

## Sacred Space in the Temples of West Bengal: Folk, *Bhakti*, and Tantric Origins

June McDaniel

College of Charleston

GODDESS TEMPLES DEVELOP in India in many ways. In Hindu folk religion, we have deities who incarnate within material objects, either spontaneously (*svayambhu*) or by choice. However, sometimes they end up imprisoned in these objects, and their liberation and worship by human beings becomes the origin of a temple. Thus, it is the birth and material incarnation of the goddess that lead to the sacred space. In tantric Shaktism, we have sacred space based on death and desire. The goddess's sacred space may be associated with death in the past (as in the story of Sati's death), or in the present (the goddess dwells in the burning ground or *smasana*). She may also be called down through the desire of the *tantrika*. In devotional goddess worship or Shakta *bhakti*, the goddess comes down in response to human love, to dwell in temples as long as she is fed, or temporarily in the *puja murtis* made for yearly festivals. In this paper, I shall examine these origins of sacred space: birth, death and desire, and love. I shall observe examples from fieldwork in West Bengal, in the areas of Calcutta, Bolpur, and Bakreshwar.

In folk Shaktism, the goddess has been in matter "from the beginning," as informants phrase it, or suddenly awoke there for reasons unknown. She finds herself trapped, and may spend centuries calling out to human beings for help. Most people cannot hear the voices of deities, so she must stay until someone can come to rescue her, usually as a response to a dream command (*svapnadesa*). The dream will recur until the person goes out to find the goddess. If he or she ignores the original dream, then the recurring dream will start to torment the person and cause all sorts of disasters. It is only after the rock is recognized as a goddess and given offerings that the dreams will stop.

When the person, usually accompanied by other villagers, goes out to find the goddess, they take the stone or statue back to the village

and set up a shrine to her. When she has performed miracles, especially healing particular diseases or answering vows or *manats*, then she is accepted as a living goddess, and her temple starts to attract pilgrims.

At the most basic level, the goddess shrine may be a rock, statue, or pot along a roadside or beneath a tree. When the power of the deity is recognized, then a small shrine hut (*than*) is built. There is just enough room inside for the rock or statue, some offerings, and perhaps a person or two. As the deity becomes more popular, a permanent (*pakka*) building with plaster or cement walls may be built, and the local *sevait* will offer food and worship on a schedule.<sup>1</sup> These folk Shakta temples do not normally have brahmin priests—they have local people willing to feed a starving goddess, who has for centuries only had wind to eat. Sometimes the goddess is hurt, as when laundrymen have been banging out the dirty clothes on the rock in which she dwells, or people have been breaking oysters open on her rock, thus hurting her back. She often begins with a small group of devotees, but with miracles, her shrine may grow into a full-fledged temple or even temple complex, and eventually official brahmin priests may work there. The place of debasement becomes a place of honor, and the goddess is liberated from hunger and loneliness, while the devotees get blessings in return.<sup>2</sup>

While the usual view of folk religion is that human beings depend on deities for happiness (for such things as food, fertility, good weather) here we see the goddess dependent on human beings for liberation. In this case, her freedom does not come from being taken from her material home. Instead, she demands worship and food, which strengthen her and allow the conversion of her space from secular to sacred.

A special case is the Adivasi or tribal goddesses, where the tribal group is forced to migrate due to industrialization or land development, and they must leave their traditional land behind. In this case, the goddess is a representation of the sacred land, and in forced exile she becomes a refugee goddess, carried into a foreign land by her refugee people. Many Hindu Bangladeshi informants in Calcutta told similar stories, of when they carried their deities on their backs during the war, unwilling to leave a family member behind. The goddess brings the sacred space of the homeland with her into the land of exile.

In the Shakta tantric tradition, the goddess comes with death. The origin may be mythic (as in the story of Sati) or current (where the goddess dwells in the burning ground or *smasana*, in the ground, or in the skull *asanas* upon which the *tantrikas* sit). While Kali is a goddess

of death, she also leads the soul to the next life or to heaven to rest in her lap, so she is a goddess much concerned with the future as well (some Shakta *tantrikas* understand her to be the goddess of the future apocalypse). She may also come down due to desire by her devotees, mediated by ritual action. She may be visualized in various places in the body of either gender through the yogic practice of *nyasa*, or she may come to dwell in the female *tantrika* through possession (*avesa*) during meditation.

