits or boksī by feeding them. I asked Nyhma for his perspective on how to maintain bodily health or prevent physical and psychological ailments. This is when he presented an oblique sketch of tantric sādhanā, the reversal of bindu flow upwards along the central nāḍī. He insisted that this practice, above all, is the key to longevity and vibrant bodily health. He was purposely vague and implied that I would need initiation, dīkṣā, before I could properly understand these methods. He was careful to qualify that meditation is done not to achieve a healthy or disease-free body; rather, these are secondary effects of the goal of this practice.
Picture 10: Tikula demonstrating with a frame drum
Dr. Khenpo Chowang is a Tibetan Buddhist lama based in the Nyingma Phatak Monastery near Gangtok, Sikkim. I was referred to him by other monks in Gangtok because of his erudition. As a khenpo, he is awarded with a degree of higher Buddhist studies which takes at least a decade – and often longer – to complete. Dr. Khenpo Chowang is clearly learned, yet also quite humble and earnest, always happy to speak to me when I came to him with comments and questions.

Though a bit ambivalent about the healing work of jhākris and shamanic practitioners in the area, he was also charitable, focusing on the importance of their intentions. He concluded that rural areas can be superstitious and “small minded,” leading to confusion and perhaps even paranoia about witchcraft and harmful spirits that may not be occurring at all. We spoke for some time at the central office of the Phatak gūmba, as well as at his nearby apartment, while sharing numerous cups of tea and Tibetan sweets.

Everything comes from the mind. It is foremost. When we go to a Rinpoche with power for healing, they’ll do pūjās for sickness, good luck, dispelling obstacles. A good lama with compassion, thinking with a good heart, will help.

There are also ineffective lamas. With compassion it really does help to cure sentient beings. We are advised to control anger, jealousy. If you’re suffering from a disease, frustrated with living, this is the result of past karma. Instead confess your wrongdoings... let harmful spirits be free. Compassion gives spiritual power. Just touching helps those who are in the hospital. But anger and hatred are poisons which eat you up.

Our nature is wisdom and compassion. We suffer if it is not awakened. Why do we blame evil spirits? They need our help too. So give them torma. If eaten properly they will not disturb anyone.

There are no bhūts, spirits; ultimately, they are a product of the mind. We feed them with mental and emotional energy.

Special lamas have to drive away harmful spirits. Even if they touch us, unintentionally we get sick. But if you give pūjā and offer food then they are satisfied after you calm them.
Simple people with compassion, such as jhākris do help. Actually if they are selfless and help others, they are bodhisattvas! Bodhisattvas sometimes have to kill others for merit. Sometimes to save and benefit others, killing is needed.

If you can recognize Buddha nature to help boundless beings – you must awaken that. Calm down the mind and it will heal. This would stop even suicide. Sickness and disease result from purifying karma; confess your wrongdoings. Be bold enough to admit what you did.

Negative actions are self-centered – the root causes. Calm yourself with compassion. In villages, some can be too caught up in self-centered, small-minded thinking.

Proper compassion grows spiritual power. Be humbler, simpler, that is the key. Pride grows with a high post and power. Keep calm, simple, and even the environment changes.

Spirits are like poor animals suffering, always doing negative actions... they are helpless. The mind should be purely compassionate and humble. Only your mind invites them.

Always remember your guru during difficulty and cut the root of self attachment. More harm and diseases come from self-attachment. The four elements and demons then attack you.

Real healing is this: recognizing your Buddha nature. Putting others before yourself. Think for the long run and be simple. Drop anger, hatred and self-attachment.

Khenpo Chowang also spent time discussing what is done with more persistent malignant spirits who continue to disturb living beings, as well as the confusion experienced in the postmortem Bardos.

He connected this context with the practice of Chöd:

Yogis tell them [recently deceased persons] not to be attached to anything, to guide them in the journey after death to hopefully cut roots with samsāra. These three weeks can transform anyone’s karma. After three weeks a fire pūjā is performed.

Christians or those talking to the dead in cemeteries keep the spirit in constant bondage... burial is too difficult [for cutting attachment]. Yogis go to the cemetery and cremation ground; since all beings are their previous mothers, we have a debt to pay.

They lie down and offer their body. “Please, take this offering, my body is for you. Take my debts away. Offer my body with loving kindness and compassion to the spirits who never get enough food.” This calms down the voracious spirits’ minds and can release their bondage.
Chöd is done in the mountains, snowy mountains and cemeteries. It’s done in dangerous places because of pure compassion. All living beings are endless like space.

_Jhākris_ and mātās may get power from formless beings; they're born this way. This is very beneficial if they work with the power purely, selflessly and compassionately. But this can prop up pride. Spiritual power is dangerous.

Special bodhisattvas take diseases into them to help others. This is *Tonglen.*
*Tong/len:* give goodness / take disease. Breathe in suffering and breathe out blessing. Absorb diseases and compassionately give back.

Wrathful Buddhas need to subdue harmful spirits.

Khenpo Chowang deftly incorporates local cosmological perspectives regarding sickness and spirit possession while interpreting this within the perspective of śūnyatā, the lack of inherently existing phenomena. He stresses the importance of realizing that “there are no bhūts, spirits; ultimately, they are a product of the mind. We feed them with mental and emotional energy.” Within this perspective, bhūts and spirits are ultimately projections of the mind – “everything comes from the mind” – drawn to human beings because of destructive emotions and accrued _karma_. Dr. Chowang repeatedly mentions “confessing wrongdoings” – to a Rinpoche, another person, or simply to oneself – as a form of purificatory release and catharsis. According to his argument, disease results directly from the purification of _karma_, and this confession can greatly ease related suffering.

He compared the gift that _jhākris_ receive from formless beings to lamas who are born with tantric power; in both cases, the temptation to abuse power or become prideful and arrogant is seductive, and this is the ultimate detriment to spiritual development. He criticized high-ranking Geshes (dge bshes) and lamas who lose the compassionate drive to help other beings in their pursuit of prestige or power; shamanic practitioners who selflessly help others are true _bodhisattvas_ unlike those who prop themselves up with pride and ranking. He also critiqued behavior that he found to be
common in rural villages: “self-centered, small-minded,” which seemed to refer to possible gossip and slander that may arise in small communities, as well as focusing too much on external conditions and causes, such as potential witchcraft, rather than turning focus inward to the root cause of negative actions. His rhetorical question, “why do we blame evil spirits?” reinforces his insistence that one must internally examine his or her own lack of compassion and karmic conditions to understand where suffering truly arises. Wisdom is synonymous with the ultimate healing, which is also coterminous with the ultimate realization of one's own Buddha nature. Harmful emotions naturally drop away as compassion guides and motivates all actions.

Khenpo Chowang repeatedly compared harmful spirits to restless animals or petulant children: it is not that they necessarily want to harm others and inflict sickness, they just do not understand how their actions may cause harmful effects. They may not mean to cause sickness at all – one must empathize with their predicament and suffering. Like human beings, they grow thirsty and hungry and need comfort, and so the most compassionate response is simply to feed them and give them offerings, that they may be appeased and find a more beneficial path. Chöd is the ultimate offering, purposely conducted in cemeteries and dangerous places, as an attempt to repay the debt to all beings; it is an act of the purest loving-kindness and compassion to feed the hungry spirits who can never be satiated. Such a pure act of offering “calms down the voracious spirits’ minds and can release their bondage.” Tonglen, the taking in of disease, is similarly an act of supreme compassion.

Tashi later introduced me to Nyhma Dorje, a Tibetan dge bshes (or Geshe) lama at the Teschu Nyingma Monastery in Darjeeling. He is well known in Darjeeling for his willingness to help local residents with issues and crises, including the offering of healing rituals to assist with afflictions purportedly connected to black magic. Tashi is personally acquainted with him because of Nyhma helping his family with home pūjās. We spoke about Buddhist approaches to healing and what
relationships there may be between local Himalayan traditional healing arts and Tibetan Buddhist approaches to healing. I initially asked him about his perspective regarding local *jhākris* and their ability to heal those affected by harmful spirits, *bhūt*. He discussed the parallel function applied by Vajrayāna practitioners:

Spirits are other life forms in another bardo…they have natural power.

At death, ātmas have unfulfilled intentions. They wander through the bardos...obsessed attachments cause spirits to live on.
So they [yogis] tell the spirit to go to the right place, to the right bardo. They're here still because of greed, etc.
Bardo entities see a different reality. Our senses are karmically limited…we have natural power just like animals.
We are afraid of some spirits but they are just trying to communicate.
They attack if they are dissatisfied...if you teach them compassion, they go away.

Some use Vajrayāna practice and become evil spirits or sorcerers. They use some mantras and become very powerful. This requires compassion...using the opposite way dams you. You become an [asura] or ghost. They instantly are *bhūts* / demons if they use this power improperly. They use the *damaru* at cemeteries like Vajrayāna yogis, but their intentions are harmful.

Those who practice at the graveyard offer their body as an offering to the spirits. They use *damaru*, the hand drum. There is a leader of the spirits. The offering is given to this leader, to appease him.
*Samsāric* gods are appeased for karmic gain. But in Vajrāyana, dhyāna is done differently.
Vajrayāna yogis do dhyāna in the charnel grounds and graveyards. Some befriend *bhūts* for them to become protectors. They are masters.

Exorcism requires true power. You have to discover what *rahāṭa* [ghost] is. The real *rahāṭa* is simply one’s own mind. You are only naming a projection.

Intense practice heals the body and extends life. Then you can live without food. Fix the seven positions of dhyāna. Focus on your mind until there is pure single mindedness. This is the base of every practice: gTummo and [other high practices] proceed from this. You no longer need food or sleep.

*Sahaja* is the natural mind. It is not-mind. It is called Yeshe or Sherap in Tibetan. There are five kinds, deep inside sentient beings. This is not comprehensible.
As this interview was conducted in a public coffee shop during the festival of Holi, a large procession walked nearby. People were extremely loud with singing, celebration and cacophonous laughter. Geshe Dorje paused for a few minutes, observing the procession. He wryly smiled to himself, then concluded with a more solemn expression,

“This is a secret, hidden practice. It is not loud and noisy.

Similar to Dr. Chowang, Geshe Dorje interprets bhūt and spirits as lacking inherent or objective existence; they instead are dependent on destructive emotions, which they feed on, and indeed they are ultimately nothing more than a projection. Gaining understanding about the true nature of such entities is stressed emphatically by Vajrayāna practitioners. Hauntings and possession occur in relation to karmic obstacles and other obstructions, rather than ghosts existing in a sense that is strictly external or independent. This is understood clearly when direct insight is cultivated. He warned more than once that those who do improper charnel ground practice or misuse Vajrayāna practices are worse than wandering, restless ghosts, since such individuals apply Vajrayāna techniques maliciously and are condemned instantly. Contrarily, those yogis who offer their body to the restless and hungry spirits at graveyards do so from the highest compassion. Some bhūts are even befriended, converted to protectors of Buddhist dharma. Because of existing in incorporeal states, such entities perceive the world differently, and they may not even intend to harm human beings or inflict sickness; true compassion is again needed to understand their karmic plight, and also needed to send them elsewhere, hopefully to a more productive rebirth.

This section illustrates the division of labor among ritual practitioners I observed during fieldwork. Tibetan lamas often oversee funerary rites to escort the recently deceased onto an auspicious postmortem path throughout the Darjeeling Hills and rural Sikkim, and their higher social prestige
grants them a higher demand for these rites when economically feasible. Because of this, and because of traditional *kul* reverence becoming neglected, some *jhākris* worry that they are fading away because of the presence of Tibetan Buddhist monastics. However, in many cases, *jhākris* are the first specialists consulted during sudden illnesses, mental or emotional crises, as well as for funerary rites.

Nyhma Holser, the first Buddhist practitioner mentioned in this section, exemplifies a pragmatic approach in which local cosmological beliefs and techniques practiced by *jhākris* are seamlessly integrated within a Vajrāyana Buddhist framework to create a cohesive healing modality. Though a practicing lama, he lives within his own home monastery and established a somewhat iconoclastic approach, serving as an intermediary between the monastic Vajrāyana context and traditional Nepali healing modalities. Khenpo Chowang and Geshe Dorje, members of large Nyingmapa monasteries in Gangtok and Darjeeling, both emphasized the danger in fixating on spirits and entities which, ultimately, are projections of the mind. They also deftly incorporate local cosmological conceptions within a Vajrāyana context. Geshe Dorje describes how a master Vajrāyana yogi, rather than fearing *bhūt* or falling ill from them, actively forge alliances with them to act as Vajrāyana guardians; relatedly, “if you teach them compassion, they [harmful spirits] go away.” Khenpo Chowang also repeatedly emphasized the role of compassion in the dispelling of illness and suffering. Self-attachment is an underlying cause of disease. As I conceive of spiritual liberation as the most fundamental process of healing as a totality, this is echoed in Khenpo Chowang's emphasis on empathic compassion, as well as in his statement: “Real healing is this: recognizing your Buddha nature. Putting others before yourself. . .Drop anger, hatred and self-attachment.”
5.8 Spirit Mediumship and Mātās

Regarding the widespread phenomenon of spirit mediumship, Samuel notes that resolving the personal psychological crisis results in “. . .not the achievement of a 'normal' identity through the expulsion of the spirit, but the achievement of a new social role, that of medium for the spirit (here conceived of as at least potentially benign, and capable of being incorporated positively into the local social universe).”\(^{350}\) Indeed a new social role is established, allowing the medium to withstand immense energies and the potential ability to heal others in the local community. It is important to note that the very Devas or Devīs who have stricken the initiate with profound sickness and apparent psychopathology are the same deities that later bestow the medium with healing abilities, and this transformation is integral for the adoption of the medium’s new social role.

