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Acting like God? Ways to Embody the Divine in Religious Play and Deity Possession

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Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetics of divine embodiments in eastern India by taking a close look at the mimetic faculty of the human body in two types of cultural performances. I shall compare (1) the mode of acting as a deity on the Ramlila stage, i.e., during a religious play that is enacted to produce sacred reality rather than merely representing Rama or other gods; and (2) the expressiveness of women who, as part of a procession, embody a goddess and thus may become possessed by her. Whereas in both types of events performers refer to divine agency in order to rationalize their behaviour, they impersonate the deity in substantially different ways, particularly with respect to the display of emotions. Unlike several scholars who argue that in ritual drama the process of acting is likely to evoke an experiential state classified as possession, I suggest that we need to differentiate mimetic forms to understand better both deity possession and Indian theatre. Whereas the possessed body develops an expressiveness of its own, the concept of *līlā* does not subscribe to the ideal of aesthetic realism.

INTRODUCTION

One prominent feature of religious plays in South Asia is the transformation of actors into divine embodiments of the character they represent. During the annual Ramlila cycle, boys and men who play the role of Rama, Sita or Hanuman are worshipped as manifestations or these deities. Abandoning their self, they are to become the gods' vehicles and thus let the audience gain most direct access to the divine world (see below). Similarly, in several performance traditions that stage the Mahabharata, actors are regarded as being taken over by the portrayed character, for instance Arjuna, Krishna or Draupadi, no matter whether in northwest India (for instance during the *pāṇḍav lilā*) or in the south (in *terrukkūttu*). <1> Again in other performing arts like *mūṭiyēttu*, *teyyam* or *bhūtārādhane* dancers put on the costume of Bhagabati or Kali. Enacting the history of the origin and the miracles of these goddesses, their vigorously moving bodies function as instruments of non-human agency. <2> This state of diffusion, i.e., when human acting and stage reality blend, is commonly verbalised by the phrase that actors do not merely imitate but in fact 'become' the divine. <3> Similarly academic scholars suggest that actors and audience embark into an imaginative reality where actor and character merge. A. K. Ramanujan exemplifies this position, claiming that 'in folk theatre ... notions of possession are never far from the audience's mind'. <4>

Recently, the Sanskritist Frederick Smith argued for the importance of deity possession as the most common form of spiritual expression in South Asia. <5> His substantial analysis of Indian literature from all ages vividly shows the multidimensionality and multivocality of possession on the subcontinent. Whereas his study is likely to challenge several historians of religion – given the fact that general books on Hinduism touch the subject of possession only cursorily, if at all – Smith's textual analysis supports what dispersed ethnographic accounts had hinted at over the last few decades: possession is anything but a marginal phenomenon. <6> Rather, it attracts people from all castes, social strata and educational backgrounds. <7> To pursue his argument, Smith proposes to regard possession as a discursive field that is outlined throughout Indian history in terms of *āveśa* (literally: 'entrance into') and *grahaṇa* (literally: 'seizing'). <8> These two Sanskrit terms are repeatedly used, though in different shades, to define what can be broadly labelled as 'positive' oracular possession (*āveśa*) and 'negative' possession brought on by malevolent spirits (i.e., *grahaṇa*). In fact Smith invites us to reconsider and subsume a large variety of

religious concepts, body techniques, healing practices and somatic experiences under the umbrella term of possession. An appreciated form within this conceptual and experiential complex is the transformation of actors on stage. <9>

Generally there is no reason to disagree with Smith's assessment of certain types of staged enactments as a form of possession. <10> However, I would have wished for some further elaboration on this point, since he, in line with Ramanujan and others, seems to suggest that play-acting and possession are closely interlinked — as if the divine presence can be reduced to a result of aesthetic illusion or the extension of an experience that may happen in everyday life, when people get carried away by their imagination. As an ethnographer working on both deity possession in ritual and on religious drama, this undifferentiated statement makes me uneasy. It silences on what basis onlookers may indeed distinguish possessed actors from those who by ritual means are regarded as a living form of a deity. The strength of Smith's approach certainly is that readers come to realize the intertextual links between theological writing, philosophical accounts, fiction, and present-day ritual performances, and thus the importance of spirit and deity possession throughout the cultural history of the subcontinent. Yet there is also the danger of pooling or even intermingling religious practices and experiences that are conceptually separated by those involved. This is the disadvantage of such a broad notion of possession, or rather the other side of the coin.

In the following sections I shall demonstrate where my reservations come from and consider some general criteria that, in a particular time and place, guide the behaviour and reception of living embodiments of Hindu deities. To do so, I will explore the mimetic faculty of the human body in two widely known types of 'cultural performances' <11> that are believed to provoke manifestations of divine agency. I shall compare (1) the mode of acting as a god on the Ramlila stage, i.e., during a type of play (*līlā*) that objectifies divine deeds; and (2) the aesthetics of possession during pageants in honour of the goddess Burhi Thakurani, i.e., a mode of behaviour that brings about and identifies the presence of various female deities. My analysis of these events is based on a sixteen month period of ethnographic fieldwork in coastal Orissa (located at the Bay of Bengal), conducted in intervals between the years 1999 and 2005. <12> It will be shown that although in both types of cultural performance the behaviour of 'actors' is regarded as a manifestation of divine agency, the impersonation is based on different mimetic patterns, particularly concerning the evocation and display of emotions.