In West Bengal, the major focus of Shakta tantra is death, and many informants interviewed either have performed the corpse ritual (*sava-sadhana*, in which a corpse becomes the place of the goddess's incarnation) or plan to do it in the future. There are also piles of skulls and seats made of skulls that attract the goddess's *sakti* or power, and people come to them to gain the goddess's blessings (or *siddhi labh kara*, to gain perfection in special types of meditation).<sup>3</sup>

There is also a third type of goddess worship—Shakta *bhakti*, or devotion to the goddess. There is introspective *bhakti*, where the goddess dwells within the individual human heart, and community *bhakti*, where groups of people participate in her worship in a shared space. Shakta *bhakti* is probably the major urban approach to the goddess, and may be found in Kali's annual festival of Kali Puja and also in her temples. Kali Puja night is a time for magic shows and theater, for fireworks and celebrations, but also for animal sacrifice to the goddess and contemplation of her importance in this world and in the universe. For most devotees, she is not merely Shiva's wife, but rather the origin of the universe, and her night reminds devotees of the fragility of their lives and their dependence upon a goddess who is alternately ruthless and compassionate. Many informants emphasized how careful one must be in worshipping Kali, for an error in worship could bring down her wrath.

During the festival in Calcutta, Kali's images are varied in the different street-corner shrines that are set up to celebrate Kali Puja. Some shrines are the size of small walk-in camping tents, made of rattan or bamboo, with Kalis like voluptuous dolls or withered old women, with white ornaments made of *solapith* and bright crepe-paper streamers. Large shrines may have beautiful Kalis standing on pale Shivas dressed in silk or gold lame or imitation tiger skins. In 1983, when Kali and Shiva were used to represent different cultural values, I vividly remember one set of statues, with a tribal-style Kali with dark skin wearing

animal skins and a fierce expression. She was stepping on a blond crew-cut Shiva dressed in a three-piece grey Western business suit, holding a briefcase. Next to him was a jackal, who stood beneath the severed head that Kali was holding, drinking its dripping blood. However, there were some Kalis at the 1993 Kali Puja with dark skin, large noses, and kinky hair, politically-correct Kalis looking like the Adivasis or tribals of West Bengal rather than Aryan invaders or Western imperialists.<sup>4</sup> In many situations, the image of the goddess is a reflection of the image of the self, or the personal ideal. Some Kalis were bright blue, voluptuous, and smiling happily, looking mature for a sixteen-year-old, while Kali with white skin showed her spiritual or *sattvic* nature. In the larger and more well-funded community *pandals* were giant statues, fifteen feet high or more, with piles of offerings all around. Sacred space was mobile, as was the goddess herself—her space was where she was worshipped and loved.

There are also more stable temples, where Kali is believed to dwell with mankind in response to their love, and to the priest's ritual devotion. These are often sanctified with the Hindu equivalent of relics buried beneath the temple in the form of jewels or gold or other valuable objects.

These understandings of sacred space—folk, tantric, and *bhakti*—often appear together. I shall give two examples from fieldwork, one on a small scale and one on a larger one. Each reflects all three types of Shakta sacred space. I shall also note two types of understanding of the goddess shown at her temples: as a joint Mahavidya goddess, and as an individual goddess who may alternate between wrathful and peaceful forms.

I met the female Shakta *tantrika* Gauri Ma in the town of Bakreshwar in West Bengal. It is a temple town dedicated to the god Shiva, with 108 Shiva *lingas* in stone shrines heavily overgrown with large tree roots. It is also a *sakti-pitha*, a place where there is a body part of the goddess. This town is the traditional locale of the goddess Sati's forehead.