Both jhākris and mātās throughout the rural Darjeeling district function as spirit media; every practitioner I interviewed experienced an initiatory sickness in childhood or adulthood, though this is certainly not the case for all media. This initial crisis and apparent psychopathological behavior must be evaluated and eventually tempered by a competent guru, who may in turn train this individual as a medium or jhākri. Rex L. Jones expands on I.M. Lewis’ simplistic binary model of cross-cultural spirit possession by developing four potential categories within the context of Nepali traditional healers, including “tutelary possession.”\(^{351}\) He conceives of reincarnate lamas or tulkas as “reincarnate possessions,” whose careers are analogous to shamanic practitioners insofar as they exhibit a “controlled possession” as a source of power throughout their life.\(^{352}\) Jones defines tutelary possession further:


\(^{352}\) Ibid., 5.
Tutelary possession is functionally related to situations where institutions other than the family or extended kinship are absent. It provides a means for status achievement in the absence of complex institutions like the monastery or temple. It is especially adaptive to the isolated village settings of Nepal among Tibeto-Burman tribal groups or in areas where the complexities of Brahmanical Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism have not intruded beyond the ideological level and where the village temple and its attendants give way to temporary, unkept shrines. In such areas the shaman through controlled spirit possession plays a primary role in the religion of the community, and the social position of the shaman is secondary to none.\textsuperscript{353}

This fits the sociocultural context of rural Sikkim and Darjeeling district well. There are small Tibetan Buddhist temples throughout the villages where I conducted fieldwork, but their cultural influence is peripheral and mainly dedicated to monks in extended silent retreats, while the “temporary shrines” are indeed quite numerous, scattered throughout forested areas. Both Jones and Lewis suggest that lower caste people, particularly lower caste or social status women, are more subject to pathological spirit possession. This often applies to unmarried women or women in servants' positions. Unmarried women in Nepali societies are often relegated to inferior social positions with very little chance of advancing their status. Men of lower castes without wealth or social status are also more commonly subject to spirit possession, as “an approved means for 'social protest.'”\textsuperscript{354} In a psychiatric study of a Nepali village, where an account of collective possession was reported, Gurung et al. comment on the social implications of their study, “Possession states allowed women to speak in ways that were socially proscribed, including expressing frank criticism and using disrespectful, or obscene language, which they would usually not utter in a conscious state. For example, when possessed, some women accused their neighbors, mother-in-laws, or daughter-in-laws of being boksiharu [witches] and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 10.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{354} Ibid., 9.}
inflicting harm on them."355 The implication here is that possession is deeply tied to sociopolitical positioning and contexts, and may serve as a kind of “unconscious” attempt to protest or aggressively respond to social oppression, what Lewis refers to as “oblique aggressive strategy.” During such fearful and often violent possession experiences, those who are marginalized and neglected can no longer be ignored, and their needs must be attended to. These experiences also mitigate the ability to speak openly and frankly without social censure, as well as to express volatile emotions that may be viewed as socially inappropriate.

Though the English word “possession” is a common anthropological term and not used indigenously in South Asia, there are problems with its efficacy as an analytical term, and the word itself is highly loaded with cultural presuppositions about what “possession” might appear as. Aditya Malik poses the following:

It [possession] suggests that one entity comes to belong to or be possessed by the other entity thereby also losing its own agency in the process. Possession thus critically raises the question of agency. When a human being is possessed by a deity or by a spirit, the human being loses their agency to that of the deity of spirit.356

Malik’s initial statements raise important questions regarding agency and the level of self-control exhibited by those possessed. However, in the kind of ritually established possession states I observed among jhākris and mātājis, what Smith refers to as voluntary “positive” possession as opposed to unwanted, disruptive possession,357 agency, lucidity and self-control are maintained even

when a spirit or deity inhabits their body. A kind of simultaneously existent, dual agency arises during possessions, as an incorporeal being merges with the body of the healer. This was more varied with mātājis: some mātās informed me that they retained lucidity and awareness, while others remarked that they lose all awareness during possession states, unable to recall what transpired. Sidky asserts that “...the possessing deity completely overtakes the mātā’s personality and she emerges from her trance incapable of remembering what was said or done.”358 I do not agree, as my ethnographic material contradicts this claim. This overly generalized claim may certainly be common, but it is not an essential feature characteristic of all mātās.

Malik continues:

However, while it would seem as though the person being possessed and the deity are two distinct entities this may in fact not be the case, at least not in ontological terms. Another way then of describing what is happening would be to say that the human agent is becoming, being or transforming into the divine agent that ultimately may not be different from itself. . .359

Malik's initial point about becoming or transforming into the divine agent which is not ultimately different fits into the nondual framework of tantric deva yoga, in which the generation of a deity aids in ultimate nondual realization. It may indeed be the case that on an ultimate level, or on the “level of Being” in Malik's terms, human beings and the possessing entity are not distinct entities. This was certainly the perspective expressed by the Tibetan lamas I interviewed regarding traditional Himalayan healing practices. Malik suggests using the term “transformative embodiment” rather than “possession” to illustrate the nondual unity between possessed and the one possessing. However, whatever the ultimate ontological nature of these experiences is, jhākris and mātājis in my field site do

not share this perspective, nor do the village residents who at least partially share a common worldview in which ghosts, restless spirits, terrestrial entities and deities are very much seen as separate entities with independent agency.

Smith notes Vedic literary descriptions of āveṣa, a process analogous to possession which he describes as “pervasion;” this term continues to be applied in various contexts of spirit possession and embodiment throughout South Asia. Āveṣa correlates with shamanic-type possession states occurring throughout South Asia, often in village-based, rural contexts. The central Āyurdevic medicinal text Caraka samhitā identifies bhūtāveṣa, possession by ghosts, as a major source of disease in 6.3.123, which may manifest as trembling, anger, sobbing, and so forth.

Christopher Wallis analyzes textual examples of āveṣa and śaktipāta in the tantric Śaiva corpus. One example is in the nondual Kaula text Timirodghāṭana, which describes the conditions or signs (cīhna) which accompany genuine entry (āveṣa) of Śiva's power, śakti, when descended into the human body. Once this power enters an adept's body, bodily signs include involuntary movement and paralysis (stobha), visions (darśana), the head spinning (śirāṇa bhramate), and spontaneous dance and song. This behavior is closely aligned with the typology of common spirit possession symptoms throughout South Asia. In fact, such āveṣa can feel so overwhelming and uncontrollable that sections 4.10c-11b of the text assure the yogin in that this is a genuine sign of possession by the supreme Goddess (parameśvarī) and not demonic possession: na ca bhūtāpiśācābhyyām na mohena ca pīḍitah – this is not suffering from ghosts and demons, nor is it madness.

Section 4.15 of this text continues to describe another form of possession or “entry,” samāveṣa,

360 Frederick Smith, The Self Possessed, 177.
362 Ibid.
wherein Śiva's power, now described as Rudra's power, enters the practitioner's body to elicit transformation: *rudraśaktisamāveśam nityāveśam acternam* – “entry” or possession by Rudra's power is eternal, inconceivable.  

Wallis contrasts this conception of āveśa with what he terms “salutary” kinds of possession that occur throughout modern India, in which deities, often goddesses, possess human vehicles in order to assist them for various purposes. Rather than a deity inhabiting a human being and speaking through this person to heal or to give advice to a local community, the entry of śakti described in Kaula and Trika texts “appears more as an impersonal force or energy;” this enables Abhinavagupta's later interpretation of *samāveśa* in these texts to accord with a nondualist perspective, with *samāveśa* interpreted as “immersion” into Śiva's power, rather than possession by a specific entity.

From the perspective of medical psychiatry, spirit possession is deeply, if not inherently, connected with psychopathology. Gurung et al., in “A Village Possessed by 'Witches': A Mixed-Methods Case–Control Study of Possession and Common Mental Disorders in Rural Nepal,” quote the DSM-5 in identifying spirit possession as relating to dissociative identity disorder. In this case, most of those experiencing possession were women. After one woman in a rural Nepali village reported possession due to harmful witchcraft, other villagers soon reported similar experiences, which gradually grew in number. The authors refer to traumatic experiences and subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as salient factors for spirit possession experiences, as well as gender violence and socio-political violence. Gurung et al. also present a sociological observation: those suffering from the effects of witchcraft are given a socially-sanctioned platform to criticize and express blame.

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363 Ibid., 256.
364 Ibid., 257.
366 Ibid.
and distrust for women accused of being a boksì: “they [suffering possession] got the opportunity to overtly criticize and challenge situations that they did not like and people with whom they disagreed. The freedom of expression gave them emotional release and a measure of social power.”

Though Gurung et al. are somewhat open to the possibility of intentional or “positive” spirit possession having therapeutic and non-pathological results, their article is embedded in a Western psychiatric framework that often presumes scientific reductionism, equating the phenomenon of possession itself with pathology and dissociative disorders, or imposing psychological categories as the sole underlying causal factors. The phenomenon of dissociation, closely linked with spirit possession, can manifest in an array of cultural contexts and is potentially therapeutic or harmful. In the case of the initiatory crisis suffered by jhākris and mātājis, their unstable, chaotic behavior and spontaneous possessions may appear as pathological, when instead this behavior is interpreted as fitting within a culturally sanctioned system, as a potential sign of the transformative crisis needed to become a traditional healer. Likewise, unintentional, malicious or “negative” possessions that occur in my field site are also interpreted as a form of treatable disease within the local health care system. Even seemingly harmful possession experiences may actually be caused by benevolent devīs or devas, as part of an initiatory experience or calling to become a traditional healer.

Frederick Smith makes an important observation related to mind-body dualism underlying psychological interpretations of dissociation:

If mind and body are considered separately, as has usually been the case in studies of possession states, the consensus has been that the individual experiences dissociation, which is invariably described as a mental state. . .It is true that in possession the status or quality of consciousness, of mind, becomes transformed; it becomes unpredictable, reflecting unusual, dangerous, or socially inappropriate speech and bodily actions. However, within relatively small and closed circles in which possession is negotiated, such behavior is sanctioned, even commended. . .It is regarded as therapeutic, indeed as
successful therapy. \footnote{367}{Frederick Smith, “Possession in Theory and Practice,” 11.}

This discussion again turns to the central role of embodiment in relation to healing as well as the analytical conflicts that result from presuming a mind-body duality. Psychological conceptions about “mental states” differing from physical embodiment, resulting from a foundationally dualistic premise, convolute the embodied nature of possession and can reduce the entire phenomenon to psychological abnormality. If the “mind-body complex [exists] as an indivisible unit,”\footnote{368}{Ibid.} then possession may be conceptualized in a different light, an analytical perspective that does not imply dissociative pathology. As Smith notes, whatever erratic behavior results from the negotiation or healing of possession is regarded as successful therapy. In the Nepali context, a word that corresponds with “spirit possession” is chhopne, a term referring to catching or covering. To be “caught” by an incorporeal entity has a plurality of interpretations and meanings, but such a phenomenon is explainable within cultural understandings of chhopne, rather than denounced as aberration.

Citing the World Health Organization's International Statistical Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), as well as psychiatric diagnoses, Gurung et al. suggest that those experiencing this collective possession suffer from conversion disorder or dissociative trance disorder. When interviewing traditional healers, the possessed women and their family members, every participant rejected psychological explanations and diagnoses; the possessed women also did not respond to biomedical interventions or counseling. The authors contribute this to the stigma surrounding mental illness in Nepal, as well as a lack of mental health literacy. They conclude that “. . .neither pre-existing mental illness, socio-political violence, nor traumatic exposure, or the oppression of women alone, can explain
the prevalence of spirit possession.” Social and psychological factors may be important underlying conditions which contribute to these experiences, but they cannot explain why they happen, nor are they the determinant causal factors. While the stigma surrounding mental illness may indeed be a part of this rejection, the authors also do not appear to be aware of implicit scientific reductionist premises within their argument. That is: those who experienced these possessions, as well as the healers who assisted them during the crisis, conceptualize this phenomenon not as something that can be reduced to a psychological category or illness, but instead view it as precisely what they claim it is: the effects of malignant witchcraft. Likewise in my fieldwork, afflicted villagers as well as traditional healers never referred to psychological diagnoses, nor were possession, hauntings, or witchcraft cases considered psychopathological. Some younger residents I interviewed were more skeptical about the existence of witchcraft and spirit possession, claiming it could be a kind of collective, psychological delusion. This perspective was quite rare during my fieldwork interviews, however.

5.9 The Goddess’ Vessel: Mātās

Mātās are defined both by themselves as well as local villagers as women possessed by goddess Devi in her many manifestations, and gains healing powers therefrom. While men can be possessed by Devi, I was informed by mātās that this calling is for women alone, who become instruments of Devi. However, this was contradicted by other mātās who claimed that men also can be Devi – gender is irrelevant. According to Mātās I interviewed, a central aspect that appeared to differentiate mātās from jhākris is the modality in which entities are called upon during pūjās:

1.) Jhākris typically perform these publicly, while mātās perform healing sessions privately, usually in their home temple or mandir.

2.) *jhākris* summon an entire array of deities and spirits, and can embody such entities, while *mātās* are possessed by a manifestation of Devī alone.

3.) while both kinds of healers often suffer an early life initiatory crisis/sickness, *mātās* are known for being spontaneously possessed by Devī, a necessary requirement to establish their vocation as *mātās*.

   Every mātā I encountered during fieldwork was vegetarian and eschewed the sacrifice of chickens that is typically performed by *jhākris* to appease harmful spirits, specifically offering their blood to hungry ghosts; in fact, mātās defined themselves in contrast to *jhākris* by refusing to partake in this ritual. Visitors to mātās are not allowed to eat meat on the day they meet the mātājī.

   Similar to *jhākris* and other local shamanic practitioners, mātās spoke of often having an initiatory sickness or crisis as a young child, which they interpret as a calling initiated through an early possession by Devī Ma. These sicknesses lead to a profound state of mental imbalance which must be remedied by a competent *guru*, or through a training that arrives spontaneously through visions and dreams, guided by incorporeal beings.

   Kathleen Erndl conducted fieldwork with *mātās* in Himachal Pradesh near Dharamsala, another Himalayan borderland area that is permeable to a variety of cultural confluences. Regarding the healing practices of *mātās*, she makes an important observation about “practical” tantra, which aims to fulfill mundane, pragmatic desires as much as it seeks soteriological goals:

   The powers gained through Tantric practice can be used for both worldly (*bhukti*) and spiritual (*mukti*) purposes. In the non-dualist ontology of Tantra, these two are part of the same reality. Mātājī and her devotees are part of a broadly based grassroots religious expression, a kind of “folk Tantra” that connects the more formal textual and esoteric Tantric traditions with esoteric village religion.\(^{370}\)

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This “folk Tantra” forms the crossroads for the practices applied by jhākris and mātās. The healing repertoires expressed by these traditional healers are certainly grassroots, connected to the larger framework of South Asian religious traditions, yet functioning independently in terms of how Hindu scriptures, šastra, are applied and interpreted. Brahmanical hegemony and hierarchy are also distanced from village religious traditions, allowing for a flexibility and novelty that is more focused on praxis than caste-bound formal orthodoxy. Among mātās, texts such as the Bhagavad-Gītā may be interpreted as a guide towards ultimate liberation, while simultaneously being a source of powerful, healing mantras to deflect afflictions caused by witchcraft and malignant sorcery.

Patricia Cook’s ethnographic work addresses sacred music therapy in northern Indian villages near Varanasi, where she observed ajhas, a word translated variously as “healer” or “exorcist.” She describes the Vedic and Sanskrit literary influence on these musical healing practices. The Śāma Veda, for instance, prescribes singing and chanting mantras for healing diseases; specific sung words affect different bodily areas.371 Rural village musical healing practice in northern India “…has evolved from Vedic, Tantric and Hindu folk traditions over many centuries.”372 This synthesis is quite similar to what exists among Nepali traditional healers, who employ passages and mantras from the Vedas and the Gītā as incantations with powerful healing abilities, rather than interpreting these passages soteriologically, at least within the context of pragmatic healing. Another potential tantric influence stems from nondual Kashmir Śaivism, including the important text Spandakārikā, a text which expounds on the universal composition of spanda, “vibration” or “pulsation,” which relates to the central role of sound and mantra. “Mantras are considered words of power, vibratory remedies. . .able to cut through psychological impasses and disturb the course of manifested disease. . .The mantra

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372 Ibid.
enlivened by the guru penetrates the maze of human psychology and consciousness. . .”373 One female ojha she interviewed is often possessed by Śītalā, a goddess capable of healing pox and other diseases. The Devi demands offerings such as flowers, lest her wrath be provoked. This goddess along with Hārītī, an ambivalent deity who is also associated with smallpox, is also crucial to Nepali mātājīs and often embodied by them.

