WELCOMED AND UNWANTED: UNCERTAINTY AND POSSESSION IN A MANASĀ CULT (NORTH BENGAL AND WEST ASSAM, INDIA)

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ABSTRACT

Manasā is a very important goddess of the eastern part of India, particularly for the lower castes of Bengal, West Assam, some districts of Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar. She is the main goddess for the majority of Rajbansis of North Bengal. The fluid border between deities, witches and human beings is an essential part of both her myth and cult. Being a Tāntric deity, Manasā has an extremely ambivalent character: according to the narratives and ritualistic practice she is at the same time both welcomed and unwanted. Her worship involves negotiation with dangerous divine power, which generates insecurity and uncertainty, but at the same time rewards adepts with wonderful abilities. This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in rural places in the Jalpaiguri, Koch-Behar, Goalpara and Darrang districts of West Bengal and Assam, India, among Rajbansis, Bodo Kachari and Assamees. The details of Manasā worship, Behula dance and storytelling by Bengali Monośa *gidal*, and in a form of Assamese *suknāni ojha-palli* (with *deodhani* dance and trance) will reveal a peculiar local knowledge system, directly aimed at overcoming and transforming mundane life crises.

KEYWORDS: Hinduism • sacred • possession • performance • Manasā • *ojha-palli* • *deodhani*

"She can kill you. She is maybe wrong. But she does not care […]. She is like our Mother. She is alive! We always come and tell her everything: we report also, when we are going to leave the village for some time, or when we are back."

(FM 2018: Darrang)

"[The] legend of [Chand Sadagar and] Manasā Devī, [...] who must be as old as the Mykhean stratum in Asiatic society, reflects the conflict between the religion of Shiva and that of female local deities in Bengal. Afterwards Manasā or Padmā was recognized as a form of *śakti*, [...] and her worship accepted by Śaivas. She is a phase of the mother-divinity who for so many worshipers is nearer and dearer than the far-off and impersonal Śiva."

(Coomaraswamy and Nivedita 2003 [1913]: 330)

This paper* reflects a specific ontology of divine beings whose socio-religious status is not very clear: their 'god-ness' appears to be a matter of investigation and test. Uncertainty of the sacred, expressed in folklore, narratives and religious practices is a genuine aspect of deities or other numinous beings whose nature, status and behaviour are fluid. The wide spectrum of possible manifestation of sacred reality often corresponds to highly intimate connections between people and deities: the phenomenon of obsession or possession is a common part of such relationships.

First, I would like to focus on the agenda we can use when studying the ethnographic material, and on the concepts of fluidity, spirit-possession and trance; I will then analyse a relevant case, that of the deity goddess Manasā, who also has several other names, for example Viṣaharī (in Bengali Biṣohori), Padmāvatī, Trijagadgaurī, Śivā, Vaiṣṇavī, Nāgamātā, Mṛtasañjīvanī, Siddhayoginī, Jāṅgulī, etc., and who is especially widespread in parts of West Bengal and Assam.

MANY WAYS TO EXIST: INTERPLAY OF FORMS, FLUIDITY AND POSSESSION

Fluidity, an important part of the animistic worldview (see Espírito Santo 2018), is one of the most striking aspects of the sacred world in India. There are many manifestations: the variety of names and titles of deities, sometimes overlapping, the number of sacred images and stories, the many ways to establish contact between the numinous world and devotees, the multiplicity and fluidity of sacred visible forms, of nomenclature (names, titles, classes, or, so to say, 'designations'), of origins, and many more.

The phenomenon of many different versions of the same narrative, of alternative or counter-narratives, opposing dominant descriptions and points of view, became the main focus of Amartya Sen's (2005) statement about "argumentative Indian", predisposed, under the influence of thousands of years of conditioning, to doubt, question and dissent. As a result of plural heritage, "the simultaneous flourishing of many different convictions and viewpoints in India has drawn substantially on the acceptance […] of heterodoxy and dialogue" (Sen 2005: ix). Such an acceptance stresses the idea of an unfinished reality and negotiation as the central points of all cultural and social institutions, including religious cults, in India. Personality appears also to be a rather fluid entity. It is fixed temporarily, and the identity here becomes a process of finding out

the most currently relevant form. Physical, intimate relations between various beings, including humans, non-humans, as well as presumably numinous reality, including deities, play a very important role in the texture of this fluidity.