The objective of this paper is, in other words, an attempt at developing a taxonomy of mimesis that reveals different forms of identification with the divine and their respective somatic states. I wish to explore what actually constitutes the personification of God: What types of movements, actions, behaviours, attitudes, emotions and implications for the self are involved? In my comparison of these two cultural performances I search for concepts that govern the expressiveness and the perception of the human body, i.e., what Phillip Zarilli calls an implicit 'theory of acting':

'Every time an actor performs, he or she implicitly enacts a "theory" of acting – a set of assumptions about the conventions and style which guide his or her performance, the structure of actions which he or she performs, the shape that those actions take (as a character, role, or sequence of actions as in some performance art), and the relationship to the audience.'

<13>

I wish neither to argue for the structural similarity of theatre and ritual (like Richard Schechner, to name a prominent example) nor to consider the relation between self-consciously staged and credible forms of possession (see Ann Gold, drawing on fieldwork in Rajasthan). <14> Rather I shall employ this 'theatrical' approach towards ritual performances in order to explore the status of two different corporeal practices that characterize Hindu religiosity. From an Orissan point of view, both of them evoke a strong sense of divine presence. Yet only one form corresponds to an experiential state that is classified as deity possession.

ACTING ON THE RAMILLA STAGE

The most widespread Indian theatre tradition is probably the Ramlila circle, the annual re-enactment of the epic about the legendary god-king Rama in the form of a community theatre. The play (*līlā*) starts with Rama's birth and education in Ayodhya. It narrates his marriage to Sita and why they were sent into exile, where the demon king Ravana kidnaps Sita. In search of his wife, Rama is supported by monkeys, who form an army guided by Hanuman. They finally defeat Ravana and rescue Sita. Rama returns and becomes the king of Ayodhya. (The story plot is commonly known as Ramayana.) The Ramlila is performed once a year and, in accordance with the Hindu calendar, lasts for a minimum of ten consecutive evenings. The stronghold of this performance tradition is Ramnagar, a village nearby the pilgrimage centre of Benares. Due to royal patronage, the Ramlila of Ramnagar surpasses the performance at other places in many respects: in size,

duration, dramaturgy and training of actors. <15>

The following example offers insights into the Ramlila tradition in Orissa, which in regional terms constitutes the periphery of this performing art. <16> The Oriya Ramlila is enacted on the occasion of Ramnavami, the celebration of Rama's birthday in the Hindu month of *caitra* (March/April). In the year 2005 I attended the performance in the village of Asureshwar, Cuttack District. <17> Here the play is enacted at a temporary 'stage': a hall completely open at three sides (where the audience squats down) on the premises attached to a Rama temple. The sequences of the play last for eleven nights. Each performance starts around midnight and may continue until dawn. Approximately thirty amateur actors, who have mostly taken their role from their father, perform the Ramlila. To participate in the play is considered a caste-bound social and religious obligation. Additionally, approximately one hundred actors join the performance as monkey soldiers, and thus constitute the divine army of Rama. <18>

In the Ramlila (in Orissa and elsewhere) divine presence is acknowledged first of all by definition, i.e., it is suggested by the theological concept of *līlā*. The Sanskrit term '*līlā*' refers to non-utilitarian action and thus commonly translates as 'play', 'sport', 'fun', 'dalliance' or 'pleasure.<19> However, it essentially indicates cosmic play. It describes the paradigmatic divine mode of action, assuming that deities are not driven by 'karmic baggage' and thus are neither bound to act as a consequence of previous lives nor are they motivated by personal desires. In one way the whole world is a manifestation of divine playfulness, particularly noticeable in cases of strange or surprising incidents. Furthermore, the term '*līlā*' describes the dramatic play of divine action staged by human beings in order to please the gods. In this double sense the Ramlila is the performance of Rama's deeds. It is implied that the actuality of this play is, after all, more real than the lived-in world: what happens on stage is not only acting but reveals god's own play. This meaning of *līlā* is not only elaborated on in theological writing.<20> It is substantially conveyed in the process of performance itself, i.e., by corporeal knowledge.