373 Ibid., 64.
Picture 11: Pumpha Regmi Mātājī outside her home near Pakyong, Sikkim
I visited Pumpha Regmi Mātājī in a rural area of southeast Sikkim near Pakyong. She is a well-known healer in her local district. Adjacent to her home is her personal mandir or temple, where she practices dhyān or meditation and jap, mantra recitation. Her mandir is also where the afflicted are taken during healing pūjās. When I met Pumpha at her house, many relatives were present, including her children of various ages, extended family and her husband. Pumpha's eldest son became intrigued after discovering I am American, and he continually asked questions about popular culture and life in the United States. Scanning me from head to toe, he mused aloud in English, “Foreigners are always so tall compared to us!” Her sons were particularly bewildered and amused as to why a foreigner would go to this remote area to speak to a mātā, and they enjoyed riotously laughing at my mannerisms and way of speaking, even during extended interviews with Pumpha!

Pumpha explicitly defined how mātās differ from jhākris, though their methods are similar and they attend to a related cosmological framework and healing modality. She emphasized the difference by claiming that jhākris work with tantric methods while mātās do not:

The jhākris work through tantra and tantric ways, whereas we [Mātās] work through Devīs like Mahā Kālī and Śakti. Tantric practices pertain to magic [black magic] and masāns [restless ghosts]. Jhākris derive their power from these sources. We instead derive our powers from the divine goddesses like Durga, Kālī. We get knowledge and wisdom from the books that have been written on the Devī Śakti.

Men cannot be Mātājis. Only women take in the Śakti of the Devis. Jhākris are a different strain altogether. They work through tantric practices, dead spirits and visit graveyards to enhance their powers. We do none of these. The Śakti of the Devī directs us and works through us.
Pumpha refers to the infamous practice of śmaśān sādhanā, charnel ground practice, a tantric rite shared among Śaiva, Buddhist, and Tibetan Chöd practitioners. This practice is engaged among different tantric ritual contexts for different purposes, and the Tibetan Buddhist lamas I interviewed, presented later in this chapter, described the functions of this practice among Tibetan Buddhist practitioners.

The dialectical exchange of confluence among disparate localized, indigenous traditions and tantric systems is pronounced throughout the Himalayan regions. The thighbone trumpet commonly used by jhākris is often gathered from recently deceased persons. They employ Śiva's hand-drum īdamaru as a main instrument for pūjā, and they often refer to Mahādeu or Śiva as their patron deity; thus, their charnel or cremation ground practice is situated within the context of wrathful Śiva praxis. Śiva is the preeminent Deva for many jhākris – he dances in the cremation grounds, is the supreme healer, god of medicine, master of tantric yoga, both sensually indulgent and restrained. H. Sidky notes, “Śiva as master of cemeteries and cremation grounds from whence emanate many of the particularly dangerous spirits with which jhākris must contend is especially significant in Nepalese shamanistic practices.” Romano Mastromattei refers to the Nepali shamanic complex as a “protoŚivaismo” which was possibly “adopted as an ideological and ritual corset for ancient autochthonous and purely shamanistic practices and beliefs.” As for whatever “purely” shamanic or autochthonous system of praxis existed among Nepali traditional healers, these traditions are so thoroughly permeated with Hindu influence that differentiating a strictly autonomous pre-Hindu system may not be possible.

From what I ascertained during fieldwork, charnel ground practice is certainly not practiced by

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374 Sidky, Haunted by the Archaic Shaman, 42.
all jhākris, but since interaction with potentially harmful entities and ghosts such as bhūt and pret are inevitable for their work, some practitioners actively forge relationships with spirits in charnel grounds, and potentially “enhance their powers” as Pumpha claims. Pumpha described jhākris who are known for meditating, contacting spirits and engaging in other practices in secluded caves at night, which adds to suspicion about their intentions and abilities to perform black magic; Gopal Jhākri showed me the cave where he performs nightly pūjās, which is shown in Picture 8. One aspect of the practice is to transcend fear of restless spirits, and to be able to confront them without falling ill or subject to their power. This connects to the general suspicion of shamanic and tantric practitioners throughout South Asia, especially among the middle and upper class gentry, such as the bhadralok of Bengal; though these practitioners have the potential to heal, it is uncertain what demonic pacts they’ve made, and so they are often seen as inherently untrustworthy.

Pumpha expanded on her healing practices thus:

When people with ill health come to us, the Devī guides us in telling us which mantras we are to use for healing the affliction. The mantras are from the book of Caṇḍī [Caṇḍīpaat, 16 chapters of Devi’s praises] the Gītā and other holy books. We are able to find out about the illness / disease of people through the Śakti of the Devī and we and the Śakti within us know about the disease, its cause and healing. We are able to ask questions to the power inside us. When a sick person comes to us, we ask the guru within. The guru is the Śakti of the Devī we have. We invoke the Śakti, we meditate upon this Śakti and we are naturally guided to deal with the disease.

I was 12 or 13 when I was chosen by the Devī to be her instrument. We do our sādhanā through worship, chanting mantras and by doing sādhanā through the entire month of Śrāvaṇa (mid July-August). We heal through the words inscribed in the holy books, Caṇḍī, Gītā, Vedas. We meditate and recite mantras [japa], very different from what jhākris do. We install the Śivaling in our temples and whichever Devī chooses to reside in our bodies, we claim her as our guru. Our sādhanā is through mantras.

The Śakti of the devī enters my body when I invoke her through the mantras in the books. The Devī manifests herself through my body. When I invoke any goddess through the mantra chants, I am aware of her presence in my body. The devī takes over and whatever words are emitted from my mouth are her words. But yes, I understand
the meaning of the words that come out of my mouth, though I am not the one speaking. The Devī is the one speaking. Through these words that she speaks, we spread her word for the benefit of all.

The Devī will not enter just anyone's body. The Devī like Kāmākhya Mā/Kāli will choose our bodies to use us as her instruments. The divine power (daivik Šakti) comes to the chosen person’s body. It may be that a person falls sick when the devī is displeased and the person may manifest signs of being taken by the devī. There may be sessions of trembling too. But this is different from actually being chosen by the Goddess. This is a case in which these manifestations happen not because of the Devī but because of pret. And at such times the Devī may also be part of the manifestations.

Wherever there are harmful beings [pret, bhūt], there is the presence of the Devī. When there is possession by bhūt, the Mātājī helps the possessed person through the powers of the Devī.

When a person gets chosen by the gods/goddesses to be an instrument, it becomes the responsibility of the person to actually find out whether she is graced with the power of the gods and goddesses or if she is held by bhūt. Once a person knows the difference, the choice of retaining the power or losing it is also made. So when a person is afflicted by spirits, the presence of the devīs and devas also tries to help the person afflicted.

The devīs I work with are Mahākāli, Durgā, and the power of these devīs. It is the Devī Šakti. The devas are Mahādev or Śiva.

People get sick because of the powers of the gods and goddesses [daivik Šakti]. Sometimes children get scared and their sāto [consciousness] gets subdued. In homes where Devīs are worshipped, the people sometimes falter in their worship. They make mistakes in pūjā and they also realize that they have faltered or made a mistake. This thought itself creates a feeling of unwellness and they fall sick. And we heal them through the wisdom that we derive from our books.

Sometimes when the spirit of the dead does not find peace [e.g. suicide] these spirits can catch hold of a person and wreak havoc. We are able to heal these people afflicted by the spirits of the dead who are yet to find peace. We can heal these sick people with the mantras in the books.

When spirits do not find their path to salvation, we are able to channel their path to peace through havans. Just like how the Rinpoches are able to put these spirits in the right track, we too can, through the mantras and chants in our books, put these spirits on their path to peace. The book we use is the Bhagavad [Gītā]. Evil spirits (pret), bhūt and troublesome spirits can all be warded off through the mantras in the book.
I heal [upakār] through mantras and also āyurveda. Sometimes a doctor may diagnose a person as being capable of giving birth to children but the person may not be able to do so. When they come to me, we invoke the blessings of the gods through our prayers and mantras for them to have a child. And sometimes we use herbs as medicines too to benefit them. We make these medicines potent through our mantras and the divine powers of Devī. So we heal through our mantras, havans [yajñas] and medicines.

Pumpha mentions Kāmākhyā, known as the menstruating goddess, who is symbolized by the yoni of goddess Satī, and her temple in Kāmārūpa is a major šakta pīṭha center of goddess worship. Paulo Eugenio Rosati describes a process of cross-cultural fertilization between “tribal” groups outside of the Indo-Aryan ethnocultural milieu – who are often referred to as mleccha in Sanskrit Vedic texts – and Brahmanical systems in Kāmārūpa, Assam. Assam, similar to Bengal and other regions of northeastern India, are geographically peripheral to the Indo-Aryan Vedic cultures dominant in northern and northwest India. Rosati argues that the goddess' yoni and fertility rites and symbolism predate Hinduization. This includes the pīṭha sites, later absorbed into the pan-Indian Yoginī Kaula goddess cultus. The pīṭhas were formerly linked to charnel grounds, and “(t)hey switched from being cremation grounds, often connected to tribal traditions, to secret places where esoteric Tantric rituals were practiced, tied to both the aniconic worship of deities and ascetic performances.”

Naraka, the legendary first king of Kāmārūpa, applied tantric practices for political power, including the worship of and possible ingestion of menstrual blood, deemed highly impure by Brahmanical priestly standards. He thus “incorporated and blended cultural contradictions necessary to build a state entity based on cross-cultural negotiation,” which involves a dynamic of dialectical exchange, rather than a one-way absorption of “Sanskritization.”

377 Ibid., 14.
The strong presence of Kāmākhyā throughout the Himalayan Indo-Nepali borderland areas attests to this cross-cultural negotiation. Nepal and adjacent Himalayan areas have tribal, autochthonous populations who are culturally interwoven into Hindu religious systems. Thus mātās who embody Kāmākhyā for healing are also negotiators, integrating localized traditions and deities with śakta worship and embodiment.

Pumpha's multiple references to texts such as the Bhagavad Gītā illustrate a unique orientation to sonic healing and Hindu Śāstra shared by mātās in my field site: these texts are applied pragmatically as sources of powerful mantras that are able to cast away harmful ghosts. Āyurvedic remedies and medicines are also empowered with special mantras, graced by the power of Devī. Regardless of the nature or the cause of affliction, Pumpha confidently asserts the healing power of mantra while possessed by Devī. “The guru is the Śakti of the Devī we have” is a statement reflected by other jhākris I interviewed, who often said “the guru is Śakti” – the guru confers the ability to heal, which would not be possible without the guru's grace and power.
Picture 12: Pumpha’s home mandir
I met Duma Mātājī in a small village adjacent to the Takdah Tea Estate in March 2017. We spoke initially at her home, where she lives alone, and she suggested that we instead talk inside her personal temple or mandir. She was outside her home occupied with housework, attending to her garden and fixing some broken wooden beams. Similar to other local villagers, she lives an agrarian lifestyle, subsisting on the growing of vegetable crops, though she does earn a modest income from healing pūjās. Duma, along with other mātās I interviewed, described a feature that distinguishes mātās from jhākris, which is to restrict healing work within healing pūjās, Duma claimed that mātās confine all work to their home mandirs. Duma described her daily pūjās which include meditation (dhyān) and the recitation of mantra, jap, as contributing to this concentrated power within her mandir.

At first she seemed bewildered that I would be interested to interview her, but she gradually warmed up, patiently and generously sharing her life experiences from within her mandir. She is a particularly kind and humble person, and I coincidentally met her during different times throughout my fieldwork, including at a lecture given by a local pandita, where she warmly greeted me with sincere kindness. After some time passed while sitting inside her mandir, having a small altar with depictions of Kālī Ma adorning the walls, she described the circuitous journey to becoming a mātā:

At seven years old I became very sick. In dreams, devīs and devas told me to perform pūjās. I built my own temple after this and recovered. I trained myself completely in this way, without any guru.

Everything comes to me on my own, in visions. A guru did come to open my temple. But knowledge comes automatically to me when people are sick. I don't need to do anything.

Sometimes a sickness is normal [microbial and/or a physical injury requiring a medical physician]. Sometimes a dead person's ātma enters one's body. Some are
poisoned. Devī works through the mātā.

Two things can happen: bhūts [ghosts] come to humans. The others are Devīs. If you're weak or defenseless, you get sick. You have to be strong.

Suicide or murder creates spirits who haunt others. If you are weak you will be vulnerable to them.

Mātās have their own practice. Jhākris beat their drum [dhyāngro, a frame drum] and can make dead people alive. Mātās remove bhūt or pret in pūjās. They don't dance or play the drum. Mātās work from their home mandir only; they don't go outside to work like jhākris. I work with both Buddhist and Hindu devas, but I use only Hindu mantras.

I have my own mantra. There are different mantras for different sicknesses, such as possession by harmful spirits or by devīs.

I do a pūjā in the morning when I wake. I give fresh water as an offering and then meditate and thank my guru for at least two hours, two times a day. One guru is Bhagavān, the other is human. I pray to the major Devīs.

I do not eat meat or drink alcohol. I use marigold flowers for pūjā.

Kandu (?) is a Buddhist Mātā. When I sit for prayer and speak with a goddess, I can speak in different languages, ones that I do not know.

Boksī [a witch] can possess people. They come automatically to those who desire the power. They have their own gurus. They go through trials and hysterics. They will feel suicidal. This is duality: Bhagavān and bhūt both exist. Mātās and boksīs both exist.

If people urinate, spit or do dirty things near water, they will get sick. You will get ill from polluting water. If you walk through the forest and scream and yell, you will get sick. Trees have Devas. Hurting and polluting trees makes people sick. Stones are sacred also. Once these spirits are hurt, they will be restless and roam around, finding someone weak to infect. They become like parasites.

People have their own kul [familial or clan lineage]. If you don't follow tradition, a family imbalance happens. If you do not pray, bad things result.

Mātās sometimes are called through a family lineage, but only those who are pure become healers.
Thus the defining characteristic of mātās is to be a vessel for Goddess Devī through direct embodiment. Duma and other mātās informed me that a powerful initiatory sickness accompanied by possession of Devī, which often occurs in youth, is a sign that this person is to heal as a mātā; however, if this calling is ignored or unfulfilled, it can lead to madness or unending suffering. Mātās almost always restrict their healing work to their home mandirs, where their power or Śaktī is concentrated. While gurus are instrumental for the initiation into this vocation, it is primarily through the relationship between initiate and Devī that all knowledge and healing techniques are learned. Duma remarked that mātās do not use the frame drum typical among jhākris, though they do sometimes use hand-drums; instead, the Devī is invoked and embodied through mantra.