At the old burning ground in Bakreshwar is an ashram of male and female renunciants of the Sankaracarya lineage. It is called the Bholagiri Abhayananda Ashram, named for the *tantrika* Shri Shri Pagal Maharaj (King of Madmen) Abhayananda Giri. Gauri Ma was head of the temple, a strongly-built woman in her fifties, with a *rudraksa mala* necklace and a shaved head. She had an intense gaze, and did a *sadhana*

practice with me that incorporated *kundalini* yoga and *pranayama* as a precursor to telling me stories about her ashram (she also told some stories that I was not permitted to publish). She told me the story of the temple's origin as we sat next to a *lakhmunda asana*, a great pile of human skulls (there are said to be one hundred thousand there). The skulls are buried at the base of a great *asvattha* tree, which appeared to be cemented over, and the area was covered with *alpana*, paintings done in white rice paste. Some of the exposed skulls are painted red and look out at any visitors who come to worship and meditate. She told of Aghor Baba's call by the goddess Kali in her *mahavidya* or great wisdom form as Tara:

This meditation seat (*asana*) was built by the tantric practitioner Aghor Baba, who was born in Orissa in the nineteenth century, and went to Tibet to study and meditate. He achieved several forms of empowerment (*siddhi*) there, and then he went to Tarapith. When he went there, the *tantrika* Vamaksepa was living there. In a dream, Tara told Vamaksepa to remove him, that Aghor Baba should not stay at Tarapith and did not belong there.

Now, people in the *aghor* stage of tantric practice [in which they do not distinguish between pure and impure] often disturb people around them. Shiva Mahakala spoke of the tantras through five mouths, and he is called Mahakala when he sits in the burning ground and decides the fate of souls. When a person dies, or enters the state of death while living, he is called Aghor Mahakala. The person in this state eats unused things and the flesh of dead people, and he drinks but does not become drunk. Even when the corpse is burning and the skull bursts, he will drink that liquid. He does many things which make people uncomfortable.

Tara instructed Vamaksepa to remove him, and Aghor Baba left unhappily and involuntarily. He then went to a temple at Howrah (near Calcutta), and sat down to meditate. He had a vision in which he was told to go to the town of Gorakhpur.

At Gorakhpur, he met a renunciant named Gorakhnath Mahayogi. Aghor Baba told him what had happened and of his anger at the goddess Tara. Gorakhnath went into meditation and called Tara Ma to find out why Aghor Baba had been expelled from Tarapith. Tara Ma answered his summons and came in the form of a tribal woman. She was quite angry, as it was a long way from Tarapith to Gorakhpur, and a long way to travel, even for a goddess. She said that she had him

removed because he could not attain any greater power at Tarapith—he had to go elsewhere to develop spiritually. She suggested that he go to Bakreshwar, which was a center of Shiva worship (an *aghor-pitha*), and a place more appropriate for his meditation. In the distant past, Shiva grew angry at Gauri, and he threatened her by chopping himself into five pieces. One of those five pieces came to rest at the Bakreshwar burning ground (*smasana*).<sup>5</sup> Here Aghor Baba could gain the power and abilities that he desired.

Aghor Baba came to Bakreshwar to do tantric practice. However, the burning ground was already occupied—a *kapalika* (practitioner who carried skulls) had come to the place years ago, and was living under a tree with his three female ritual partners (*sadhikas*). The *kapalika* told Aghor Baba to leave, which he did not wish to do, as he had been commanded by Tara Ma to go there. They fought there, and Aghor Baba killed the *kapalika* and his three partners. However, he did not allow their souls to gain liberation, for he intended to gain knowledge of the place from the four souls. Their burned bodies gave the first four skulls of his collection. He continued to collect skulls from the bodies burned at the burning ground and from the bodies of people killed by tigers and wild animals. He would enliven the skulls, and draw the souls down to the bones, and by tantric means ask the souls about meditation and use their power for his practice. However, he still could not attain his final goal.

At the last stage of his practice, a Shakta tantric holy woman (*bhairavi*) named Maheshvari Devi from East Bengal came to Bakreshwar. She helped him a great deal and finally brought him to liberation. With her help he attained siddhi, and he spent his remaining years in Bakreshwar. His pile of skulls is still here, at the base of the great *asvattha* tree.<sup>6</sup>

Aghor Baba's *samadhi* site at the ashram (where his body rests, for renunciants are buried rather than burned) is a five-foot ziggurat of bright red, and it is understood to be a place of power. Bakreshwar is often called a power place, sacred to both Shaktas and Shaivas. The main temple at the ashram is a temple to Kali, with the outside painted yellow and the inner room painted blue. There is a statue (*murti*) of a sweet, mischievous goddess, wearing a red and white silk sari and a garland of red hibiscus flowers, who stands before a red aura painted on the wall. She is called in hymns Satyanandamayi Kali and is surrounded by numerous pictures of deities and saints, including a tantric Ganesha with four arms. The priest in saffron waves a black fan and performs the offering of lights (*arati*) with young female assistants.