At first, actors are identified as divine personifications by means of their specific use of the human body and its mimetic qualities. Performers strictly adhere to inherited conventions of staging, and in Asureshwar (unlike at other places) the central features are as follows. The main actors are made to wear elaborate costumes, distinct headgear and heavy makeup. This facial painting is of opaque bright colours – such as yellow, green and blue – and transforms the individual face into a mask. It

hides the human physiognomy, so that members of the audience hardly recognize their uncle or neighbour, who might have taken on the role. Once the face gets painted, actors have to stay mute. On stage, their dialogues are spoken or rather sung by one reciter (Oriya: *bacanikā*) standing in proximity to the 'speaking' character and shifting position whenever required. The *bacanikā* does not wear a costume. He is dressed in white, like religious scholars (*paṇḍita*) commonly do, and as a sign of his storytelling he carries a ceremonial stick. He may also narrate sequences in third-voice or add explanatory comments and thus act as intermediary between stage reality and the audience. Apart from him, different stage assistants are likely to cross the scenes (during the play) in order to direct actors, to arrange props, or to lay the cable for the microphone.

In this context, acting (*abhināya*) consists primarily in the avoidance of facial expressions and bodily movements which could appear natural or human. The character (i.e., the deity) is not generated by means of visualizing emotions. Although the actor may share Rama's sorrow or anger, he will not self-consciously express the divine feeling. Correspondingly, any involuntary emotional activity that onlookers (nevertheless) might observe in the face of the actor is attributed to the social persona and his interior dynamics. Thus contractions of facial muscles or changes in breathing pattern will reveal the sentiments of the actor rather than prove his credibility in acting. This absence of intended emotional expressions contrasts with the aesthetics of travelling theatre troops whose commercial 'opera' performances are highly melodramatic. <21> Unlike in opera, Ramlila actors will employ only very few standardized gestures. Upon entering the stage, they proceed in striking graceful movements of arms and legs, follow given sets of steps or stand stiff like statues. Their acting is to a high degree suggestive in that several deeds are performed in a very schematic or symbolic way. Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on fighting sequences and martial dance. Actors equipped with bow and arrow will gradually quicken the pace until their jumps and circles also intoxicate the audience. In other performance genres this bodily sensation is taken as a method to induce possession and as a sign of divine presence. At any rate, Ramlila performers do not make use of those codified hand gestures and eye movements that characterize several Indian dance genres, and that require years of practice to master them. In line with the classical Indian digest on drama and dance, the *Natyaśāstra* (200 bce – 400 ce), these techniques should help to express a refined set of mental states (Skt.: *rāsa*) ready to be enjoyed by the audience. This

dramaturgical concept is basically unknown to Ramlila performers in Asureshwar, and yet the Ramlila is conceived of as a very emotional event. Whereas the visualization of sentiments is apparently not part of the *abhināya*, actors are still involved emotionally. Similarly, the audience watches the play paying particular attention to the sentient body. <22> This tactile mode of seeing is deeply influenced by the concept of *darśana*, the loving sight of god. <23>

Considering the style of acting, Ramlila performers almost resemble puppets on a string: frozen faces, largely stiff limbs or, while dancing, as if the strings are pulled with furious energy (I shall come back to this point). This type of codified acting by the main performers is supplemented by groups of people who join the play in their everyday social role and routine: priests perform rituals, fishermen hoist a boat across the stage, and musicians accompany the divine wedding. These actors are recruited among the respective castes only; like the *bacānikā* they are not costumed but wear their ordinary clothes, yet often a new or costly set. After all, devotees in the audience may not only watch Rama but also enter the stage and bow down, similar to their counterpart described in the Rama legend (for instance, the monkey soldiers). Hence spectators may turn into actors themselves. Their reverence confirms the liminality of the occasion and also the successful embodiment of a deity.

In Ramlila, the attention to the performative process is maintained continuously. The production emphasizes both the narrative reality (the play) and the enactment (the playing). In this respect there is no attempt to redirect the audience into a fictitious world that has no bonds with social reality (as in cinematic illusion). Rather the objectification of the divine, its living form (*rūpa*), invites participants to somatically sense the gods in utmost proximity. However, in Orissa there are several performance genres that by dramaturgical means play with the process of acting itself. In Prahlada Nata, for instance, the story plot is duplicated and performed on twin stages facing each other (like goals on a football ground). The audience is attracted by two theatre troops who compete with each other through witty dialogues and impressive acting. <24> In Danda Nata, a ritual performance with theatrical elements, actors employ their bodies to constitute stage props, like a plough or a temple building. <25> In short, the local theatre tradition is hardly characterized by the aesthetic ideal of naturalism, i.e., the attempt to stage the world 'realistically' (like in Western illusionist theatre). Even opera productions with their melodramatic gestures and excessive use of lights create a highly artificial atmosphere. <26>