Much of Tashi’s fieldwork assistance including help with navigating the rugged terrain of the villages flanking the Takdah Tea Estate; not only were constant uphill hikes required, footpaths were often barely marked, making travel difficult if not previously familiar with the terrain. After mentioning a newly recognized mātā, a woman in her early thirties who lived a mere two kilometers from his home, we visited her neighbors and inquired whether she might be interested in discussing her recent initiation. As a foreigner, I received puzzled and incredulous expressions from her neighbors. We were told contradictory answers and advised to visit her ourselves. When we reached the mātā’s home, Tashi explained that I am in the area for ethnographic research. She was attending to housework outside with her husband and was skeptical – and her attitude quickly turned angry, as she screamed, Kīnā ma?!

Malāī kēhi thāhā chaina. Malāī kēhi thāhā chaina! Jānuhōs! “Why me? I don't know anything! Go away!” Smiling apologetically, her husband advised us to instead visit Lakśmi Lhamu Sherpa Mātājī, a well-known nearby guru. Offering our apologies, we both left and soon traveled to the home of Lakśmi.

Lakśmi Lhamu Sherpa Mātājī is a guru who initiates mātās in a village near the Lopchu Tea Estate. She lives in a bustling household with her husband and numerous children of various ages.
When Tashi introduced us to Lakšmi, she was quite receptive to an interview, despite being busy with domestic work inside her home. After sharing formalities and drinking tea, she introduced me to her family members, including two young children and neighbor children also visiting. Other relatives and villagers would come and go throughout the evening, as her door was open to neighbors. She busied herself with preparing dinner and the evening fire in her home wood-stove when I met her, occasionally stoking the flames. The smell of onions frying emanated through her small cottage, and she pan-fried vegetables while talking to us. Her home was continuously busy with constant visitors and children playing, yelling and running about. She shared her experiences while she cooked, pausing now and then to stare off and reflect on her past:

Mātās don't sacrifice animals or work with eggs. My ancestors followed a kul [clan lineage]. But I was chosen to be a mātā.

I train both men and women. They are empowered by Devī. People come to me to be trained who are acting crazed. Singal and Durgā Mā then come to me; they speak through me.

This twenty-first century is in the Kali yuga. There are many harmful actions. Bhagavān comes to many people to choose them as healers and to teach them [because it is needed more now].

Devī mantras allow me to diagnose sick people. Devīs/devas can sicken people who pollute certain areas. I also heal bhūt possession.

If the graha [astrological chart] is weak then the spirits attack people. For diagnosis I use a damaru, conch, and Rudra mālā. During pūjā I burn dhoop (incense), use coconut water, and offer supari [Betel nut], fruits and flowers. During Śivaratri (Śiva's festival) I take both gānjā and datura [but only during this festival].

Curing depends on the diagnosis. I give supari to offer to Devī. I use my mālā and Devī mantras to suit each person.

I only work with Hindu devas. I do not mingle with Buddhist devas or practice.

I was chosen because I am simple and pure in mind. Every mātā must be this way. I am pure vegetarian because this pleases Devī. I do pūjā twice a day which also pleases Her.
Mantras and knowledge come to me instantly. Once I chant, the mantra is so powerful that it instantly heals the body. I also use instruments at the same time [e.g. conch, damaru].

Mātās always work in their own mandirs, but some do travel to others to help them.

Possessed people come here. Men even will sound like women. If a man is struggling to be a mātā, but not yet chosen, he is left vulnerable and open to attack by bhūt. It is up to me as a guru to decide and heal. Bhagavān ultimately chooses, and then no one and nothing can cause harm.

5.10 Concluding Reflections

This chapter demonstrated the many negotiations, tensions, and mediations required for the practices applied by Nepali traditional healers in the Darjeeling Hills and rural southeast Sikkim. These relationships include the “division of labor” involved in healing practices conducted by Tibetan lamas and jhākris, connecting to the higher social prestige of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners who are often preferred to conduct funerary rites. Intersections are also evident, as Buddhist healing practitioners draw from a shared cosmology and set of healing techniques similarly applied by Himalayan traditional healers. This includes the accepted belief of the effects of capricious terrestrial spirits such as subterranean nāg and harmful spirits, bhūt. While there are distinctly different mantras, ritual instruments, and intentional frameworks applied, the pragmatic orientation towards exorcistic healing often intersects: as Pumpha Regma Mātājī describes, “Just like how the Rinpoches are able to put these spirits in the right track [while lost in the postmortem journey], we too can, through the mantras and chants in our books, put these spirits on their path to peace.”

Other mediations encompass the interventions required by traditional Nepali healers, who negotiate the delicate balanced relationships among human beings and nonhuman or incorporeal beings. As these healers convulse with the presence of helper deutā inhabiting their bodies, they are able to
perceive what spirits are causing sickness from human offenses, who inflicted malignant witchcraft and the reasons why this occurred, and how one's astrological alignment or graha has affected their health and luck; all of this interpretation is granted by the power of the embodied deities. It is only the deity that enables the ability to heal, and mātās often define themselves as receptive vessels for the power (śakti) of the goddess, Devī. Pūjās are highly aesthetic events, with an array of burning incenses, the playing of multiple instruments including conches, hand-drums, frame-drums and bells, and singing and the chanting of mantras; this aesthetic dimension is further discussed in Chapter Six.

Following diagnosis, jhākris and mātās find ways to reestablish equilibrium and release sickness by appeasing harmful spirits, the former often giving offerings of fresh chicken blood to appease the voracious spirits. If an afflicted patient has contaminated or offended natural spirits, the patient may be required to give his or her own offering to natural sites so as to reestablish reciprocity. Reciprocity also prompts jhākris and mātās to appease and give offerings to malicious boksi, even when these individuals deliberately strike out and inflict others with harmful intentions, causing them to fall ill or mentally disturbed. Healing pūjās are not isolated, individual events, and are instead quite public, with an array of local villagers and family members attending these sessions which may last all night. This illustrates the socially integrative aspect of healing in Nepali traditional healing arts: healing as reintegration is not cut off from the greater community, but is directly tied to the nexus of relationships existing between individuals and their local village community.

While jhākris are described by villagers as those who apply “tantra-mantra” and are sometimes even referred to as tāntrikas due to their association with charnel ground practice and contact with spirits, the mātās I interviewed distanced themselves from this set of practices. As healing practitioners who both undergo spirit possession, often for the benefit of afflicted patients, I regard jhākris and mātās as practitioners of “folk tantra,” an eminently pragmatic, localized and village-based approach to
healing, which integrates Hindu and Buddhist devas and sādhanā unique to Himalayan cultural and religious confluences. Folk tantra includes the South Asian phenomenon of āveśa, merger with a spirit or tutelary deity by a ritual specialist, which is more prevalent in rural village-based healing modalities, wherein affliction by spirits requires the exorcistic abilities of a healer. Pragmatic necessity regarding a local health care system is crucial, as many villagers in my field site cannot afford hospital or physician care, or are too remote to access such facilities during emergencies and crises. Allopathic medicine and biomedical treatments are also viewed as ineffective in cases regarding black magic, witchcraft, or chronic illnesses which are interpreted as not being “natural” sicknesses.

The following chapter returns to my notion of healing as a totality while focusing on aesthetic, sonic approaches to healing. I offer theoretical reflections on affect and its connection to embodiment and healing. Within the South Asian philosophical framework of nāda-brahman as primordial sound, I analyze the methods of sonic healing applied by Nepali traditional healers in their healing repertoires. Bāul musical performance is additionally presented as a modality of sonic healing, which directly connects to esoteric bodily praxis.
Chapter Six: Healing as a Totality

6.1 Embodied Healing: Bāul Bodily Praxis

Given the disparate, often contradictory approaches to Bāul bodily practices, musical cultures, and interpretations of encrypted song lyrics presented by Bāul performers, I nonetheless offer an analysis derived from commonalities in the oral exegeses given by Bāul performers I interviewed. As stressed previously, I do not attempt to present any cohesive “Bāul worldview” or singular tradition, but even among widely diverse, heterogeneous orientations, I observed certain themes regarding bodily cultivation and dehataattva that were at least partially agreed upon.

Dindayal das Bāul, a Bāul sādhaka introduced in chapter four, stressed the equilibrium required by Bāul sādhakas: there should be neither overexertion nor obsessive practice, while sloth and submission to desires are also to be avoided. This makes bodily practice “easy,” sahaj:

[sahaj] is how to make it easy... Sahajiyā is the secretive use of sexuality. Birya [semen] is the strength of essence of the body. First be like a child, sahaj, innocent. Like a baby – childlike. This is the first stage – it subdued sexual desire. Women are a flower. Nourish, water and take care of the flower. The bee seeks honey; nourish this in a childlike way. If you know the secrets, the union will be ānanda [blissful]. Rati [female sexual secretion] is important. Yoga can bring nectar from the crown to the throat.

Yugal sādhana is easy. Sahaj. It is easier than extended yoga. This absorbs the ras from women. . .Women’s ras has protein which the sādhaka absorbs. This is because woman is śakti. . .they are power houses.

Losing ras is death. Women are a fireball. Be like a stone and don't get burnt. She is a goddess, believe this way. She is Mother and Devī. Marrying doesn't give the power...Rādhā is actually the guru. Just as Kālī is Śiva's guru. This is why Kṛṣṇa doesn't marry. We [Bāuls] have taken many things from Buddhist tantra. . .the main difference is we are bhaktas.

378 Dindayal refers to Śiśu-bhāb, one of the crucial bhāb or “moods/attitudes” to cultivate. Śiśu-bhāb is how a child emotionally relates to his or her mother. This is a main strategy employed by Bāuls to calm sexual desire by perceiving women as mothers and goddesses.
379 Dindayal used this English term.
380 Dindayal das Bāul, personal interview, Kolkata, West Bengal, 5 May 2018.
Dindayal's description, similar to the oral exegetic style of other Bāuls, is poetic, abstruse and partially veiled, while the language itself is not overly complex. He stresses the necessity of sahaj in cultivating the body, making practice “easy” and knowing the secrets of esoteric sexual praxis. He reiterates the embodiment of power, śakti, within women, which is absorbed via sexual fluids into the male practitioner’s body. Dindayal mentioned the often repeated principle among Bāuls: losing sexual fluids is death. The prevention of this, and reversal of the sexual current inwardly, is thus the key to bodily longevity.

An initial step in bodily control involves dietary regimens: foods that overly heat the body, such as garlic and onion, are to be avoided. If the body becomes too warm, lust will be more difficult to control, as explained by Sibsundar das Bāul: “Bāul sādhakas avoid food such as meat, eggs, onions; they avoid tamasic foods. We need to control bodily appetites through diet.” Numerous Bāul performers stressed sattvic and vegetarian diets, which include fresh fruits and vegetables, milk, legumes, and “neutral” food that is not spicy, though this was certainly not agreed upon as an ideal to adhere to. These are initial steps in controlling bodily appetites and habits, as well as calming the “six enemies” or chay ripu, destructive emotions such as greed and lust that inhibit bodily discipline. As I argued in Chapter Two in my initial discussion of Haṭhayoga, within a model of embodiment in which there is no ontological distinction between “mind” and “body,” strengthening and purification of the gross physical body is as crucial as more subtle yogic practices. I consider these bodily discipline techniques to be a form of indigenous medicine akin to Lorea's analysis of Bāul contraceptive practices.

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381 One of the three gunas or “qualities” composing the material universe. Tamas refers to the most densely coarse and inertia-bound quality.
382 Sibsundar das Bāul, personal interview, Birbhum district, West Bengal, 25 March 2016.
Basu das Bāul comes from a familial lineage of established Bāul performers and is well-known in the Santiniketan area. I interviewed him at his home on the edge of Santiniketan during my initial fieldwork visit in early 2016. When discussing the topic of dehatattva, he went into a detailed description of disciplines needed to maintain bodily vigor and stability. He explained this bodily regimen thus, “Dehatattva is about knowing the self (ātma). First you need conscious control over food habits. Be vegetarian and sattvic. Maintain celibacy if possible. Restrained – do not engage the body with harmful things.” The orifices of the body are referred to as “doors” or “gates” which Basu insisted must be guarded carefully. “Yoga is important to awaken cakras. Body contains everything in the universe; don’t search outside. To awaken kuṇḍalinī, do prem yoga. Then śakti accumulates. Then you will understand all. Then ānanda (bliss) comes.”

Śakti accumulates in individual yoga practice, but the primary source of śakti is absorbed from the female practitioner during yugal sādhanā. Though Basu and other Bāul performers I interviewed described this sattvic diet and bodily regimen, Basu emphasized the sahaj attitude – neither to overdo anything nor to deprive oneself. Ascetic practice and physical deprivation is antithetical to this orientation. Ultimately, kuṇḍalinī awakens through surrendering to divine love and the guru’s training in prem yoga.

Dindayal’s description of nectar, amṛta, descending from the crown area into the throat is an apparent referent to the yogic practice of Khecarī Mudrā, illustrating a direct influence from the haṭhayoga milieu, propagated by both Nāṭh and Buddhist tantric practitioners. This orientation, involving the extension of bodily longevity through the recirculation of internal energies and

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substances, corresponds with the bodily alchemy regimens adopted by Nāth yogis and exhaustively described in the texts and vernacular poems attributed to Gorakṣa. A central aspect of esoteric praxis is the internal sublimation of sexual fluids upwards through the central nāḍī, as the lunar nectar descends from the cranial vault where it meets rajaḥ, female sexual essence; the combined essences are then to be reversed upwards to again meet in the cranial region. This is urcha redha, “reversal practice,” common to disparate tantric traditions as a means of obtaining a yogic or perfected body. This application of bodily praxis, including bodily disciplines, yoga regimens and esoteric sexual practice, cultivates a unique form of self-healing, which Bāul sādhakas argue prevents disease and keeps the body buoyant and jubilant. As Binod described in Chapter Four, “By calming the ripu with tantra-mantra and working with dehatattva, you can extend the body to live up to one hundred years. . .you must learn how the five elements, pañcabhūt, move inside your body.” Bodily discipline thus requires careful control of the bodily constituents needed for the transformation of vastu, rather than non-consciously being subjected to the whims of desires, destructive emotions and other physical components, which may parallel biomedical understandings of hormonal and neurochemical fluctuations.

The perfected stage among Bāul practitioners is that of the Sāi, which is very rarely achieved according to Bāul performers I interviewed. A liberated Sāi lives in complete immersion in Sahaja, and liberation is only found in and through the body, samdeha. Tarak das Bāul, introduced in Chapter Four, described the perfected stage thus: “In this stage, the material world does not matter at all. One is completely unaffected by the world. This is the last stage where the body-ātma meets Paramātmā. Some say the human dies, but I don't understand. . .one never dies.” Basu das Bāul relatedly expanded on this accomplishment, “For one who is attained, all is Māyā. [This person] won't even be hungry or
thirsty, being above all worldly desires. Forget the guṇas\textsuperscript{385} and kām (desire). Then you will understand all. Everyone is born a siddha [accomplished/perfected.] Controlling bindu, gathering śakti, awakens the siddha. The way we learn limits us.” Reiterating Binod das Bāul's references to the simultaneous dangers and accomplishments resulting from esoteric sexual praxis – self-mastery is crucial: “People cannot cross it. . .only those with sādhanā controlling body and mind can cross.\textsuperscript{386} If you want to cross [this river], go slowly and cautiously. Those who do properly never die.”