*Sannyasis* chant a hymn to Shiva by Sankaracarya before her statue. She is not jealous of this worship, but rather is pleased at the praise of her husband. There are complex white designs (*alpana*) before the entrance to the Kali temple, often with a dog sleeping in the middle of the designs (as Gauri Ma says, “These are not ordinary dogs”). Kali is friendly and helpful, and blesses the practitioners of various Hindu traditions who come to meditate at the burning ground. Gauri Ma discussed the nature of tantra generally:

Life stories tell about a person’s worldly history, but tantric practice (*sadhana*) reveals a person’s internal history. When a person has initiation, he or she is given the power to see inside. True initiation is given through the eyes and into the heart, but false initiation goes only through the ears (with the mantra)—it is a business. When you do *tantra-sadhana*, your right side becomes like fire and your left side like water, and your spine looks like a row of Christmas lights, shining in different colors. Inside of your mind you can see an inner television screen, and you can watch your inner life (*prana*) on it. Indeed, the term *tantra* is derived from the words body (*tanu*) and your (*tor*): it is the practice that you do with your own body.

Tantra is a kind of worship that requires the body. Some people worship Shiva to gain Shakti, and some worship Shakti to gain the blessings of the Mother. Shakti is wonderful in meditation, she does everything; Shiva barely helps, that’s why people call him a corpse.

People say that *tantrikas* do evil things, but real tantric practitioners do not. They do meditation on the five forbidden things (*pancamakara*), which have many secret meanings. For instance, *mada* is not wine, but rather special breathing (*pranayama*), and it makes you full of power. *Mamsa* (meat) means silence, the control of speech, while *matsya* (fish) represents the uncoiling *kundalini* energy, which looks like a fish when it is active (*jagrata*). *Maithuna* is the raising of *kundalini* up and down the spine, which unites the right and left sides of the person, the male and female halves. It is not intercourse, for no female partner (*bhairavi*) is used. *Mudra* means spontaneous trance, when the universal spirit (*paramatma*) and the individual self (*jivatma*) are related. The various finger to hand relationships, which most people think of when they hear about *mudras*, actually represent these deeper relationships. For instance, the thumb represents the universal spirit and the first finger represents the individual self, and the *mudra* where they touch represents their union. The third finger is Shakti, the fourth finger is Shiva, and the fifth finger is

Dakini or Yogini. The *mudras* occur spontaneously when people are in trance.<sup>7</sup>

Gauri Ma's story of the ashram's origin combines many aspects of folk Shaktism (including the power of the goddess in material objects and communication with spirits), Shakta tantra (supernatural power over death and gaining power from the dead), and both Shaiva and Shakta devotion (obedience and love towards Shiva and Shakti).

This site is also based on the story of Sati. There are many variants of the story of Sati, who in Bengal was most frequently understood by informants as an incarnation of Kali and who had committed suicide and was dismembered by the gods as her husband Shiva danced a mad dance of grief and destruction. Each place that one of her body parts fell become a place sacred to her.

Most goddess temples include all of these aspects, and perhaps the most famous set of goddess temples is known as the *sakti-pithas* or *sati-pithas*. There are many temples and shrines dedicated to Kali that arise from the story of the *sakti-pithas*. These are centers of power that extend over India and represent the goddess's identity in a variety of locales. These sacred sites of the goddess are based on a myth—the destruction of the sacrifice of Daksha Prajapati by the god Shiva, also called Rudra. The story is found in many sources, the earliest probably being the *Mahabharata* (XII, 282–283), though it is also found in several major *puranas* (including the *Matsya*, *Padma*, *Kurma*, and *Brahmanda puranas*). The most well-known variant is in Kalidasa's *Kumarasambhava* (I.21), in which Sati was the wife of the god Shiva and the daughter of Daksha. When Daksha organized a great sacrifice to which neither Shiva nor Sati was invited, Sati decided to attend anyway, and was insulted there by Daksha. Sati's death came about because of this insult, for Kalidasa says that she threw herself into the fire and perished. When Shiva found out about this, he angrily came with his attendants and destroyed the sacrifice. Three of the Shakta *puranas*—the *Kalika*, *Mahabhagavata*, and *Devibhagavata puranas*—also have versions of this story.