The ways in which the human body is employed during the Ramlila performance is partly verbalized. Being on stage, the body is understood as a carnal vessel (*pātra*) of divine agency and to impersonate a deity is regarded as an act of devotion. Actors claim that they 'do God's work'. They conceive of their performance as a result of 'in-spiration' in its etymological sense (Latin: *spirare*), i.e. as spirit or divine breath blown into someone. A similar idea is expressed in sixteenth-century *bhakti*-theology in which devotion is characterized as absorption (*āveśā*) of divinity.<27> Therefore a Rama actor does not qualify by his individual talent or creativity but rather by his degree of ritual purity. As a consequence, all main actors have to be Brahmins, and anybody on stage will keep a religious diet (of *sattvika* food) to purify and 'cool' the body. Moreover, during Ramlila actors should abstain from sex, smoking and consuming meat or alcohol. To engage in role-play is also considered a spiritual exercise as it involves temporarily abandoning ego-consciousness.<28> To conquer the self and expose the body on stage is understood to have soteriological meaning. This form of surrender to the divine is experienced in what might be classified as the psychophysical state of 'flow', i.e., the process of being lost in the (cosmic) play. As I have argued elsewhere, in Ramlila this experiential state reveals the divine presence to actors and spectators alike.<29> Since acting is considered both a devotional act and a spiritual exercise, a person may gain religious merit by doing so.<30> To participate in the Ramlila thus also serves as a method of expressing the urgent wish for a divine favour or to compensate a deity for his (or her) grace. The army of monkey soldiers is recruited on the basis of such a conditional vow (*mānasika*).

Apart from the specific style of acting mentioned above, the divine presence in Ramlila is brought about by means of 'performatives' in Austin's sense, i.e., by formalized and coded expressions that *do* rather than *display* (or 'say') something.<31> Similar to illocutionary speech acts such as nominating or promising, the process of acting on the Ramlila stage is not only taken as an illustration of a particular story line. Indeed most onlookers are familiar with the legend and watch the play for only one or two nights. They also visit the Ramlila for its capacity to create an atmosphere of devotion and worship. In complementary fashion to the play of actors, the audience for its part contributes to the reality of divine presence. Some people prostrate themselves before Rama, men jointly praise the Lord, and women ululate whenever they sense an auspicious moment. Like the acting of costumed performers, these reactions cannot be assessed solely in terms of representation and truth.<32> Whoever enters the

stage and garlands (the living form of) Rama indeed worships God. Hence a Ramlila performance serves also in this respect as a religious event.

REPRESENTING THE GODDESS

At times, the pot bearer is not only considered a 'formal' personification of the goddess, a state achieved by means of carrying a sacred pot within a ritual framework. Rather the woman behaves radically different and thus offers proof of the presence of an exterior, non-human agent. She may lurch, tremble, grimace, shriek or cry, stare with glassy eyes, become stiff or jump wildly. Her face will show intense emotions such as distress or rage. 'The mother has come' (*mā āsile*) onlookers may say, 'she entered the body' (*dehaku āsile*) and will 'dance' (*nācibe*). It is an extremely auspicious moment. Some devotees make their infants lie down on the road so that the goddess may show her grace by stepping over them without doing them any harm. Others will come and ask for divine advice.

In this context the notion of dance (*nāca*) refers to two related concepts: at first to the choreography performed by the costumed priest and the men below the large goddess masks; secondly to the comparatively unorganized, yet still patterned movements of the possessed pot bearer. Whereas the priest in the guise (*beśa*) of Kali employs his artistic dance as a method to induce goddess possession in the pot bearer, the latter will behave in such a way that alludes to the character of Burhi Thakurani and related goddesses classified as *ṭhākurañī*. This class of female deities is known for its ambiguous powers. A *ṭhākurañī* is worshipped so that she may confer well-being on the world, but she can also cause disease and calamities. Hence possession is considered harmful, especially if it should spill over to an unprepared onlooker of a pageant. Although this person might show the same bodily symptoms as an overwhelmed pot bearer, in this case the priest will intervene and help her or him regain normal consciousness. Moreover, the expressiveness of the human body does not always indicate whether someone has been possessed by a goddess or by a destructive force. At any rate, goddess possession is not required for the success of the pageant, i.e., its religious merits as promised by the priest. Rather in southern Orissa the overpowering of an individual by a divine agent may happen on several ritual occasions and is regarded as an optional proof of the divine that will heighten the religious experience of mediums and onlookers alike.

<34>

Let us again take a close look at the assumptions that

govern this form of divine embodiment. Similar to the Ramlila stage, the transformation of the female pot bearer into a living form of the goddess is achieved by means of ritual acts, here performed by the *bhaṇḍārī*-priests. Additionally, the appearance of severe bodily otherness indicates that the human body of the pot bearer has turned into an instrument of some non-human entity. Given the ritual frame, the agent is thought to be of divine origin. This change from only personifying the divine to being completely overtaken is, however, not regarded as a result of play-acting (*abhināya*). Rather the likelihood of a particular pot bearer being possessed is explained with reference to the shared bodily substance of the human host and the deity. In case of a woman joining the pageant as divine manifestation, this similarity is achieved by her female body, by non-vegetarian nutrition – the goddess likes flesh – and other circumstances that bring about a ‘hot’ psychophysical constitution. Consequently, in another type of ritual male mediums can induce possession by wearing female attire, such as a sari, earrings, or bangles. Nevertheless, the shared qualities rather than the visual resemblance are thought to seduce the deity into gaining control over a human body.