Soteriological liberation is the most fundamental manifestation of healing. Continuing with the metaphors of movement and transition, this requires an ontological shift – a shifting away from conditioned limitations, as described by Basu das Bāul, and a movement beyond the vicissitudes of emotional “enemies,” ripu, continually stressed by Bāul performers as initial steps in training for bodily sādhanā. Even if the perfected stage is quite rarely achieved, the gradual refinement and transformation of bodily constituents engaged by practitioners, including subtle body flows as well as cognition and emotional flux, purifies bodily obstructions and heals illnesses and mental ailments. Bodily regeneration occurs by recirculating the subtle essences of ras inwards through practitioners' bodies, as further described by Binod: “dehatattva is knowing the body. There is much work needed to make the body fit. If you work on it, knowledge [jñān] comes. An unfit body will never know bliss, ānanda.”

\textbf{6.2 Embodiment and Nepali Traditional Healers}

Among the Nepali traditional healers I interviewed, embodiment manifests in several ways. One integral aspect relates to the orientation practitioners have with his or her body. Mātās often referred to their bodies as “vessels,” Nep. pōta, with which they are to serve Devī simply and humbly.

\textsuperscript{385} The three “qualities” or elements that make up the materially existent universe, Prakṛti
\textsuperscript{386} The bāṅkānāḍī or the “curved river/channel. This is an oblique reference to esoteric sexual practice.
Certain lifestyle constraints are needed to keep the body pure, such as maintaining a vegetarian diet, ingesting and working with herbal medicines, adhering to disciplined practices and daily pūjās, often one in the morning and one at night, and avoiding polluted places like graveyards and areas where people committed suicide. Kumar Sarki, a female jhākri, told me that a vegetarian diet is indeed ideal for her work, but that chicken is acceptable as it is a “neutral” meat and women need to replace lost iron. Jhākris also have uniquely idiosyncratic approaches to bodily discipline and purification, and they are often willing to “pollute” their bodies by purposely spending time in graveyards and communicating with and even embodying restless spirits, practices eschewed by mātās, according to my field interviews.

Similar to the tantric bodily schemata found in Bāul dehatattva songs, some jhākris refer to dhokās, “doors,” as bodily entrances, the number of which differs among varying schemata applied by practitioners. Jhākris are purported to “see” through a larger number of doors than others, granting them the ability to perceive incorporeal domains and entities required for their healing work. When the physical body is unable to perceive spirits and other beings, the subtle suṣma body is required for this work. During the invocation of tutelary deutā, the five elements may also be invoked for protection, as well as guardian spirits residing over rivers, local mountains, the sky, and the Earth – again showing an embodied ecology corresponding with place, as these elements and guardians enter the body for protection during pūjās.

During possession, the practitioner is both him or herself and not him or herself. This relates to the complexities regarding agency and spirit possession, discussed in Chapter Five. Embodying spirits and tutelary deutā requires a certain yielding of the body, in which individual bodily agency gives way to the receptivity requisite to invite incorporeal beings to cohabitate his or her body. Jhākris in my field
site typically regain some level of conscious awareness and recall what transpired during possession, while some mātās do not; this was explained as becoming a surrendered vessel for Devī to control their bodies, allowing the healing work and šakti to emanate because of the goddess' grace.

Another key aspect involves how traditional healers view the embodiments of afflicted patients. When sick people visit healers to report localized bodily symptoms, such as gastrointestinal or gastrik problems, chronic bodily pains or symptoms related to viral and bacterial infections, rice or ginger divination is performed to determine if a physician is to be consulted due to a “natural,” (Nep. prākṛtika) sickness. While this may be the case, it is also often the case that these symptoms are diagnosed as resulting from harmful witchcraft, contamination by harmful spirits, offending nature spirits such as shikari. The presence of benevolent devas or devīs who are mediating within this person's body for various reasons may also cause this; these deutā enter their bodies perhaps to protect the patient from harmful entities, or to beckon them to become a healer. Mental ailments such as listlessness, depression and anxiety, often generalized as the English word “tension,” as well as symptoms relating to madness, pāgala, are almost always diagnosed as resulting from boksī or malignant entities such as pret or bhūt. In this manner, allopathic or psychiatric medicines are seen as ineffective for bodily symptoms that are not purely physiological as that term is understood within the mechanistic lens of Western biomedicine. The human body is conceptualized as more than the viscera composing the gross physical body – it also intersects unseen and incorporeal domains, ever subject to the whims of capricious terrestrial and environmental spirits.

This next section illustrates the central role of aesthetic and musical healing, what I term sonic healing. This relates directly to the role of embodied healing among Nepali traditional healers and Bāul performers. Sonic healing practiced among research participants includes drumming, singing, and chanting mantra. I present sonic healing by discussing the Indic framework of primordial sound, nāda-
\textit{brahman}, being cosmogonic and inherently salvific. Before the analysis of sonic healing, I offer theoretical reflections on affect and its relation to emotional release and healing.

6.3 Affect, Musical Performance and Healing

At Bālāji Temple ritual healings, Dwyer notes that the harmful spirits, \textit{bhūts} and \textit{prets} that are summoned and forced to appear at Bālāji's court, become enraged, and afflicted patients experience that anger directly: “(t)hat is to sa \textit{y}, the anger of the spirits is not simply viewed in an abstract manner, it is believed that the emotion itself is activated.”\textsuperscript{387} Dwyer concludes that the cathartic emotional release that occurs during exorcisms at Balaji Temple, which includes paroxisms, trembling, vomiting, screaming and powerful sobbing, “. . .may well be the dynamic force that enables healing or physical-and-mental transformation to occur, as in psychotherapy or other healing systems which strive to produce emotional feeling as an aid to cure.”\textsuperscript{388}

Expressing deep emotional release is undoubtedly a major aspect of the transformative process evident in successful \textit{pūjās} conducted by \textit{jhākris} and \textit{mātājīs}. Traditional healers I interviewed explained the dramatic behavior exhibited by afflicted patients during healing \textit{pūjās}, which also includes screaming, writhing around and explosive sobbing; these kinds of behavior are seen as signs of \textit{bhūt} or malignant witchcraft leaving the body, or as a lost portion of \textit{sāto} returning to the patient's body, having been summoned and retrieved by the healer. Not only is deeply held emotion purged, the release of harmful energies and entities accompanies a regeneration of affect, according to villagers I interviewed who underwent healing \textit{pūjās}.

Though I agree with Dwyer that emotional release is a central aspect of healing, and

\textsuperscript{387} Graham Dwyer, "Healing and the Transformation of Self in Exorcism at a Hindu Shrine in Rajasthan," 119.\textsuperscript{388} Ibid., 130.
accompanying cathartic relief is palliative to both body and mind, his orientation is within the psychoanalytic tradition, which as previously argued, is bound by body-mind dualism and the privileging of a private, autonomous subject. Modern affective theory attempts to view emotionality and affect with a wider analytical scope. Gilles Deleuze has been instrumental in the so-called “affective turn.” He and F. Guattari reframe affect as being pre-linguistic and ineffable – outside or preceding discursive intellection. Yael Navaro-Yashin describes “emergent” affective theories: “(i)n the psychoanalytic tradition, for example, affect has been synonymous with subjectivity (in spite of the fact that subjectivity was studied as conflicted and split). Emergent theories of affect hijack the traditional subject matter of psychoanalysis and illustrate that affectivity can be studied in sites and spaces beyond the scope of the ‘human subject’, his or her ‘subjectivity’, or ‘psyche.’” Affect is understood not as emotion per se, but the base from which all potentialities of emotion arise. According to these emergent theories, places and physical sites themselves have a unique agency and thus contribute to affectivity – affect is established relationally among human beings and landscapes. Navaro-Yashin bases his analysis on his ethnography in northern Cyprus, where wartorn ruins are left throughout the area, emanating a sense of melancholy to local residents – which Navaro-Yashin argues comes from the physical sites’ own affectivity.

Given this wider analytical framework, affect is situated as a further set of dynamic relationships among human beings and other entities, rather than as the sole product of the human psyche and individual subjectivity, subject to individual repression, expression and release, per the position of psychoanalysis. Rather than being confined to one's individual psyche, a broader conception of affect allows the possibility of emotional states arising between and among human beings.

intersubjectively. Thus in Bāul gān sādhanā, powerful emotional experiences and rapturous bhāb\(^{391}\) can be viewed as a collectively shared process. This corresponds with Bāul performers’ descriptions of gān having inherent power, bīj (seed) and prāṇ which can be transmitted from singer to audiences, further discussed below.

Affect also has powerful effects on health and disease. In the context of ritual healing at Bālāji Temple described by Dwyer, it is the profound release of volatile and unexpressed emotion that is healing in itself. According to Dwyer, this release allows for “. . . a process in which patients de-identify with pathological states of being and re-identify or re-construct the self in accordance with positive feelings and conceptions;” this socially prescribed process “enables them to recover from spirit malaise or distress.”\(^{392}\) Pathologically harmful emotions and “states of being” are thus reconfigured with new insights and ostensibly more helpful or “positive” emotions, following the cathartic release experienced in exorcism.

Trauma that is not exorcized, however, can have deep impacts on well-being. Regarding inter-generational trauma experienced by indigenous Americans, which is applicable to other forms of inhering trauma, Patrisia Gonzales remarks, “(t)raditional healers hold that this deep untreated trauma may ‘mature’ into chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and depression. Such concepts are part of knowledge systems that may conceive of the Indigenous body in ways that are distinct from that of allopathic meaning systems. . .”\(^{393}\) Gonzales continues by discussing Mexican traditional medicine (MTM): “(f)rom the logic of MTM, susto is not depression but can cause symptoms associated with allopathic definitions of depression if left untreated. Elders say that susto can become lodged in a

\(^{391}\) Skt. Bhāva – this important term is discussed below.
\(^{392}\) Graham Dwyer, “Healing and the Transformation of Self in Exorcism at a Hindu Shrine in Rajasthan,” 130.
\(^{393}\) Patrisia Gonzales, “Calling our spirits back,” 28.
particular body part, causing breast cancer, heart disease or spur the onset of diabetes.”

Proceeding from my premise of nondual embodiment, in which cognition and affect are not independent of physiological processes, chronic emotional suffering and disturbances can blossom into physical disease. From the perspective of Mexican traditional medicine and Nepali traditional healers, the possibility of soul loss or interaction with harmful spirits is a primary diagnosis for underlying mental disturbances, and it is in the negotiations with incorporeal domains – retrieving the lost tonal in MTM or the sāto among Nepali traditional healers – that corporeal healing occurs.

Relatedly, jhākri Jitindra Kumar informed me, “In every household, the family god, kul deutā gets easily disturbed. It can lead to mental disturbances (Nep. mānasika aśānti); if it can’t be healed, then the person needs a medical doctor. My main work is to calm the family god.” Numerous jhākris claimed during interviews that the common reason for sickness among many, regardless of what culture they live in, is from disrespecting or offending their familial spirits, who then afflict family members. This illustrates a similar process of emotional suffering, or “mental disturbances” in Jitindra's words, which can blossom into physical disease, requiring the intervention of a doctor. The role of affect and its role in relation to health and healing is thus significant. Yoga practices focused on the calming of thought fluctuations, and the emphasis Bāul research participants placed on calming the affective “enemies” of the chay ripu, are therapeutic insofar as the stilling of excessive emotion and compulsive thought patterns contribute to well-being. The calming of these ripu is also essential to the mental-emotional equilibrium required for sexual praxis, yugal sādhanā, the crux of esoteric bodily practice.

During a conversation about her musical performances, Rina das Bāul expressed how mystifying it is to witness foreigners who do not understand a word of Bengali, yet are nonetheless

394 Ibid., 32.
395 Jitindra Kumar, personal interview, 20 April 2018.
moved to tears and powerful sobbing when watching Bāul gān. This reinforced her conviction that there is something inherently meaningful about Bāul music that is not strictly confined to Bengali culture. Relatedly, during an interview at the Jaydev Melā, the late Tarak das Bāul described the five “moods,” bhāb (Skt. bhāva) that are conveyed in songs: dāsya, śānta, sākhya, bātsalya, and mādhurya. “People cry when hearing Bāul songs or Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa myths because all bhāb exist inside people, and they are all stimulated.” Each song is able to elicit different kinds of bhāb, and bhāb corresponds with the “devotional mood” developed between the bhakta and that which he or she is devoted to.

The term Sanskrit bhāva commonly used among Vaiṣṇavas is variously translated as “moods,” “emotion,” and “devotional mood;” TR Sharma defines bhāva as a specific emotional response: “(t)hus we can say that bhāva is the basis or prime emotion which develops subsequently into a fully-fledged form of rasa (sentiment) and can be defined by the following Rūpasvāmi’s words: ‘Like the rays of a sun in the form of love, turning the mind into a liquified form by its lustre, pure, involuntarily expressed – is what is called a bhāva.' Rasa in turn refers to another technical term – literally “juice” or “essence” and also expressed with connotations of “taste,” this refers to the ineffable emotional experience occurring in aesthetic works and performances. This term has multiple connotations in Bāul code-languages, referring both to aesthetic “essence / taste” as well as to the “liquid love” of sexual fluids.

Bhāva within bhakti contexts is a kind of latent emotional disposition that manifests during song and dance, including devotional kīrtan and bhajan songs. To further illustrate the intersubjective nature of affect, the bhāva or specific emotional attitude of the composer is “encoded” within a song

396 Tarak das Bāul, personal interview, 16 January 2017. See Dimock, The Place of the Hidden Moon, 22-3 for a further description of these bhāb.
composition, which is then collectively shared during the song's performance, among performers and everyone in attendance. Someone listening to a Bāul song, without knowing the meaning of the words, as described by Rina, can still be moved to this deep state of bhāva. As Tarak explained, that is because all bhāb exist within every person, and they are stimulated during Bāul song performance. This directly physical impact on affect, independent of semantic meaning, demonstrates the ability of sound itself to engender healing as a form of sonic healing.

6.4 Aesthetic and Sonic Healing

The English word “aesthetic” is cognate with the Greek term aisthētikós, a word referring to general sensory perception. By discussing aesthetic healing, I invoke a multisensory meaning that engages multiple sense perceptions, including touch, sound, scent, and taste, the latter term having multiple connotations as rasa within the context of Vaiṣṇava bhakti. Regarding aesthetic healing, I focus particularly on the efficacy of sonic healing in relation to my ethnography.

Guy Beck’s conception of “sonic theology” traces the deep impact of nāda-brahman, primordial sound or vibration, throughout a number of Indian religious traditions, including classical music theory. Beginning with Vedic chants and mantra recitation, “. . . the function of oral language as an agent of transformation from the human realm to the divine has been a perennial concern of Indian theological speculation, since language in Hinduism is nearly always identified with both human consciousness and the divine. This transformation of language finds a firm foundation in the ancient Vedic tradition of ritual recitation.”399 In a more recent work, Sonic Liturgy, Beck comments, “The compact elemental sound of Om becomes manifest through the power of oral chant and music and is first discussed in

399 Guy Beck, Sonic Theology, 23.
terms of Nada-Brahman in the Agamas, Pancartras, and Tantras. Nada-Brahman encompassed, in addition to linguistic sounds and utterances, all musical and other nonlinguistic sounds. Musically treatises discussed Nada-Brahman as the foundation of musical sound, and Yoga texts used the term Nada-Brahman to refer to the musical sounds heard during deep meditation. Nada-Brahman was thus essential to Indian views of the salvational dimension of music, for music, as a direct manifestation of Nada, was seen as a means of access to the highest spiritual realities.”