In the *Kalika Purana* version, Daksha did not invite his daughter Sati and her husband Shiva to his sacrifice. When Sati learned of this, she generated yogic power that burned her body with yogic fire. Shiva took her corpse on his shoulders and began to dance madly. To shake Shiva out of his frenzy, the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Sanaiscara (Sani, god of misfortune) entered the corpse and cut it into six pieces, which fell to earth and formed the six *sakti-pithas*. The area where Shiva had

danced, “the eastern part of the earth,” came to be called “the sacrificial land.”<sup>8</sup>

In the *Mahabhadgavata Purana*, Daksha decided to have a sacrifice but would not invite Shiva. Narada suggested that they attend the sacrifice anyway, and Sati agreed, but Shiva refused. At this Sati became furious, took on a wrathful expression, and generated ten forms of herself, the ten *mahavidya* goddesses. Sati predicted that these forms would be worshipped in the future by Shaktas in tantric rituals. Shiva was very frightened by her terrible forms and praised her, telling her he would obey her. Sati later split into two forms, one of which committed suicide (which was a shadow or *chaya* form), while the other existed secretly. Sati was thus able to survive her own suicide. Shiva was angry at Sati’s apparent death and generated out the form of the warlike Virabhadra, who went to destroy Daksha’s sacrifice.

Brahma and Vishnu told Shiva that the real Sati was alive and invisible and that it was the Chaya Sati who had apparently died in the fire. All three gods praised Sati, who then appeared before them in the form of Kali. She told Shiva to create the *pithas* by carrying Chaya Sati’s body on his shoulders and letting her limbs fall in different places. Then Shiva chose to live in the fifty-one *pithas* in the form of rocks (*lingas*).<sup>9</sup>

In the *Devibhadgavata Purana* story, Daksha ignored a gift from his daughter Sati, thus insulting her, and she became angry and burned herself to ashes in a yogic fire generated by her rage. Shiva roamed the world with Sati’s corpse on his shoulders, and Vishnu severed her limbs with his arrows. These limbs fell to earth in 108 pieces, creating the 108 *sakti-pithas*.<sup>10</sup>

As we can see, there are a variety of origin stories for these sacred sites and their temples. There are also several different lists of *pithas* in various puranic and tantric texts, and the numbers range from 4 to 108. Many tantric sites claim to have some piece of Sati as justification for their existence, and there are long arguments by priests and disciples as to why their site is not listed in any of the traditional lists of *sati-pithas*. Most recently, the temple site of Tarapith has made this claim, and many Shaktas accept it as a *sati-pitha*, or at least a *siddha-pitha* (a place where people have gained perfection or *siddhi*).

However, such justification as a *sati-pitha* is not necessary—sites can begin just on the basis of dream commands from the goddess. The most famous dream command story in Calcutta is probably that of Ananda Thakur, whose picture hangs throughout the marketplaces and

shrines. Thakur was an ecstatic who lived in Calcutta around the turn of the twentieth century. He had dreams and visions of the goddess Kali and would often fall into trances. He was commanded by her in a dream to rescue her statue, which had long lay hidden in the muddy waters at Eden Gardens. He found the statue between the two trees she had specified and had it brought back for worship. It was a statue of the goddess Kali in her tantric form as Adya Shakti Kali, or Kali of primordial power, naked and with matted hair and a sword. This form of Kali is often described as the origin of the ten tantric *mahavidya* forms of the goddess.

While the Adya Shakti Kali was initially satisfied with household worship of her statue, after a few days she decided that she was dissatisfied with worship at only one place—she wanted much broader worship, and she also wanted devotional rather than ritual worship. So she ordered Thakur to immerse her in the Ganges and have people worship her photograph instead. This was new technology at the time, and an early case of what came to be known as “photo-*bhakti*”—taking the *darsan* of a goddess from a photograph. But she could indeed get wider worship, for pictures could be spread throughout villages and marketplaces and home altars, as well as just temples. While the goddess required devotion, she also threatened people who would not worship her properly, punishing families with illness and misfortune for their neglect of her picture. She continued to come to Thakur in dreams and visions, giving him mantras to chant and hymns to write down. The mantras would also induce states of trance.