Even once the physical behaviour of the pot bearer exhibits all kinds of unusual symptoms, the identity of the divine agent is by no means self-evident. Devotees have to decipher the complete posture of the woman, the movements of her body and also her uttering, if the medium should speak in tongues. In this context, facial expressions reveal the character of the goddess rather than of the persona of the possessed woman. The excessive and at times transgressive behaviour of a pot bearer is thus neither reduced to her psyche nor to the social circumstances of her life. Possessed bodies are not individual bodies. <35> Any emotions, including anger and sorrow, allude to the goddess’ personality, the goddess’ mood and also the goddess’ intention to communicate her (dis-) satisfaction with her devotees. Compared to the concept of acting at Ramlila performances, one can even recognize an opposite pattern of deciphering emotional expressions. Whereas (non-intentional) contractions of facial muscles in the religious play are associated with the sentiments of the acting person, in possession events they indicate the personality of the possessing deity (in a sense the *dramatis personae*). In the latter case, a high degree of visual similarity between the well-known iconography of the goddess and her living carnal appearance proves the credibility of the event rather than invites doubts about the experiential state of the pot bearer. However, the kinds of somatic reactions that achieve the quality of a sign may vary and this opens discursive space for the

social negotiation of divine presence. Moreover, only particular deities are thought to overpower their devotees in such a physical way: goddesses classified as *ṭhākurāṇī* (e.g. Burhi Thakurani, Durga, Kali) and specific male gods, for instance, Narasimha, the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu. At any rate, from an Orissan angle Rama, Sita, Laksmana or Hanuman will never take possession of a human being.

Unlike a religious play, the occasion of deity possession allows communication with the divine in a very direct way. A goddess may express her dissatisfaction with careless worship or, contrarily, provide advice (oracular possession). It is mostly non-possessed persons (devotees, priests) who interact with the goddess. Yet also a medium herself can 'concentrate on' or straight away 'call upon' the deity in anticipation of being overpowered. Thus a person is not merely carried away by the exposure to pre-given actions and bodily movements, but self-consciously surrenders her self in order to sense divine instructions. In retrospect, however, the medium/host will be unaware of her behaviour during possession or may even suffer from amnesia.

CONCLUSIONS

In the previous sections I have described two cultural performances during which human beings do not merely represent but indeed personify the divine. The relationship between (social) actor and deity is one of identity. In both cases the performance (of the play or the pageant) is more than a means of being psychophysically distracted for a limited time span. The Ramlila actor and the possessed pot bearer both undergo a process that is considered a substantial transformation of the self. This change is acknowledged by the reactions of pious onlookers (such as prostrations). It might even affect the social relations of a person after the end of the play or pageant. Although one might dispute whether these two types of ritually framed mimesis can be adequately classified as acting, they certainly exhibit contrasting 'techniques of the body' (Mauss). Keeping in mind that neither of these types of acting implies make-believe, these forms resemble what the theatre director Richard Schechner would classify as 'codified minimal acting' versus 'total acting'.<36> Looking at the main Ramlila actors or at non-possessed pot bearers, the human body is considered an objectification of the divine, i.e. its living form (*rūpa*). The persona change is brought forth by formal means, here by ritual conventions. According to the second form of personification (possession, 'total acting') the human body is considered a divine instrument to intervene in the lived-in world. This state

is brought forth by the dynamics of the body itself. Here carnal expressiveness easily escapes human control although it is anything but arbitrary or accidental. The mimetic patterns are learned somatically, through embodied practice rather than intention.<37> However, occasionally onlookers will question this complete conversion into a non-human character.

Considering these implicit 'theories of acting', to achieve divine personification formally (type 1) can – at times – lead to the total absorption of the self by a non-human agent (type 2). So far this process has been shown only in the case of pot bearers who embody Burhi Thakurani. As mentioned above, in Orissa deity possession might emerge at several rituals and, in one particular situation, also on the Ramlila stage. During the scenes in which the goddess Kali appears, some spectators believe that the actor (a *darji*, i.e., a man from the tailor caste) is possessed. His/her psychophysical presence is indeed intense, the dance an eye-catcher: fast and loud drum beating seems to chase him/her across the stage, rapid movements and wild rotations allow the audience to get a glimpse of flying sparks blown out of the actor's/Kali's mouth. The audience totally thrilled. What is more, both the reciter and the personification of Rama have to pay their respect to this goddess in order to successfully proceed with the Ramlila. This occurrence of possession in the Ramlila is absolutely exceptional. It seems to be related to the importance of goddess worship in this region and, on the level of drama, the association of Kali with the battlefield where – ahead of Ravana's death – many others sacrifice their life. To the best of my knowledge, only in Asureshwar is the experiential state of the Kali actor conceived in terms of possession.