The grammarian Bhartṛhari (ca. 4th century CE) popularized the pan-Hindu theory of śabda-brahman, sound-energy, in which the entire universe flows forth from the primordial word, Vāc. This occurs in four cosmogonic stages, from the most subtle and unmanifest word-sound, to the physically manifest world in which sounds are audible. This theory has been adopted by many Indic traditions, and it occurs in yoga and tantric contexts as well, often to describe the liberative efficacy and cosmic power of mantras. Padoux analyzes the Śaiva tantric theory of nāḍa cosmogony, commonly described as the universe flowing forth from Śiva as supreme Lord, after which the first existent is primordial sound, nāḍa, which then manifests as corporeal nāḍa, bindu, and seed, bīja, followed by kuṇḍalinī and the individual phonemes composing language: “It is a cosmogonic process, and yet, with the kuṇḍalinī, it occurs within the human body, which indeed is considered as identical with the cosmos, the swan (haṁsa) being the vital breath as well as the flashing forth of the supreme energy.”

For Vaiṣṇava bhaktas, chanting the divine Name is itself a supreme method for liberation. Nāḍa as the primordial vibratory resonance, tied directly to cosmogony, is thus intimately connected to the breath and kuṇḍalinī. The proper usage of sound, in the ritual chanting of mantra and in musical

402 Ibid., 87.
performance, is able to catalyze ultimate liberation, as śabda-brahman is synonymous with ultimate reality. If primordial sound emanates from the most subtle and unmanifest to physical and corporeal existence, then human beings are also fundamentally composed of this vibratory presence. As such, chronic mental and emotional ailments, as well as the effects of malignant entities diagnosed by Nepali traditional healers, may be understood as a distortion of or a disruption in this fundamental vibratory nature. Thus, the proper application of sound can directly and viscerally affect the human body's vibratory composition, enabling transformations that catalyze psychophysical healing. To discuss this in terms of psychoneuroimmunology, music has a direct effect on biomarkers and stress levels, and reduced stress levels have a corresponding effect on immunological function. Music and rhythmic intonation, such as the chanting of mantras, are correlated with shifts in brainwave patterns and the release of endorphins and endogenous opioids, both of which may accompany transitions in affect and decreases in physical and emotional pain, a vital aspect in the transformative ontological shift that underlies healing.

6.5 Mantra Healing

David Gordon White argues that the literal consumption of “seed” as female sexual fluids within Kaula initiation rites became disguised or sublimated in the form of bīja mantras, while feminine śakti inherent in these fluids was relegated to the abstract śakti or power of the male guru.

405 David Gordon White, Kiss of the yogini, 219-257.
In Bāul initiatory rites or dīkṣā, bij seed-mantras are intoned into the forehead of an initiate by a guru.

Bāul esoteric praxis also can involve the ingestion of male and female sexual fluids – thus the literal consumption of seed practiced in Kaula initiations is continued, along with the continuation of bij as sound – both meanings have equal validity and applicability.

Ákos Östor, in his analysis of Durgāpūjā festivals in West Bengal, comments on the efficacy of mantra and its connection with śabda, “word,” the sonic power inherent in words:

Mantra is sakti: words have power to accomplish what they say in the context of the pūjā. The word, mantra, is itself sacred, but in the pūjā it is also efficacious. . .Power comes from “vibration”; word is sound, sabda, that produces vibration, energy. This energy has results when allowed to unfold in the ritual context. A mantra is efficacious even when the object to which it is directed is unaware of it; mantra has the quality of a spell. Because of its independent energy, it can act independently. There is widespread belief in Vishnupur in the power of certain religious ascetics who can direct a mantra at a man for good or evil. People accept the action of the mantra when uttered by such an ascetic, even when the man at whom the mantra is directed is unaware of it. Hence mantras have to be pronounced correctly, because they have independent power (power inheres within the proper sound). We noted above that the Universal Being, brahman, is itself associated with sound.

The implication of sound having an inherent sonic power or “energy,” – corresponding with the technical term Sanskrit spanda referring to the vibrational power of sound – means that this vibratory power can be transmitted in Bāul performances, among performers themselves as well as with the audience members who share in the participatory context of performances. Östor makes the intriguing claim that mantra has an independent “energy” which can act independently.

In concrete terms related to healing, uttering mantra to mimicking the primordial sound inherent within the cosmos, nāda, enacts a powerful form of symbolic healing. The Nepali traditional healers in my field site almost always work with mantra, and they claimed that the power (śakti)

inherent in the mantra itself is enough to expel harmful spirits, bhūt, or whatever entities or imbalances that are underlying causes for illness.

Pumpha Regmi Mātājī described the healing power of mantra thus:

The Śakti of the devī enters my body when I invoke her through the mantras in the books [Caṇḍī, Gītā, Vedas]. Our sādhanā is through mantras. Just like how the Rinpoches are able to put these [harmful/lost] spirits in the right track, we too can, through the mantras and chants in our books, put these spirits on their path to peace. The book we use is the Bhagavad [Gītā]. Evil spirits [pret], bhūt and troublesome spirits can all be warded off through the mantras in the book. I heal [upakār] through mantras and also āyurveda. We make these medicines potent through our mantras and the divine powers of Devī.

Pumpha Regmi Mātājī's description of the healing effects of mantra illustrate her unique approach to “folk tantra.” She often refers to her methods in the first person plural, implying that her techniques are similarly used among other mātās. Rather than approaching the Gītā and other foundational Hindu texts as soteriological guides, her orientation is quite pragmatic and “this-worldly,” drawing upon mantras within these texts for their sonic ability to heal. Such mantras are powerful enough to physically draw in and embody the presence of Devī. They also directly empower the herbs and āyurvedic medicines employed for healing. Aside from mantras found in these books, numerous jhākris and mātās reported learning mantras directly from dreams, continuing a lineage of transmission, a paramparā, without necessarily training with a human guru. “Our sādhanā is through mantras” – her main healing practice is working with mantra. It is the sonic pulsation of the mantra itself, the vibratory presence which physically enters the afflicted patient’s body, that engenders the healing process. Harmful entities such as bhūt likewise are affected by the sonic presence of these mantras, and according to Pumpha, if they are causing affliction by being lost in the postmortem state, the right mantra is able to set them on the right path, similar to the methods of Tibetan lamas who work with restless spirits. Mantra can thus be expressed as a powerful form of sonic healing, as described by
Lakṣmi Mātājī: “Mantras and knowledge come to me instantly. Once I chant, the mantra is so powerful that it instantly heals the body. I also use instruments (e.g. conch, ḍamaru) at the same time.”

6.6 Drumming, Nāda, and Embodied Sound

Throughout the Himalayan region, drums are ubiquitously used in ritual contexts across numerous traditions. Both Hindu and Buddhist practitioners use frame-drums similar to the dhyāngro, and Śiva's hand-drum, the ḍamaru, is also very commonly used in a variety of ritual contexts across traditions. Among low-caste drummers in the Indian and Nepali Himalayan regions, there is a unique tradition connected to the Nāth yogis. Andrew Alter engaged with these communities in the north Indian Himalayas, particularly in the Garhwal region, who continue a tantric tradition related to Gorakṣa and the Nāth Siddhas.

The influence of Gorakṣanāth (also known as Gorakhnāth) in Nepal and the Himalayan regions of northern India is considerable. He and his guru Matsyendranāth are deified throughout Nepal. Among jhākris, Gorakh is often viewed as a supreme guru. Hence this incantatory stanza uttered by Sukra Bahadur Tamang before being possessed by his tutelary deity:

Come my guru, come!
Sri Gorakhnath, teacher
Gauri Parbati, Lord Mahadev!
Change into fire and flames
Come
jhāṅkri spirit
Come. 407

Because musician castes are often low-caste, Alter argues that the Nāths' rejection of caste distinctions caused their sampradāya or tradition to propagate through a wide range of musician castes

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407 Sidky, Haunted by the Archaic Shaman, 26.
in northern India and the central Himalayas. These Garhwali drummers often refer to an oral text entitled *Ḍhol Sāgar*, “Ocean of Drumming.” It is structured similar to a Śaiva Āgama text, being a dialogue between Śiva and goddess Pārvatī. Herein the term śabda appears, referring to uttered words having an inherent sonic power, which is analogous to the vibratory power of drumming.

According to the drummers' interpretations of this oral text, bīja, seed, as a manifestation of sound, inheres within the vibrations caused by drumming. “Drum syllables and patterns hold meaning as much as, if not more powerfully than, language itself. Each stroke may be the bīja syllable of a drum utterance as much as a spoken syllable can be the bīja syllable of a mantra. Nāda, the primordial sound, in its pure form is Śiva. It is Śiva's drum that pulses and this pulsation brings forth existence.” These drummers thus incorporate conceptions of śabda, bīja as “sound/drum seed,” and nāda, terms commonly used among Nāth yogis, within their conception of the sonic power inhering within drums.

Among *jhākris*, pounding the dhyāngro, a large frame drum often made of deerskin or other animal hides, is essential for the entry of spirits and tutelary deuṭā into their bodies. This is the primary instrument employed by the *jhākris* I met during fieldwork. The resonance of the pounding dhyāngro and chiming bells corresponds with ākāśa, as these sounds are said to originate from the sky. It is only when the resonance is established from the rhythmic pulsation of the dhyāngro, while chanting invocationary mantras, that the summoned entities become embodied – music is thus the medium which establishes contact between the corporeal domain and the incorporeal world of spirits. Other instruments are also employed, such as conches and an assortment of bells. These instruments are especially important among *mātās*, who play these instruments to establish a similar aural invocation for pūjās. Duma Mātājī defined a distinguishing characteristic of *mātās*: they use a small hand-drum,

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409 Ibid., 196-7.
ḍamaru, rather than the dhyāngro, to summon Devī; the usage of music in pūjā, including conches, bells, and singing or chanting mantras, is just as crucial for mātās. The overall aesthetic orientation is central to healing pūjās conducted by both jhākris and mātās: the air is heavily permeated by rich incense, local flowers such as marigolds are strewn about the room, chanting and singing is accompanied by multiple instruments, and the shrill cry of hand-bells alternate with the pounding of dhyāngro or ḍamaru. All of these aesthetic features, according to the practitioners I interviewed, have a direct and visceral effect, able to enter the body of afflicted patients and agitate the sickness or harmful entity residing there. As Alder equates primordial sound in its purest form with Śiva, so did jhākris and mātās claim that the mantras and musical instruments they play directly manifest the healing power of Śiva or Devī. In fact, music and mantra are no different from the Deva or Devī. The inherent power of nāda is enough to dispel malignant entities and influences from an afflicted patient's body.

6.7 Gān sādhanā: Music, Healing, and Sādhanā

“Music IS sādhanā... it affects the body-mind (man). If you sing from your heart, it is true bliss (ānanda). If faking, it is obvious.”

A crucially related practice to bodily praxis among Bāuls is that of gān sādhanā, musical training and performance. The rhythmic breathing and physical regimens required for singing and dancing incorporate the breathing techniques of prāṇāyāma, and the cultivation of “vital breath” or prāṇa is also key in musical performance. “Dancing is our primary exercise, and it works with the breath. . .Singing and its rhythm gives the 3 stages of prāṇāyāma. You

410 Sudhir das Bāul, personal interview, Birbhum district, 26 March 2016.
don't need prāṇāyāma if you know this. You can do yogas, but dancing is primary.”

The influence of bhakti as a path towards liberation, mokṣa, also relates to Bāul musical performance as a socially liberative act, since śabda or “sound-energy” is shared between performer and audience members. Karen Prentiss offers an important critique regarding scholarly perceptions of bhakti: “Academic discussions of bhakti that focus on the image of God, including monotheism and nirguṇa and sāguṇa, and those that focus on social movements, including reform, revolution, and revival, tend to obstruct scholarly recognition of the pattern of concern with embodiment common to bhakti’s proponents and interpreters.” This embodied practice involves “engagement with (or participation in) God [which] should inform all of one’s activities.” This religious attitude is shown in the quotidian imagery, the everyday activities and relationships so commonly described in vernacular bhakti poetry, which are nonetheless sanctified in the bhakta’s surrender to the divine. As argued by Christian Novetzke, bhakti presents itself within the context of a “publics of reception,” wherein “ideas, materials, and memories circulate among individuals;” it is thus an eminently public process. Bāul musical performance is socially liberative because, in the “publics of reception,” friends, strangers, performers and audience members dissolve the social boundaries that normally affirm differences and hierarchical distinctions. This includes, as I discuss below, the transfer of vital breath, prāṇa, and emotional experiences that are publicly shared and socially permeable.

Multiple Bāul performers told me that a central aspect of gān sādhanā is the ability to affect the flow of prāṇa in audience members through singing, which is inherently healing as this can unblock their bodily obstructions which inhibit the unhindered flow of prāṇa. As Binod described in the

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411 Dindayal das Bāul, personal interview, Kolkata, 10 May 2018.
413 Ibid.
interview presented in Chapter Four, “When we sing Baul songs and do sadhanā, we [both singers and audiences] feel peace (śanti) and solace in the body and mind. In this way, songs heal you.” This illustrates the sanctified context of musical performance as a practice that engenders healing as well as spiritual liberation and a platform for sociopolitical critique. This also reinforces the necessity of approaching Baul music as an embodied, performative totality, rather than solely extrapolating lyrical meanings in textual analyses.

Kristin Hanssen describes the Vaiṣṇava view of sound being laden with emotion: singing is regarded as a form of feeding, and it establishes bonds – strangers (par) “are made into one's own (āpan). In ideal terms, love and nourishment pervade the relationship between singers and their listeners and these qualities are also found in seed, assimilated by [train] passengers when they listen to a song. The bonds forged resemble kinship ties and as such cut across caste distinctions based on separation and ideas of pollution.”

This illustrates another form of oblique sociopolitical subversion, as – at least ideally – bonds are forged akin to kinship ties, not separated by caste and hierarchical boundaries. Tara, the Baul singer interviewed by Hanssen, explained that singing can weaken a performer because melodies are endowed with a life “(ekta jiban) or life force (pran). The life within the song derives from seed and during the course of singing, the pran passes into the melody by means of breath.” Tara further explained songs as having an inherent life, and they are also endowed with seed: the seed in sound moves circuitously through breath when someone sings. As sublimated sexual fluids are to be sustained within the head in yugal sādhanā, so should song remain within this area – the “song-seed” is then transmitted to others in singing through the vehicle of breath.

According to this model, those listening to Baul songs can be directly and viscerally impacted by the music via the

416 Ibid.
417 Ibid.
stimulation of prāṇa flow.

Daniel Gold notes a strikingly similar notion that connects sound and seed among north Indian Sant minstrels: “Authority in panths today devolves both through nād paramparā, 'succession through sound' – the mantra imparted to the disciple at initiation – (spiritual lineage); and bindu paramparā, 'succession through seed,' (biological lineage).”