Because of their strong belief in spiritual discipline, which can change physical and social identity, temporarily or permanently, humans, according to widespread belief, can become a divine/supernatural beings (for example, a *vidyādhara*, 'keeper of knowledge', a *gandharva*, 'musician'), and vice versa. This identity changing can happen due to a particular practice of *yoga*, *sādhanā*, music, etc. In addition, there are certain eminent people whose status is almost divine: Rabindranath Tagore is 'Guru Dev' for Bengali people, Veerendra Hegde, a *dharmadhikari*, hereditary administrator of Dharmasthala in South Karnataka, is venerated as a sacred and (almost) divine person, and there are many other examples. Certain circumstances can also make a person divine for a particular period: guests (*atithi*) are venerated as 'guest-gods' (*atithi-dev*), grooms are *narāyan-dev* (equivalent to the god Viṣṇu), little girls become 'goddesses', 'virgin-goddesses' (*devīs*, *kumārīs*) for the period of special worship, *kumārī-pūjā*, etc. *Sannyāsis*, people who embraced a particular lifestyle and go under the system of vows, are not equal to other humans. By the blessing of gods a human can become something else. A new body can be achieved, and can also be lost due to some curse.

Apart from discipline and blessing, or curse, another method of identity change is one that is enforced externally. Spirit possessions[1] caused by deities, spirits or ghosts constitute an important model for that change. The practice of physical possession, which is part of shamanic practice, or an activity performed by mediums, introduces the theme of multiple identities (see Pierini 2016), finely tuned in a local social set-up.

Possession plays a significant role in many rituals and rites that form part of local, and often marginal, religious practice in India (Smith 2006). It can be spontaneous or enacted, anticipated or unexpected, wanted or unwanted. Visitors to human bodies use one of two mechanisms, exorcism or adorcism (see Oughourlian 1982). Possession can be 'democratic', 'global' (covering everyone irrespective of origin, caste, religion, sex, place, etc.), 'feudal', 'ethnic', or 'local' (community, ethnic and/or place-specific: deities or spirits restrict their actions to certain places, ethnic communities or castes). The question of which deity is able to enter the human body has multiple answers according to different sources and cases.

Sanskrit literature does not mention possession often. The sixth chapter of the Buddhist text *Lalitavistara* (Tripathi 1987: 57) says that when Queen Maya was pregnant with Buddha, she could treat various diseases including possession caused by supernatural beings, namely *gandharvas* (beings, related to smell and sound) and *yakṣas* (spirits of plants, developed into a specific class of semi-divine being). We can find another short reference to negative spirit possession in Bhavabhūti's (1968: 176–177) play *Mahāvīracarita*, which narrates the story of Rāma. In the fourth act a maiden, Mandharā, is possessed by a demonic lady Śūrpaṇakhā, and talks to Rāma about the fake message from queen Kaikeyi that demands he go into exile. According to the text, Rāma himself asked Daśaratha to arrange this exile, which was eventually a result of black magic via possession. Yet, the description of possession in high classic literature in India is quite rare, considers it rather 'low', i.e. something we would call today 'folklore'.

Several ritualistic texts do mention possession, for example several texts in the *Atharvaveda* (see in Whitney 1996 [1905]), are aimed at removing ghost possession, which is

considered one of the possible origins of disease (Zysk 1985). The invocation of high deities, Hindu *devas*, however, share some common aspects with possession but do not look to be the same as the local deities of particular cultural areas, such as *devata* of Himachal (Alter 2017) or *daivas* of Tulunadu (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 1984). Vedic gods such as Indra, Agni etc., as well as Brahmanic gods, according to the Brahmanic texts, do not normally 'take seat' in a person's body. However, in ethnographic reality there are a many cases of possession, and almost all gods (even Śiva, as is narrated below) can possess and be possessed, enter trance, become intoxicated, etc.