The Ramlila production in Asureshwar also varies in other respects from its counterpart in Ramnagar or elsewhere. Whereas the dramaturgy in Orissa emphasizes dance, Ramlila in the Hindi-speaking area is commonly a rhetoric art, based on the elaborate recitation of the Ramcaritmanas. In the latter version, dance and excessive bodily movements are rejected. Apart from regional preferences, however, both if not most Ramlila performances seem to share certain aesthetic principles: (1) make-up and costume are employed to conceal the human nature of an actor; (2) the character's (divine) emotions are not visualized; (3) the dramaturgy alludes to the double-sided nature of play and playing, prominently through the reciter/mediator on stage.<38>

Hence I suggest generalizing some criteria that – at least in Orissa – performers and onlookers consider, which distinguish two types of divine personification. These criteria can be summarized as follows:

LIVING FORM OF THE
DIVINE

facial expressions are
assigned to the social
persona of the actor

the identity of the character
(deity) is clearly defined

in principle, devotees can
personify any deity

emphasis on body control,
the 'cool' body

pre-given dramatic action

LIVING INSTRUMENT OF
THE DIVINE

facial expressions are
assigned to the divine
personality

the identity of the
possessing agent calls for
clarification

only specific deities are
known for taking possession
of devotees

emphasis on un-controlled
bodiliness,
the 'hot' body

action developed vis-à-vis
the Other

Taking into account Elisabeth Schömbucher's study of possession mediumship among a caste of fishermen, the aesthetics of possession varies even within Orissa. In the case of these Telugu-speaking mediums, the altered state is expressed and proven by lengthy and poetic dialogues, i.e. by divine words rather than radical physical otherness.<39> Nevertheless, although different body techniques (including forms of speech) are employed during possession episodes, the status ascribed to bodiliness itself seems follow the pattern described above.

Returning to my initial reservations about a broad notion of deity and spirit possession, I should now like to develop further my critique of Frederick Smith's work. As it has been shown in the above paragraphs, whether a ritually authorized person is conceived of as a divine embodiment (rather than as mere representation) can *not* generally be taken as an evidential indicator of an experiential state classifiable as deity possession. Indeed, the vocabulary used in Indian languages to describe various forms of identification with the divine suggests a common ground of experience. Terms such as *līlā* (play), *nāca* (dance) or even *veśa* (Oriya: *beśa*, literally: guise, disguise) allude to an all-encompassing sameness of actor and character, choreographed and un-controlled movement, reality and illusion. At the same time, performers and onlookers classify only certain types of divine embodiments as *abhināya* (acting). Even from an outsider's view, deity possession does not resemble theatre in that its form hardly follows aesthetic conventions prevalent in performing or ritual arts (although it might appear to some onlookers as make-believe). In other words: since the concept of theatre does not subscribe to the ideal of naturalism, there is no inherited theatrical paradigm that could

possibly inspire people who experience themselves as an instrument of divine play or dance.

However, Smith, like Ramanujan and several others, seems to subsume any type of divine embodiment under the umbrella term possession. <40> Close reading of ethnographies on the Ramlila, the *pāṇḍav lilā* or *teyyam* would reveal that only in very particular moments of the play are *some* performers (or onlookers) regarded as being possessed. For instance, Sarah Caldwell writes after a vivid description of *mutiyēttu* solely about the dancing goddess impersonator, who 'loses consciousness and has to be helped to his seat on the small stool before a lamp.' <41> In regard to the Ramlila, Philip Lutgendorf mentions that although several directors (*vyas*) speak of being absorbed by the divine spirit of Hanuman, most of them 'do not enter into a state of actual "possession" – indeed, their performances are characterized by a high degree of lucidity and control'. <42> Similarly, Richard Freeman states that *teyyam* performers hardly exhibit 'trance behaviour' but rather achieve a heightened sense of consciousness. Their dances are well-rehearsed. The performers employ learned gestures and signs of divine possession, their dialogues are highly structured. <43>

Several scholarly accounts of religious plays are indeed ambiguous when it comes to questions of acting style and related body techniques, as if the religious context of the event would prevent ethnographers from considering aesthetic features. My analysis has shown how descriptive categories developed in theatre studies help to identify distinct types of corporeal practices, although the cultural bias of these analytic categories should not be overlooked. Whereas in both cases participants emphasize the personification of the divine, when speaking about deity possession as an analytic category that exemplifies Hindu religiosity, we should distinguish both forms. Moreover, if we wish to take seriously the religious experience of deity possession, we should also acknowledge and explore the soteriological implications associated with role-play and divine masquerade. Thus a broad notion of possession, as proposed by Smith, now calls for further investigation into subcategories of body techniques, somatic states and religious experiences.