Sant lineages are thus continued in familial lineages as well as in the sonic transmission of nād paramparā; seed (bindu) is seen as having inherent affinity with sound, nād: “semen, biological seed, becomes the source of vital power that is transmuted in yoga, and specific seed mantras (bīja mantras) can eventually blossom in the lotuses of the subtle physical body. . . Both aspects of the potentiality of seed can govern the continuity of Hindu religious traditions, where a parallel is drawn between nād paramparā and bindu paramparā.”

These polysemic and interrelated meanings of “seed” (bīj) are similarly reflected in the code-words of Bāul performers – sādhana is practiced to transmute biological seed, seed mantras within subtle body lotuses correlate with physical seed, all of which correlate with sound itself. In certain Bāul initiations, the guru chants an initiatory mantra, also known as bīj or a “seed mantra,” through the forehead – the area where bīj resides – thus completing a circuit that interweaves various manifestations of bīj.

As previously stated, though I do not employ the term “shaman” as a cross-cultural analytical term within this thesis, Andrew Schelling invokes this term in his analysis of bhakti performers to analogize their role with that of “the shaman,” the controller of ecstatic states, whose poetry, contrary to descriptive or purely functional usages of language, “transports the listeners into other 'states.'”

Here I again comment on how tempting it is to employ Western academic terms such as “altered states” or “mental states” generally within the context of “ecstatic” – yet another highly loaded, culturally

418 Gold, The Lord as Guru, 100.
419 Ibid., 48
imposing term – performance modalities. Nonetheless, Schelling’s point connects with my argument: Baul performances, in alignment with bhakti devotional expressiveness, are embodied discourses of healing, capable of transforming performance attendees. This results from the viscerally affective effects of the instruments' physical sensations, as well as the purported ability to transfer prāṇa as well as bhāb, “devotional moods.”

Regula Qureshi, in an article questioning how meaning arises musically, draws her analysis from her fieldwork with sarangi musicians in northern India and Pakistan. “In Sufi music, I found that meaning was created sonically between performers and listeners. . .song texts provide pivotal references to affect, grounding the sonic experience in shared horizons of memory and metaphor.” This is another connotation of “meaning” – not referring to the semantic context of deciphering and interpreting song lyrics, but the sonic, direct sensation of music shared between performers and listeners, which establishes a new kind of felt experience – a newly situated meaning. So too can Baul songs invoke “pivotal references” to affect and powerful emotional surges in the stimulation of bhāb.

Qureshi argues that the complex, embodied meanings conveyed in musical performance include an inherently political discourse, insofar as music composed from socially marginalized positions speaks “to social struggle and to the politics of dominance and exclusion.” In Sufi musical performance or sama, Qureshi notes that music is referred to as ruhani ghiza, literally “soul food,” “an essential emotional-spiritual nourishment that is inherent in music;” this nourishment is [provided] with melodious singing and rhythmic dancing. Shashibhushan Dasgupta argues that Baul music and dance derive inspiration from Sufi sama.

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422 Ibid., 823.
I agree with Qureshi’s statements about the shared “nourishment” and meanings conveyed in the collective experience of musical performance. In Bāul musical transmission, the ambiguous and polysemic nature of song lyrics creates novel reconstructions of interpretative meaning with each performance, innovating diverse and shared discourses among performers and audience members. The sonic resonance emanating from the physical sensations of musical instruments and vocals establishes empathic bonds among performer and attendees, both individually and socially. Qureshi considers this disruption of social order to be inherently political – I concur, and the socio-political aspects of healing correspond with the social critiques of Bāul songs as well as the intersubjective, shared experience of Bāul performances, which are often rapturous as the intensity of dancing and vocal expressiveness increases throughout all-night melās.

Jean During, developing a model of musical therapy within Islamic cultures, describes the healing context of Sufi gatherings or “listening,” sama. She notes psychophysical healing properties attributed to music by early Sufis, including Abu Nasr Sarraj, who wrote that “(m)any ill people were cured by sama.”424 Al-Bokhari, in the eleventh century, stated that “many mentally ill people were cured by sama and recovered their reason.”

During describes a shamanic context in sama gatherings among the Baluchis – in her own words, she refers to the musical officiant (khalife) as a “shaman” – wherein harmful entities, such as jinn or guat, are extracted from patients suffering physically or psychologically by the sheer power of the music itself.425 Those spirits causing sickness are then drawn out of the patient’s body. The performed songs, gauti-damali, are specifically structured and intended to reach jinn or guat.426 This is

425 Ibid., 376.
426 Ibid.
accompanied by the descent of beneficent forces, such as the souls of ancestors or saints, all invoked through specialized music.

_Gān sādhanā_ exemplifies the centrality of _bartamān_ as distinguished from _anumān_. Rather than transmitting teachings _via_ written śāstra, which is dependent on inferential understanding, logical induction and related rational processes – hearsay and secondary knowledge, according to Bāul performers – song and dance are very much direct, highly visceral processes which _embody_ the teachings encrypted in song lyrics, conveyed among performers as well as those attending performances. The role of song is indispensable in the expression of bodily-centered teachings, oblique riddles and paradoxes, and multiple layers of veiled _entendres_. _Gān sādhanā_ both provokes the rapturous intensity of _bhakti_ while continuing the principle of _bartamān_ in a pedagogical fashion.

Regarding diagnosis and treatment in north Indian sacred music therapy, Patricia Cook notes that “through song, the disease (that is, the possessing spirit or deity) tells the healer what it needs from the patient or family. Koshalya [the healer] then negotiates through song and spoken words until an agreement is reached between all parties.”427 This illustrates an orientation in which disease is understood as the result of or even the embodiment of a sentient entity with active agency. Reciprocity is also crucial to healing – the possessing spirit must be appeased and satisfied, but in a manner that establishes agreement among everyone present. The goddess possessing the _ojha_, in this case Śītalā, must also be properly respected and satisfied, or serious harm may fall upon the _ojha_. Strikingly, the disease finally expresses itself externally within a group setting in cohesive form _as a song_. _Spanda_, the vibratory presence of sound and music, is able to directly and viscerally affect a sick person's body-mind, while attracting unseen powers known only to the healer and the deities or spirits presiding over the ceremony. If disease is sung into being as a disruption of bodily consonance and

one's network of intra- and interpersonal relationships, then healing as the reestablishment of one's cohesive, sanctified existence is also sung into being.

The most fundamental healing can potentially spark an ontological shift – that is, one's entire existence is capable of reformulation and transformation. From a broader perspective that envisions healing as a totality, afflictive symptoms, psychophysical pain, and disruption that occur throughout the body-mind can be conceived of as residuum that develops from the habitual flux of thought and affect in the way one exists, rather than as strictly the result of localized mechanical dysfunctions meticulously specified in modern biomedical science. The way in which one lives correlates with the many relationships and engagements with place and ecologies, human and nonhuman beings, as well as how one relates to him or herself, which includes an array of self-reflexive thoughts and emotions; traditional healers as interpersonal mediators are able to perceive the social obstructions, bodily imbalances, blockages, ancestral and personal traumas that underlie affliction and suffering. Among Nepali traditional healers, many of these imbalanced or obstructed relationships are diagnosed as occurring among human beings, nonhuman entities and the terrestrial spirits inhabiting local biota, illustrating a larger connotation of “social” interactions and ethical obligations.

Musical training and performance among Bāul singers connect directly to the rigors of esoteric bodily praxis; even when the latter is not cultivated, gān sādhanā is also a central aspect of bodily training. Through the provocation of primordial sound, nāda, these musical performances directly affect both performers and observers, viscerally altering one's physical composition through the nonlinguistic transfer of prāṇa, contributing to healing as a totality.

Jean During further comments regarding Sufi musical healing, “(g)enerally, the patient is also seized (inhabited or transported) by these forces [incorporeal beings]; and it is the descent of such forces through the means of music that leads to the recovery of health. . .There is no question in these
rituals of the direct effect of music on the body. Further, it is widely known that in many cultures, music is the language used to communicate with the spiritual realm. Sama influenced Bāul musical performance via the uniquely situated culture of Bengali Sufism, which permeated tantric yoga cultures as well as Vaiṣṇava-oriented bhakti. While I am unaware of parallel shamanic-type musical healing among Bāuls, private Bāul performances for ill or diseased people occur, with singing intended to bring a palliative effect.

The aesthetic modalities described in this chapter – bhakti-inspired song and dance, drumming, and chanting mantra – psychophysically impact bodily illnesses and psychological distress as a form of sonic healing that may fall outside the purview of allopathic medicine and biomedical etiology. As Patricia Cook notes in north Indian sacred music therapy, the possessing spirit of a disease quite literally sings the nature and cause of illness, while the healer sings the cure in response; this is strikingly parallel to the sung or chanted negotiations between Nepali traditional healers and possessing spirits. The notion of embodied sonic healing, a multisensory and multidimensional form of healing, relates to my argument regarding healing as a totality, which envisions health and healing as a dynamic process that interweaves mind-body-spirit rather than separating these elements as discrete components; with this more inclusive model of embodiment, sound and music are able to alter the affective and physical compositions of the body directly, providing palliative relief.

As I further argue, Bāul musical performances form a unique scope of healing, one that intersects sociopolitical subversion with bodily healing and rejuvenation. As for Jean During’s description of music communicating “with the spiritual realm,” Bāul gān sādhanā is not oriented towards any ontologically distinct realm and is very much directed towards the dynamic processes occurring here-and-now, echoed in the words of Biswanath das Bāul: “sādhanā is bartamān.”

Conclusion: Reflections on Healing

1 Language Formed Anew

Vāc is the goddess of speech described in the Vedic corpus, a personified power who inspired the ancient ṛṣis to be her mouthpiece by uttering ultimate truth in sonic form through divine poetry and mantras. Through the power of healing mantras described by Nepali traditional healers in my ethnography, unique lifeworlds are born anew, allowing the amorphousness of deep suffering to manifest in comprehensible form, subject to the healing abilities of the practitioner singing the mantra. What is relevant is not what the mantra “means” semantically: rather, it is how the sonic presence of the sounds themselves enter into the suffering patient. My argument presented within the sonic framework of nāda-brahman in Chapter Six expanded embodied healing to refer not only to the body-as-place but also to the body-as-sound. As noted by Padoux in his analysis of nāda-brahman as discussed in Śaiva tantric texts, the human body, with its flow of vital breaths, is coterminous with the cosmogonic emanation of the universe via the first primordial sound. The physically transmitted, sonic and vibratory quality of mantra, within the pan-Indic frameworks of śabda and nāda-brahman, is able to catalyze healing by affecting the physiological makeup of an afflicted person. Since the theory of śabda-brahman states that all corporeal existence is inherently vibrational and composed of sound, then the human body is equally subject to the healing effects of sound and music.

Elisabeth Schoembucher argues that those afflicted with spirit possession in South Asia “. . .are identified with the traditional agents of disorder and chaos, in which case they act out the role of the rebellious agent, rebelling against the power of the priest or exorcist and creating chaos. . .it [hysterical
behavior’] has to be seen rather as an enactment of negative and chaotic cosmic forces. Analogical terms such as “order,” “chaos,” “harmony” and “disharmony” are fitting to use in this context, and it is noteworthy that an original definition of harmony refers to the consonance of musical notes. The centrality of metaphorical language again appears in this description of illness and healing. To continue with these metaphors, traditional healers thus bring about a reestablishment of consonance and order as one who is able to interpret and work with cosmic forces, tensions, and hostilities, which manifest individually and socially within the nuanced dynamics of the local community. Ideally, healing as a totality involves the movement from a fragmentary ego-centered existence to wholeness and connectivity, a movement reflected in the reestablishment of cosmic order from chaotic disharmony and suffering.

Song, dance, and the spectrum of musical potentia also reform language, establishing an aesthetic language able to catalyze this fundamental healing. This refers to “movement” both literally and in metaphorical language as an ontological shift and transition. Likewise in my training with traditional American healing modalities, song and dance are of central importance. Every place and landscape has its unique song, and through patient receptivity, one is able to learn and echo this song. The sound of birds singing on drifting winds, how trees sway and dance during storms, the nocturnal, haunting coyote songs that reverberate throughout canyons – all of these melodies form a singular song that flows directly from Earth. When our vitality is lowered from depression and grief, the proper song can bring powerful relief and healing. Peyote songs among the Apache, Huichol and Native American Church members accompany the sacramental ingestion of peyōtl, and these songs are the direct expression of the plant's sentience. The pan-Native Ghost Dance is practiced throughout North America,

a dance prophesied by Northern Paiute traditional healer Wovoka to purify and heal tribal nations while bringing them together in cross-cultural unity. Powwow gatherings are also important ceremonial events for intertribal healing songs, dance, and cultural exchange. Lakota elder Ben Black Bear Sr. described the central role of dancing in traditional healing arts:

. . . Maybe you have a negative or bad thought in your mind, if you involve yourself in dancing – you will become well, your body will attain balance and harmony, you won't become sick, you will enjoy life and you will feel good not just towards your relatives but toward all people, and this is a divine feeling, and this is the way God wants us to feel.430

Elder Black Bear places emphasis not just on the cathartic effects of healing-dance which accompany the release of sickness and pain, but also a shift in orientation, a reinvigoration and sense of interconnection, relating to the Lakota prayer mitakuye oyasin, “all my relations” – all beings, including landscapes and places, are one’s relatives. Lakota traditional arts such as the Hoop Dance aim to reestablish the existential equilibrium that is disrupted in the presence of anguish and chronic illness, as well as grief and anxiety resulting from a disruption in social relationships.

Among Bāul singers, bhakti as a complete devotional surrender through song and dance is crucial. As some singers informed me, proper singing is sādhanā if the song pours out from deep within the abdomen rather than from the chest or throat, mirroring the breathing cycles of prāṇāyāma, raising the prāṇā upwards and leading to the highest bliss, ānanda. Indeed, as they further explained, the intensive and gradual bodily purification through body praxis, deha sādhanā, is to be accompanied by the mastery of performing Bāul songs.

430 Quoted in Benjamin D. Koen and Kevin Lock, “The Lakota Hoop Dance as Medicine for Social Healing,” in The Oxford Handbook of Medical Ethnomusicology, 495.
2 The Dance of Healing

Guiding research questions presented in the introduction asked how Bāul performers and Nepali traditional healers, responding to unique sociocultural health care systems, conceptualize and understand embodiment and healing; further, in what ways do their cultural health care systems interact with biomedical systems of diagnosis and treatment? My thesis explored the multidimensional responses to this guiding question, which includes the conceptualization of embodiment transmitted in *dehatattva* songs among Bāul performers, and the practical application of these theories in bodily praxis, *deha sādhanā*.