While the possibility of possession caused by high, pan-Hindu deities – Śiva, Viṣṇu, Lakṣmī, Durgā – are disputable, there are several deities that manifest themselves only through impersonators, such as *daivas* of Tulunadu, folk deities such as Goga of northern and western India, and *devatas* of the central Himalaya. Sometimes they assume the names of Viṣṇu (such as Viṣṇumurti *daiva* of North Malabar), Śiva, Durgā, Kālī, etc., but obviously they are local, indigenous deities with their own stories, food habits and agencies. Some of their features could be said to be common across South Asia, and even globally. One of them seems to be the relationship of snake worship to possession. Snakes are supposed to be beings who can enter the human body – at least in the form of venom, which travels around the body through the circulatory system. In India there are several examples of the connection of snakes to trance, most probably because the venom could be an origin of trance; the tradition of snake worship in coastal Karnataka may be the most notable among them. The venomous nature of snakes, both physically and mystically, even in the form of a snake's shadow, or sight of one, as in the story of Medusa in Greek mythology, is well known (see for example Wilk 2000). The Goddess Manasā of Bengal and Assam is quite similar to many other goddess snakes as she also creates danger, not by biting but just by being present, even invisibly, or by turning her gaze onto someone.

Manasā belongs to the highly ambivalent deities who are believed to perform opposing functions (see McDaniel 2004). For example, Gaṇeśa is able to create obstacles, but he is also the one who removes them. Śītalā *devī* (in West Bengal considered a sister of Manasā, or sometimes even another name for Manasā) is a personification of smallpox and fever, but is also worshiped as one who cures them.[2] Ṣaṣṭhī is a numinous being who is able to kill a new-born child, but she is also believed to be a mother, feeding and protecting it. Yet, the negative features of almost all of these deities are not discussed or thought about by the majority of common devotees. Manasā's story is relevant to the discussion proposed by Fabrizio M. Ferrari (2011: xx–xxi) in his volume studying ritual, health, possession and healing in South Asia. According to him Manasā's ambivalent character – as compared to others – is pronounced and clear. She is truly welcomed and unwanted at the same time, as is obvious from both mythological narratives and rituals.

The coming of a deity or spirit, whether wanted or otherwise, into a mortal human body is always a point of uncertainty. Possession is often related to trance. Erica Bourguignon in her books (1973; 1976), and Gilbert Rouget in his research *Music and Trance* (1985), discuss the distinctions in details, using many case studies. Music, singing and dance are the most evident manifestations of trance, although trance can happen in full silence as well.

The material presented below proves the presumption that trance plays a dual role in dealing with possession: it can either invite, or stop it. There are music and dances for

inviting certain spirits or deities, and to prevent a possession, or to exorcise an already possessed person. Several rituals, in which gods/spirits of a conspicuous or even horrible nature are invited, treated accordingly, and then taken away have the same function. Those deities, with the considerable uncertainty over their origin, nature and behaviour, are not really welcomed and so their images, idols and places of worship are usually situated at a distance from domestic spaces, and there are many restrictions and precautions relating to them in communication. Yet, paradoxically, the same deities and their cults can achieve high levels of popularity; in some cases these deities can even be the only hope for devotees. The goddess Manasā is one of the best examples of this.

MANASĀ'S STORY: THE LOGIC OF SCANDAL AND THE NEED TO BE VIOLENT

I will discuss below the cult of the snake goddess that is widespread in the eastern part of India, Bengal (Birbhum[3] in particular, but also Jalpaiguri, Koch-Bihar, Bankura, Burdwan, 24 Pargana districts in West Bengal,[4] Pabna, and Faridpur in East Bengal), and certain parts of Odisha, Assam, Tripura, Bihar and Jharkhand.

Manasā (in Sanskrit 'one mentally created', 'who exists in the mind') is just one of the several names of the goddess, in fact the multiple names of the goddess create some problems in identifying her. Manasā temples are situated in Haryana, Punjab (the temple of Mata Manasā Devī in Panchkula, near Chandigarh), Uttarkhand (on the hill near Haridwar), and Uttar Pradesh (close to Ramnagar fort in Varanasi). Those Manasās very possibly are not identical to the Monośa or Monoha of West Bengal and West Assam: they have different narratives and visual representations, and snakes are not related to them.