At any rate, the distinction proposed in this paper is not to hide the ambiguities inherent in the Hindu notion of divine play. Indeed, the borderline between divine form and divine instrument is not always that clear. Whereas in Ramlila the dancing Kali actor is considered possessed, his counterpart in the pageant – the priest in the Kali costume – is thought to perform as the entertainment of Burhi Thakurani. However, *our*

difficulties in following these nuances are partly due to contrasting perceptions about the ontology of a divine image. Unlike in 'Christian-centred modernity', in Hinduism visualizations of God are not treated as pictures that reflect an idea or concept. Whether an anthropomorphic stone idol in a temple, an earthen vessel or a termite hill is regarded as credible form of God is essentially based on the rituals performed, i.e. on human action rather than iconic reference/similarity. Without the regular invocation of the divine, any of these objects may lose its meaning. Similarly, a pious devotee can pay his or her respect even to (the) Rama (actor) in a TV-serial. The religious relevance of a (living) divine image is not defined by its material substance or inherent quality, but by its place within a performed ritual context.

NOTES

<1> On the *pāṇḍav līlā* see William S. Sax, 'Who's Who in the Pāṇḍav Līlā?' in William S. Sax (ed.) *The Gods at Play: Līlā in South Asia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), pp. 131–155; William S. Sax, *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pāṇḍav Līlā of Garhwal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002). On *terukkūttu* see Richard A. Frasca, *The Theater of the Mahābhārata: Terukkūttu Performances in South India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1990).

<2> On *muṭiyēttu* see Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kālī* (New York: Oxford University Press 1999). On *teyyam* (*teyyāttam*, *tirayāttam*) see Richard Freeman, 'Performing Possession: Ritual and Consciousness in the Teyyam Complex of Northern Kerala', in Heidrun Brückner, Lothar Lutze and Aditya Malik (eds) *Flags of Fame: Studies in South Asian Folk Culture* (Delhi: Manohar 1993), pp 109–138. On *teyyam* and *bhūtārādhane* see Sita K. Nambiar, *The Ritual Art of Teyyam and Bhūtārādhane: Theatrical Performance with Spirit Mediumship* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts & Navrang 1996).

<3> C.f. Sax in his introduction to 'Gods at Play', p. 8.

<4> A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore' in Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (eds.) *Another Harmony: Essays on the Folklore of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), pp. 41–75, here p. 69. See also the entry 'possession' in Ananda Lal (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press 2004), pp. 355–357.

<5> Frederick Smith, *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization* (New York: University of Columbia Press 2006).

<6> Theorizing on possession has been shaped for long by the deprivation theory, identified with Ioan M. Lewis,

Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1975). Meanwhile social anthropologists have become fairly critical of Lewis's approach, see, for instance, Janice Boddy, 'Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23, 1994, pp. 407–434. Elsewhere I have argued along the same line: Beatrix Hauser, 'Göttliches Gestalten: Zur Besessenheitserfahrung von Frauen in Orissa, Indien', in Michael Schetsche (ed.) *Der maximal Fremde: Begegnungen mit dem Nicht-Menschlichen und die Grenzen des Verstehens* (Würzburg, Ergon 2004), pp. 139–160; Beatrix Hauser, *Promising Rituals: Doing Gender in Southern Orissa, India* (postdoctoral thesis submitted at the University of Halle, 2008), Ch. 4 and 5. For recent studies on deity and spirit possession in South Asia see also Jackie Assayag and Gilles Tarabout, *La Possession en Asie du Sud: Parole, Corps, Territoire* (Paris: École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales 1999).

<7> C.f. Smith 'Self Possessed', p. 147.

<8> Smith 'Self Possessed', p. 14.

<9> Smith 'Self Possessed', p. 76, 148, 348, 351, 360 (Fn. 25).

<10> In his discussion of possession during drama performance Smith relies on secondary sources. However, he could have reflected on the data more critically.

<11> I employ the term 'cultural performance' as a meta-category to name events that escape the ethnocentric modern understanding of ritual and, conversely, theatre – two concepts whose analytic value has become increasingly contested within the academic community. The notion of 'cultural performance' goes back to Milton Singer, *Traditional India: Structure and Change* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society 1959), p. ix–xxii.

<12> The argument presented here is a kind of by-product resulting from two research projects conducted in this region. The first focussed on women's cultural performances in southern Orissa and its effects on their self-identity (see Hauser 'Promising Rituals'). The second is a comparative study of the production and reception of Ramlila in different regions of northern India, undertaken at the collaborative research centre on aesthetic experience at the Free University of Berlin. Educated as a social anthropologist, in the latter project I enjoyed being exposed to the methods of performance analysis and theatre studies. I am grateful to the German Research Foundation for funding both projects.

<13> Phillip B. Zarilli in his introduction to Phillip B. Zarilli (ed.), *Acting (Re)Considered: Theories and Practices* (London: Routledge 1995), here p. 4.

<14> See Richard Schechner, *Performative*

Circumstances: From the Avant Garde to Ramlila (Calcutta: Segal 1983); see Ann G. Gold 'Spirit Possession Perceived and Performed in Rural Rajasthan', Contributions to Indian Sociology (N.S.) 22 (1), 1988, pp. 35–63.