However, many years later, Annada Thakur had another dream command. This one was from the late *sadhu* Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a famous Shakta saint of West Bengal. He told Thakur to build a temple to Adya Shakti in Kalisthan (or the Land of Kali, as he called Bengal because of its Shakta devotionalism). He gave detailed instructions on how it was to be composed and run. The new temple was to include Vaishnava iconography, as well as a statue of Ramakrishna, and another statue of Adya Shakti standing upon the chest of Shiva. This started out as a small temple, which grew into the temple complex known today as Adyapitha (or Adyapeath), the third member of the tourism “Holy Trinity” (as their advertising phrases it) along the Ganges, of Belur Math, Dakshineswar, and Adyapitha. It is considered a modern addition to the shifting number of *sakti-pithas* in West Bengal, and it is included in the stops of the tourist buses that come out of Cal-

cutta to visit the *pithas*. It has adopted imagery from other traditions; for instance, their Mother Teresa hall can feed two thousand people each day, and the poor eat for free. The walls list thousands of donors, and there are offices, orphanages, a library, kitchens, meeting halls, and housing for the elderly and for renunciant monks and nuns. It has been very successful at fundraising and attracting political support.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Annada Thakur and Adyapitha, we see the various forms of sacred space merged together. Initially, there was sacred space by dream command and a neglected and demanding goddess. Then she came as a tantric Mahavidya goddess, giving mantras and trance states with visions. However, she also requires devotion and develops a form of *bhakti* that had no name at the time, shifting sacred space from building and statue to photograph. For Thakur, Adya Shakti Kali was the most important form of the goddess Kali, as primordial power. However, we may also see Kali in joint or alternating forms. To gain insight into how the goddess is understood, we can look at one example where the images of the goddess are united in a Mahavidya mandala and another where we have an individual image that alternates between peaceful and wrathful aspects.

At Matrimandir Asrama, in Kalimpong in the mountainous region of northern West Bengal, there is an astrology temple dedicated to the goddess's Mahavidya or Great Wisdom forms. This temple was founded by the Shakta tantric renunciant Jnanananda and has images of the tantric Mahavidya goddesses, which are here associated with astrology. The goddesses are believed to control the planets, and they have set planetary associations. The temple priest explained the correspondences between the Mahavidya goddesses and the planets and stars followed by this temple:

- Tara – Sun
- Kamala – Moon
- Bagala – Mangala (Mars)
- Tripura – Budha (Mercury)
- Matangi – Brihaspati (Jupiter)
- Bhuvaneshvari – Sukra (Venus)
- Dakshinakali – Sani (Saturn)
- Chinnamasta – Rahu
- Dhumavati – Ketu
- Durga – Shakti (as universal power)

At the front of the temple, the smiling black Kali statue in the center area was full of heavy silver jewelry: she wore necklaces, bracelets, an ornate silver crown with red jewels, and a belt of large, shiny silver hands. She carried a silver sword with a large eye on it, and there was a silver lamp over her head. Behind her was a sky-blue halo made of wood with the images of the Mahavidya goddesses painted on it around the edge. The Mahavidyas are understood to be Kali's ten major forms or emanations.

According to the priest, Shiva is the joint husband of all of these Mahavidya wives. The goddess takes on different shapes for different functions. If a person has problems with Budha, there is no energy for work; with Mangala, he loses his business and has political problems; with Sukra, he has too much desire. Bagala helps with legal problems, both civil and criminal.

When people come to the temple with problems, the priest looks at their palms to find out which planet is the cause of the trouble. He also finds this out by the date of birth, with which he consults the almanac (*panjika*) and does calculations. Once he has decided upon the planet that is causing problems, the person can then worship and give offerings to the goddess who controls that planet and thus take care of the problem. The priest finds out which planet is causing the trouble by means of palmistry or horoscope, and then that goddess is consulted. Astrology has come to be a specialization of *tantrikas*, and here astrological insight is associated with the tantric knowledge gained through worship of the Mahavidyas. While many wandering *tantrikas* make their living doing astrological predictions and selling astrological gems informally, here we have a temple dedicated to the practice.