Manasā is a very important goddess for the lower castes of Bengal, West Assam, some districts of Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar. She is the main goddess for the majority of Rajbansis, an officially scheduled caste in North Bengal and West Assam, as well as for the local tribes of Tibeto-Burman groups such as the Bodo Kachari and Rabha. She has also been worshiped in Sunderban, the coastal area of Bengal, where simple mud idols have been installed. Her shrine can be found in the courtyard of almost every agrarian household.

Location and identification of this goddess, her legend and her cult, are two problems that are still discussed and have not been fully settled. A common occurrence in many writings on Manasā is the statement that she is a pre-Aryan goddess, widespread in parts of India that have been less influenced by Indo-Aryans, i.e. eastern and southern India (Bhattacharyya 1977: 131). Yet there are many regions in South Asia with almost no 'Aryan' impact (such as Nagaland for instance) and no snake worship either.

Among the earliest texts that mention snake cults are the *grihyasūtras* – treatises of domestic, household traditions (Apte 1954 [1939]: 119–122). In *Baudhayana grihyasūtra* (see in Olivelle 2000) a *sarpabali*, a snake veneration ritual performed during the full moon during the month of Śravana, is mentioned. Adoration of snakes goes hand in hand with fear of snakes, especially of being bitten and of their venom.

Ophiolatry, serpent worship, is widespread all over South Asia and exists in all levels of tribal religious culture and beyond, from small village rites to elaborate Brahmanic

ceremonies. Image of snakes have a very broad spectrum of interpretations: in the spiritual practice of many yogic schools the snake represents eternal energy, *kuṇḍalinī*, or the channel of life, where both degradation and resurrection are possible.

Innumerable legends and rites relate snakes to the sacred reality, showing that people can have widely differing attitudes to them, giving rise to worship that has various formats and outlooks all over the world. In South India this takes the form of veneration of *nāga* stones (stones carved with images of snakes and semi-divine beings, *nāgas*) and worship of live domestic snakes (in Kerala in particular). Goga Chauhan, a famous deity in many northern Indian states, is a deified legendary hero who takes a form that is both human and snake; his devotees fall into a trance to communicate with him (FM 2018: Irana).

The origin of *nāgas* – in *Mahābharata* (see in Ganguli 1883–1896: *Ādi Parva*, *Astika Parva*, section XIII) – shows their sacred character as semi-divine beings. Although there are well-known examples of their persecution, for example the snake sacrifice made by Vedic king Janamejaya – ironically snakes appear to be at the same time dangerous and in danger.

Some castes who practice snake charming (such as the Kalbelia, 'who remove the fear of poison', or the Sapera, widespread in Rajasthan), specialise in cleaning domestic spaces of snakes, although usually they do not worship them. Two attitudes are interwoven here: snakes should be removed from the living space, and may be killed, but can also be worshiped. I argue that a very similar strategy is related to Manasā: it is better to avoid her, but if this is not possible she should be worshiped.

Relations between snakes and Hindu gods of high rank constitute an interesting aspect of religious synthesis, possibly developing slowly as a process of merging various cults. Śiva has a particularly intimate bonds with snakes: he is adorned by them and is worshiped as a Nāgeśvar, 'king of *nāgas*'.

Incantations and magic are the most ancient and important part of serpent lore and of the ways of dealing with snakes. Incantations to cure snake bites are well known both in folklore and in Vedic traditions, such as in the *Atharvaveda* (see in Whitney 1996 [1905]: VII, 58), for instance, although no snakes or snake goddesses have the name Manasā here.