<15> Several scholars have done research into this tradition, like the theatre historian Anuradha Kapur, the indologist Philip Lutgendorf, the anthropologist William Sax and the theatre director Richard Schechner. See Anuradha Kapur, *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and God: The Ramlila at Ramnagar* (Calcutta: Seagull 1990); Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing Rāmcāritmānas of Tulsidās* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1991); William S. Sax. 'The Ramnagar Ramlila: Text, Performance, Pilgrimage', *History of Religions* 30 (2), 1990, pp. 129–153; Schechner 'Performative Circumstances'.

<16> This local Ramlila tradition has not yet attracted the attention of academic scholars, besides some hints in Joanna Williams, *The Two-Headed Deer: Illustrations of the Ramayana in Orissa* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1996), pp. 30–38. Recently, I have published some articles on Ramlila in Orissa; see Beatrix Hauser, 'Ästhetik im Transit: Indische Konzeptionen der Ramlila-Aufführungspraxis', *Paragrana* 15 (2), 2006, pp. 133–148; Beatrix Hauser, 'Durch den Körper sehen: Zur Präsenz der Götter bei der indischen Ramlila', in Erika Fischer-Lichte et al. (eds.) *Auf der Schwelle – Kunst, Risiken und Nebenwirkungen* (München: Fink 2006), pp. 143–159; Beatrix Hauser, 'Dem Spiel ergeben: Zum Entwurf devotionaler Liebe bei der indischen Ramlila,' in Anke Henning et al. (eds.) *Bewegte Erfahrungen. Zwischen Emotionalität und Ästhetik* (Berlin: Diaphanes 2008), pp. 201–214.

<17> In Orissa, the Ramlila is mostly classified or rather subsumed as *yātrā* (literally: procession, theatre), hence people speak of Asureshwar Yatra or, at other places, of Lankapodi Yatra or Sahi Yatra.

<18> See also Hauser 'Dem Spiel ergeben'.

<19> On the concept of *līlā* see Sax 'Gods at Play'.

<20> On the potential of play in theological writing see Donna M. Wulff, 'Religion in a New Mode: The Convergence of the Aesthetic and the Religions in Medieval India', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (4), 1986, pp. 673–688.

<21> The English term 'opera' has entered the Oriya vocabulary to describe a regional performance genre. The dramaturgy of these theatre troops parallels to some degree the aesthetics of 'mythologicals' in mainstream Indian cinema.

<22> See Hauser 'Durch den Körper sehen'.

<23> On the concept of *darśana* see Diana Eck, *Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press 1998, 3rd edition).

- <24> C.f. John Emigh, *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1996), Ch. 2.
- <25> C.f. Burkhard Schnepel, 'Tanzen für Kali': *Ethnographie eines ostindischen Ritualtheaters* (Berlin: Reimer 2008).
- <26> On the ideal of aesthetic realism and corresponding dramatic novelties popularized by colonial theatre see Anuradha Kapur, 'The Representation of Gods and Heroes: Parsi Mythological Dramas of the Early Twentieth Century', in Vasuda Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds.) *Representing Hinduisms: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage 1995), pp. 401–419.
- <27> Smith 'The Self Possessed', p. 346.
- <28> See also Beatrix Hauser, 'Divine Play or Subversive Comedy? Reflections on Costuming and Gender at a Hindu Festival', in Ursula Rao and John Hutnyk (eds.) *Celebrating Transgression: Method and Politics in the Anthropological Studies of Culture* (New York, Berghahn 2006), pp. 129–144.
- <29> Hauser 'Dem Spiel ergeben'.
- <30> Hauser 'Divine Play'.
- <31> On the role of 'performatives' in speech act theory see John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Worlds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1962).
- <32> In spite of these conditions that prefigure the perception, the understanding and reception of the play certainly varies individually.
- <33> The pageants have been analysed in Hauser, 'Göttliches Gestalten', and Hauser 'Promising Rituals'.
- <34> Hauser 'Promising Rituals', Ch. 4.
- <35> C.f. Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002).
- <36> Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge 2002), pp. 146–174.
- <37> On the concept of embodiment in Social Anthropology see Thomas Csordas, 'Somatic Modes of Attention', *Cultural Anthropology* 8 (2) 1993, pp. 135–156.
- <38> Some of the recent Ramlila productions in Delhi, however, follow a realistic idiom of acting, popularized lately by the television serial on the Ramayana (directed by Ramanand Sagar, first screening in 1986) and possibly initiated by Parsi theatre companies (see Kapur, 'Representation of Gods and Heros'). On the popularity and reception of the television version see, among others, Philip Lutgendorf, 'Ramayan: The Video', *The Drama Review* 34 (2), 1990: pp.127–176.
- <39> Elisabeth Schömbucher, *Wo Götter durch Menschen sprechen: Besessenheit in Indien* (Berlin: Reimer 2006).
- <40> See, for instance, Smith 'The Self Possessed', p.

351, 360 (Fn. 25).

<41> Caldwell 'Terrifying Mother', p. 256.

<42> Lutgendorf 'Life of a Text', p. 184; compare p. 199.

<43> Freeman 'Performing Possession', p. 115.