Bāul bodily praxis is a novel approach to self-healing, employing tantric yogic methods to promote bodily longevity and to prevent sickness and disease. *Deha sādhanā*, esoteric bodily regimen, may or may not be practiced by Bāul performers, and the role of bodily *sādhanā* is emphasized and deemphasized during different phases of life, according to the Bāuls I interviewed. As described in Chapter Four, an excessive loss of bodily fluids and correlated vitality is analogized with a kind of death, while the recirculation of bodily essences in *yugal sādhanā*, sexual praxis, corresponds with the cultivation of bodily longevity and vibrant health. This level of psychophysiological healing approaches aspects of my hypothesis regarding multidimensional healing as a totality. Directly related to praxis is a bodily schema, obliquely described in *dehatattva* songs, which presents a tantric subtle body physiology that interweaves mind and body as a dynamically interconnected process. Praxis centered on bodily regeneration and the circulation of internal wind-currents along with the schema of *dehatattva*, “body-truths,” illustrate the *transformational* capability of the human body. While this schema was developed outside the foundational premises of biomedical anatomy and physiology, Bāul practitioners in my ethnography presented an overlap with biomedical models: Binod das Bāul discussed *ras* or bodily fluids as a flow composed of “vitamins” and “chemicals.” Dindayal das Bāul
described female sexual secretions as having vital “protein.” Khyāpā Baba explicitly referred to the endocrine system by claiming that those who work with *urdha redha*, “reverse practice,” are attempting to subdue and transform the physiological effects of testosterone.

For Bāul performers, healing also involves a subversion of socioeconomic constraints and positions, including being positioned in the caste structures of *jāti* and *varṇa*. Here sahaja as “naturalness” or easiness relates to a spontaneous, liberated mode of living that is unencumbered by societal and caste-bound constraints. This striving towards liberation stems from the struggle of low-caste “subaltern” communities, described in the evocative imagery of the Buddhist *Caryāpādas* and continuing with modern Bāul singers. The emphatic push away from institutionalized dogma and caste hierarchy appears in these songs, the oldest textual example of Bengali heterodox religious orientations. In the vernacular songs attributed to the early medieval Siddhas, the extolling of the human body as the locus of divinity and the central pilgrimage site worthy of supreme worship established a subversive technique, what Hugh Urban refers to as “internal” subversion, the establishment of an esoteric, alternative social body. This subversion includes the open rejection of institutional and social hierarchies, caste purity standards, and priestly hegemony, sustained in the social critiques of contemporary Bāul songs. It also includes more veiled critiques of socially oppressive hierarchical and gender structures, such as in the songs of Rina das Bāul. I view this as a form of sociopolitical healing – a liberative movement away from oppressive and enslaving societal roles.

*Jhākris* and *mātājīs* who participated in my ethnography may belong to a specific *varṇa*, or they may be exempt from caste membership. Similar to tantric healers who are “polluted” due to their contact with members of all social classes, they also form a unique position outside of standard social hierarchical status. Reputable healers develop an alternative form of status, one established by their efficacy as healers. Relatedly, Nepali traditional healers face a continual tension with more socially
prestigious Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, who are often called to perform similar exorcistic and healing work. These healers also face ambivalent expectations from villagers due to modern biomedical physicians who occupy an overlapping sphere within the local health care system.

Yet despite these social pressures, which Monkumari Tamang Jhâkri fears may even threaten the livelihood of jhâkris, since fewer villagers are properly respecting their familial lineage (kul) due to the dominance of Buddhist institutions, the traditional healing modality practiced by these healers continues to fill a vital niche within this health care system. This niche maintains a pragmatic methodology unique to the Nepali cosmological framework and the Himalayan confluence of Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Another guiding research question asked is: do research participants' models of embodiment distinguish mind and body as separate, discrete categories? The Nepali word man with the connotation of “heart-mind” connects to a foundational premise commonly adopted by the Nepali traditional healers in my ethnography: thoughts and emotions lodged within the “heart” and “mind” may directly affect and harm physical health and well-being. Chronic ailments may not be “natural” diseases and instead potentially arise from harmful witchcraft or contamination by bhūt or other harmful spirits; such afflictions require a ritual specialist to draw these malignant influences out from the body of the ailing patient. This exemplifies a multivalent system of ritual healing that addresses numerous components of the human body, health, and disease, corresponding with my notion of healing as a totality. As explained in Chapter Five, patients suffering from “natural” diseases correlated with microbial infections, broken limbs, and other conditions subject to effective allopathic treatment are often referred to medical practitioners by Nepali traditional healers, illustrating an ongoing division of labor shared with biomedical physicians and treatment.

Attipat Ramanujan discusses the freedom resulting from mokṣa, understood both as spiritual
liberation and freedom from all societal demands – that is, “freedom from context.” Bhakti is “(t)he last of the great Hindu anti-contextual notions,” which “defies all contextual structures: every pigeonhole of caste, ritual, gender, appropriate clothing and custom, stage of life, the whole system of homo hierarchicus ('everything in its place'). . .”

As Saraha sings in dohākośa 48, when thoughts go to sleep and the body breaks its bonds, then the identity of enjoyment is left in Sahaja; one stays neither Śudra nor Brahmin. Here, the unveiling of one’s true nature as sahaja transcends caste distinction and social hierarchy. Likewise, Bāuls seek liberation from context in which jāti and varṇa are no longer regulating forces. Above all, it is oneself – it is one’s body that is the locus of all salvation and sanctity; religious formalism and caste division are not relevant to this process. Rather than relying on overt socio-political rebellion, this freedom is achieved in the reconfiguring of the body-self in sādhana, and the “naturalness” and “easiness” of sahaja as a modality of living. This movement towards freedom develops a framework for healing as a totality: psycho-physiological healing of the body-self in addition to freedom from socio-political conditioning. Esoteric praxis is thus far from mystical quietism, as it forms a crucial foundation for societal engagement and critique. Practices aligned with tantric transgressive praxis, such as esoteric sexual union, yugal sādhana, and the eschewing of social and gender norms also form a platform for societal subversion.

Uḷṭā as the regressive way is the reversal of the course of nature, as sexual essences are inverted upwards through the bodies of female and male practitioners for the generation of bliss, rather than being expended for pleasure or procreation. The reverse way also flows contrary to what is expected in the fairly rigid structure of South Asian social and gender roles: herein Bāul singers move away from

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the expected behavior and norms of worldly householders and the renunciative attitude of sannyāsa.

As the universe unfolded from original, undivided unity into the material cosmos of duality into the material cosmos of duality, so can the primeval oneness be realized within the human body. Sahaja as an ultimate or soteriological referent is the merging of dualities, termed variously as Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, puruṣa and prakṛti, in blissful nonduality; human beings in their highest nature (svarūpa) as god and goddess are drawn together despite myriad human suffering and vicissitudes through the divine yearning and sublimest love of prema. To continue with this feedback loop, once the body is experienced as divya or divine, one can live naturally or “easily” in sahaja within a nondual perspective – here, the joyful mood or bhāva must be expressed in an ecstatic outpouring of songs, songs which can only point to this experience in the most oblique and poetically symbolic language.

Those Bāul singers who do not practice body-sādhanā insist that bhakti and singing performances are their form of sādhanā. I observed Bāul performers consumed by overwhelming emotion in frenzied song and dance, losing themselves completely in the music, the bliss of which causes ecstatic tears to burst forth. This is a kind of healing, a shared catharsis that moves beyond cultural and linguistic barriers. Through bhakti, the highest love of prema can also be achieved, and this sublimest love is a true healing elixir for human misery of whatever manifestation. Song and dance in this context is more than aesthetic delight – it forms the foundation for cathartic release, for a renewal and healing of the body-place. The indigenous teachings I received also emphasize the central role of singing and dancing: the sacred drum invokes the primeval beat of the universe, the one rhythm that permeates Creation. Losing oneself in dance by circling the drum provides the deepest vulnerability for healing.

Baba Khyāpā argues that the “Vajrayāna completes in Bāul” by adding the emphasis on bhakti
devotional music and prema as liberative, divine love. He further compares sahaja with Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen:

The final outcome is sahaja. Sahaja can be all the stages completed: that is Dzogchen. Dzogchen is love between guru and disciple. Essential understanding of the Bāul Sahaja is samaya – when you have become your guru, when your guru has entered your transmission. There should be no book in Dzogchen, no deities and mantra. It is pure essence of oneness that happens when you find yourself surrendered. You cannot try to surrender. . .you have found the Beloved. You surrender.

I fell in love with my guru. . .that falling in love with the guru made me an avadhūta. I am missing my beloved and learned to see my guru everywhere. Through tears I’ve learned to see my guru in everyone and everything.

Our understanding of Dzogchen or Sahaja is love, and how love becomes eternal compassion. Because only love can join you in saṃsāra. Guru is nirvāṇa and you are saṃsāra.

Sahaja: translated into English as the co-emergent, simultaneously arisen, “the innate.”

Adjectively, this is applied as living in a way that is easy, natural, spontaneous and unencumbered. Sahaja as the highest nondual realization is coterminous with divine love, prema, which manifests as mahākaruṇā, the greatest compassion. This “eternal compassion,” the love which “can join you in saṃsāra” is not otherworldly or devoted to a transcendent deity: it is shared among human beings, cultivated within the sacred crucible of the human body. Healing of the totality of oneself comes with the grace of surrendering to the guru, both as one's spiritual teacher and as one's true inner nature, svarūpa. It is this yearning for the elusive, multifaceted Beloved that Bāul songs inevitably return to, like the constant ebb-and-flow of the streams and rivers coursing through the Bengali countryside. It is at this riverine juncture, the confluence of numerous heterodox streams, that bhakti as the spontaneous outpouring of emotion is indispensable for the application and understanding of sādhanā.

Bāul sādhakas apply tantric yoga practices, such as bodily alchemical techniques employed via
Haṭhayoga āsanas, breathing techniques and esoteric praxis – including erotico-yoga or yugal-sādhanā practice – to rejuvenate bodily health and even to extend longevity; as some sādhakas claim, those who properly apply sādhanā are not subject to death or the suffering and vicissitudes of samsāra. This level relates to psycho-physiological health and vibrancy. On the soteriological level, the ideal aligns with the goal of jīvan-mukti, being liberated while still alive. Like the early medieval Siddha composers of sahaja songs, the aim is not to transcend or leave samsāra, but to realize advaya, the nondual unity of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, remaining within the wheel of existence while not being bound to it. This enables one to live unencumbered and easily – the sahaja way, unveiled directly within the human body.

We as human beings emerge from the oceanic oneness of our mother's womb in a blur of tears and pain, gradually forming a separate ego-bound identity that defines itself in distinction from the world. The fragmentation of selfhood, insofar as the ego-self identifies itself in separation, is a primary source of continual suffering. The indigenous American healers I trained with insist that understanding the truth of our interwoven being is the initial step towards healing. Within this paradigm, this movement is inherently ecological, as it is the terrestrial powers of Earth that have the greatest potential to heal. The fragmentation of an isolated ego-self away from the interwoven biota of Earthly life is a fundamental cause of spirit-sickness, which afflicts individuals and the greater Earthly community.

One elder from the Chinook nation taught me that the Earth in this current era would undergo a great cleansing, as prophesied by traditional stories; disconnection, human suffering and spirit-sickness will only intensify across the planet. It is therefore imperative that humans find the way toward empowerment and wholeness.

As the immediate physical materiality of the body is one component within a larger permeable embodied system, embodiment is also interwoven with language, and the reformulated language of incantation and ritual speech, the “shamanic language” referred to by Maskarinec and employed by
jhākris and mātājis can deeply affect viscerally embodied illnesses and affliction. Performative healing thus transforms the symbolic efficacy of language to another kind of expressive domain, wherein uttered words, songs, and mantras themselves are charged with a new meaning and power. Recreating new social and cosmological orders grant the ontological shift needed for healing to occur.

Relatedly within the context of indigenous American healing, Shawnee philosopher Thomas M. Norton-Smith draws from Nelson Goodman's constructivist philosophy, which posits that linguistic descriptions of the world create new worlds in themselves. Norton-Smith, in what he describes as “the semantic potency of performance,” instead focuses on music, poetry, performance art, and “. . .speech acts – prayers or storytellings, counselings, or healings – as such world-constructing performances.”

I find Norton-Smith's description to be useful for my analysis, insofar as the movement from affliction to healing may be understood as a metaphorical journey from a fragmented, disintegrated system to a newly recreated, integrated life-world.

Such “world-constructing” performances such as singing and storytelling, within the context of indigenous American ceremonies generally, perpetually sustain orally transmitted histories and tribal stories. Regarding the oral transmission of Native stories, he continues, “(i)t should be clear, however, that the written text of stories cannot put experience into perspective, teach moral lessons and strengthen tribal bonds in an oral tradition. The stories must be performed.” Enacted stories establish a felt, lived experience in a way that differs from attempting to understand a history or narrative by studying a written text:

But a lifeless written text – like a lifeless corpse – is not a conscious being with powers of thought and action; a story is enlivened and empowered, animated and transformative through its performance. And oral events like storytellings are spiritual entities that give

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433 Ibid., 100.
shape and meaning, and create beauty and orderliness in the world.”

This aligns closely with the healing performative context among Nepali traditional healers who participated in my ethnography. Origin stories of Śiva, the creation of disease, cosmic imbalance and the first jhākris and boksīs are recited, along with cosmological frameworks transmitted from elaborate oral texts, recalling a primeval time which permeates the present moment and the predicaments facing afflicted patients. The enlivened stories connect directly with the narratives of those suffering, as harmful witchcraft, sickness, and the resolution of disease described in these cosmogonies continue to recur in the present. Due to this nexus of relationships, a physical site or place itself also may need healing. Group pūjās attended publicly in the rural Darjeeling Hills enable a collective experience in which suffering and familial-shared anxiety take on a cohesive shape and meaning, contextualized within local cosmological and healing frameworks. Orderliness manifesting from the chaotic malaise of disease and grief is palliative in itself, since identifying the source of sickness opens up the possibility for healing the affliction.

Ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras proposed the notion of “the harmony of the spheres,” positing that the Sun, moon, and celestial bodies create music in their orbital movements. His disciples, the Pythagoreans, conceived of music as medicine, which could provide bodily release or katharsis as well as purify and calm one's soul. His fundamental premise is that the universe is inherently composed of numbers, and the universe remains existent because of numerical harmony. The tones emitted between celestial bodies add up to seven – the diapason or octave – the harmony of the cosmos. A central aspect of this harmony is the circular motion of the celestial bodies through space.

434 Ibid., 101.
The circle as cosmic completion and wholeness is commonly emulated and embodied through dance in traditional healing arts, such as the use of symbolic hoops employed in the Lakota Hoop Dance. During Bāul musical performance, singers often enter the hypnotically circular revolutions also employed by Sufi dervishes, sustaining this movement continually while singing and playing the single or double-stringed ektāra and dotāra. The tantric maxim repeated by Bāul performers – yā āche brahmānde, tāi āche ei deha bhānde – whatever is in the universe is also inside the body – implies that the celestial bodies, the solar and lunar essences so commonly referred to in Bāul dehatattva songs, move within the human body as the human body moves in the liberation of dance. The circle of healing as a totality concludes itself in the dance of healing. Ultimate healing does not result in ascetic rejection of embodiment and flesh – it only occurs with the body – samdeha. Thus Basu das Bāul gave this reflection on the living cosmos that indwells within the human body: “Sahaj means to surrender everything – body and mind. We are born as the Divine [Bhagavān]. The body contains everything in the universe; don't search outside.”

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