When I asked about his own experience of the goddess, the priest said:

I am myself a devotee of the goddess, and my form of the goddess was chosen by my guru. Kali appears in my dreams, looking like her statue, and she gives me suggestions and instructs me. One may do Vedic *puja* (ritual worship) or tantric *puja*—here we do tantric *puja*. During tantric *puja* I am the son of the Mother, and I cling to her. We do not sacrifice many goats to her, for the goat is only the symbol of lust (*kama*), which must be sacrificed to have spiritual love (*prema*).

Kali is like a fire under a kettle, but you cannot put her out. People are like matches—if you go too close to her, you too will catch fire. But she is also a person, and she has a personality. This is shown by

the fact that she gives boons and she listens to devotees when they call. But she is invisible, and people have to sense her presence without seeing her.

Kali is a good goddess. Ma cannot be dangerous to her children, for she loves them, and she only punishes wrong actions, according to karma. She can change karma, but only to the good. She only destroys attachments (*ripus*), not her devotees.<sup>12</sup>

Tantric worship uses different mantras than Vedic worship and seeks a more personal relationship with the goddess. According to the priest, the major goal of Kali worship is the destruction of worldly attachments, which is a boon given by the goddess. She destroys the bonds that bind the devotees and brings liberation to those who seek it. As most people seek only favors, she gives gifts and suggestions to devotees through dreams and visions. She gives mostly moral instructions in dreams. Of the temple's founder he states:

Usually, the role of guru is handed down from father to son, but sages and *sannyasis* learn from other gurus. The founder of this temple, Jnanananda, was a wandering *sadhu* who spent much time in Bengal and Assam. He did tantric ritual meditation at burning grounds, with *pancamunda asanas* and many skulls. We do not do tantric ritual meditation (*sadhana*) here, only tantric *puja*. But we remember Jnanananda, and hope that one day we may be like him.

In this case, the goal of the goddess's multiple forms is a sort of specialization of labor. Kali's *rupas* have control over the powers of the various planets, and each form benefits the devotee in a different aspect of life. However, the Mahavidya goddesses may not be inclined to influence the planetary energies without prayers and assurances by the devotees.

This tantric temple in the mountains was founded by a *sadhu* who had done meditation in the area and called down the goddess in her Mahavidya forms. There are many stories of *sadhus* who have seen the goddess in all of these forms (the most famous is probably Sarvananda, whose vision occurred on a new-moon night while he practiced the *sava-sadhana* or corpse ritual). However, specifically tantric temples are a minority among the temples of West Bengal. Most temples combine tantric imagery with folk and *bhakti* traditions.

In the village Badabelun in Burdwan, Kali is worshipped in a small temple in her form as Bada Kalima (Elder Mother Kali or Big Mother

Kali; the term implies power as well as age and size). While the age and size show folk influence, the revealed style of worship was tantric. When the patriarch of the Bhattacharya family, Bhriguram Vidyavagisa, was on his deathbed, he called his sons together. He told them how Kali had appeared to him and told him to move from Ketugram to Badabelun early in his life, as well as how she had recently appeared to him in his dreams, telling him to prepare to die. She wanted her worship to continue, and he needed to inform his sons how to worship her. He told them of how to perform her worship in a long poem (emphasizing tantric rites rather than the Vedic *homa* fire or the puranic *arati* or worship with lights):

On the new moon of Kartik, sit [in meditation] through the night  
 Worship the Mother with devotion, after building her image.  
 It should be fourteen cubits tall  
 Worship the image according to tantric rites.  
 Put earth on her body on the full moon of Asvin  
 Make her tongue from a winnowing tray.  
 Offer her three bags of rice, and sweets  
 Then be seated and keep a steady mind.  
 Offer her a banana, and the blood of goat and buffalo in a skull  
 But do not perform *homa*-fire or *arati* to the Mother.  
 Light torches at the time of worship  
 And offer red hibiscus flowers at the Mother's feet.  
 Then give her sweets, rice and lentils, and meat offerings.  
 Continue to worship her until dawn.  
 Do not immerse her pitcher (in which she was installed)  
 But keep in inside the house, and daily offer it loving worship  
 On the third day after Kali Puja.<sup>13</sup>

He also told his sons about his experiences. After he had moved to Badabelun due to the goddess's dream command, he collected a set of five skulls and buried them at the local cremation ground and sat there in tantric-style meditation. He built a statue of Kali himself, and he would worship her at the burning ground, with vultures and jackals roaming about. He would call her "great bliss" (*mahananda*), and spend long hours before the statue. One day he went off for a bath, and when he returned he found that the image on the altar was not the one he had built. He had made a peaceful goddess, but when he returned he saw a terrifying figure. She had become very old and was standing on a corpse with a terrible face, full of blood and horrifying to see.

He was frightened to see the image and was about to run away. However, the goddess spoke to him reassuringly, saying, "My name is Elder Mother. This image will be worshipped for ages. Anyone who worships me with devotion will never have to worry about the next world." She told him to marry, for someone had to serve her after he died, and she suggested a bride for him. She told him that on the next new moon the daughter of a brahmin would die of a snake bite, and her relatives would bring her to the burning ground. He should take a handful of ash from the funeral pyre and put it into her mouth, and it would bring her back to life. He should then marry this reborn woman and start a family.

He agreed to do this, and on the next new moon he saw the funeral party. The girl's father wept like a madman, and he went over to Bhriguram and begged him to bring his daughter back to life. Bhriguram followed the goddess's advice and put the ash into the girl's mouth. She sat up and said, "Goddess," and stretched as if she had just awakened from sleep. Bhriguram then told her father of the goddess's command, and he agreed with the proposal for marriage. This was the beginning of Bhriguram's family and the reason for the necessity of maintaining the goddess's worship.<sup>14</sup> Tantric worship emphasizes the goddess's power over life, death, and liberation—in this story she is clearly a conqueror of death. Her continued worship at her temple reminds people of her ability to take life and to give it. In this case, we did not have a joint image of the goddess like the Mahavidyas, but rather a single image that could transform itself from peaceful to wrathful.

In the examples of Bakreshwar and Adyapitha, we have some major understandings of Shakta sacred space. The folk goddess is incarnated in matter, and her liberation is the ritual sanctifying of the matter that imprisons her. She gains not freedom but power and respect. The tantric goddess controls birth and death, sanctifying the places of death of her own past incarnations and the burning grounds of her followers. Death gains new value. Tantric ritual brings the passions of both goddess and devotee under control and uses them for creation and destruction. *Bhakti* has a mobile goddess who dwells in *puja murtis*, in temples, and in the hearts of her devotees in response to their love. Temples may also be large or small, dedicated to multiple forms of the goddess or to one form. There are folk, *bhakti*, and tantric interpretations: all of these are ways that sacred space is understood in Bengali Shaktism.

## NOTES

1. See Tushar Niyogi, *Aspects of Folk Cults in South Bengal* (Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1987), 6.
2. See June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 1.
3. See June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 120–123.
4. India has problems with affirmative action and prejudice, as does the West. In the case of the Kali with non-Aryan features, the statue shows respect for the Adivasi or tribal people who wish representation and concern for their cultures.
5. According to Gauri Ma, the five major *aghor-pithas* are at Ujjain, Bakreshwar, Varanasi, Gorakhpur, and Kathmandu. The story may be a variant on the story of Sati and the origin of the *sakta-pithas*.
6. Gauri Ma, interview with the author in Bakreshwar, 1994.
7. Ibid.
8. *Kalika Purana*, chaps. 17 and 18, cited in Usha Dev, *The Concept of Sakti in the Puranas* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1987), 146.
9. *Mahabhagavata Purana*, chaps. 7–11, cited in Dev, *Concept of Sakti*, 147–150.
10. *Devibhagavata Purana*, VII, chap. 30, cited in Dev, *Concept of Sakti*, 151.
11. Fieldwork and interviews with practitioners, Adyapitha (Adyapeath), 1994.
12. Kalimpong (a Shakta priest), interview with the author, 1994.
13. Pranavesa Cakravarti, *Ei Banglai* (Calcutta: Dev Sahitya Kutir, 1992), 56–57.
14. Ibid., 56–58.