Folklorist Asutosh Bhattacharyya (1977: 35) draws attention to another snake goddess, Jāngalī, or Jāngulī (Jāngalitara in Mayurbhanj), whose cult was well developed and widespread in eastern India (see also Bhattacharyya 1993 [1924]: 80). Her cult is known from Tāntric texts such as *Sādhanāmala* (see in Bhattacharyya 1968 [1925]) and in other literature. Invocations appear to be the main way to communicate with her. Buddha used to worship her, and passed mantras against snake bites to his disciples. The descriptions of this goddess are many, and they are very similar to the later visual images of Manasā, known from the medieval poetic *maṅgalkāvyas* texts,[5] compilations of various legends and stories. Jāngalī is visualised as a lady of white, yellow or golden colour, with music instruments[6] or weapons, or as a child. She is a daughter of Śankara, who was born out of a lotus, was worshiped and was asked to remove poison. According to Bhattacharyya (1977: 37), the name Manasā replaced Jāngulī, and the cult remained more or less the same. There are many other names for the same goddess, denoting her qualities and activities – Viṣahari ('she who destroys the fear or effect of poison'), Padmā or Padmavatī ('lotus'), Nitya ('eternal'), Burimā ('old mother', 'grand-

mother'), Cintamanī ('[she who possesses] gemstone'), etc. Many epithets overlap with that of Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Durgā (Svetambari, Jagatgauri, Makdākṣi, etc.; see the list in Maity 2001 [1996]: 328). One of Manasā's specific features is that she lost an eye in battle (Smith 1980) and so Kānī ('blind') is also one of her epithets. Yet she is not exactly blind. According to Bengali folk belief she has 'poison eye', through which she can look at people and divine beings, causing them to swoon. She can also cure them or bring them back to life with the positive sight that she has in the other '*amrita* eye' (FM 2003: Mainaguri).

There are many snake deities in South India with different names and agendas: Mudamma, Manchamma (Deccan, Mysore), Mane Manchamma (Karnataka), Subrammanya or Subrāya (Karnataka and Kerala) and others. *Nāgas* or *Nāginis* (Nāga Kānya, etc.) are supposed to be pan-Indian numinous beings with divine qualities. Fertility is the main aspect of all of these cults. The Brahmanic snake deity Vāsuki, as well as snake deities of the *nāgamaṇḍala* tradition (complex worship of snake's spirit with the help of impersonator) of coastal Karnataka are worshiped in several places by higher caste Hindus, Brahmans in particular. The holy images vary considerably: sometimes it is a stone sculpture with the bas-relief of one or several snakes, sometimes a temporal decoration, a drawing, or a group of snakes residing in special 'forest' or bushes, or sometimes the deity is even invisible.

The name Manasā is generally unknown in South India. Yet, certain similarities can be discovered between Manasā and Ammavaru, a village goddess of several districts in Andhra and Karnataka who possesses magical power and can spread epidemics, particularly of smallpox and cholera. Her legend and cult are described by Henry Whitehead in his book *The Village Gods in South India* (1921 [1891]). According to the belief, she was born before the existence of historical time and laid three eggs, from which Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva hatched. She built three palaces for them and one for herself. Three gods initially paid her respect, but later they forgot and neglected her, seeking worship on their own account. Śiva even began to insult her, which made her angry. She dressed and adorned herself, took "a deer in one hand, a conch in the other and a small drum in a third and put a snake round her body as a sacred thread" (ibid.: 123). She rode on a jackal to Devagiri, a domain of Śiva, and placed her sisters, the hundreds of Śaktis, there along with a 12-headed snake that emitted poisonous fumes from his mouth. She attacked her sons and their devotees, killing them. Finally Ammavaru brought them back to life and left the place where they began to worship her. (Ibid.: 126–137) This story has several variations in which the goddess appears in different forms once people forget to worship her, bringing disaster or attacking people and gods in various ways. The confrontation ends with negotiation and the satisfaction of the goddess's demands, although in few cases the deity's threats are blocked at the very beginning (see Maity 2001 [1966]: 138–139).

I was introduced to Manasā devī in 2002 during my first fieldwork period among Rajbansis in Jalpaiguri district, North Bengal. I had previously met, in Delhi, one of my main informants, Dinesh Roy, from Mainaguri, who came with a musical group to the one of the cultural programs. Part of the performance was a Rajbansi folk dance related to Monośa worship performed by young lady who imitated the movements and gait of a serpent. I was told that this deity is of a great importance for all peasant families in North Bengal. An invocation and worship, *pūjā*, dedicated to her is performed

Photo 1. Monośa-monduś *made of Indian cork and paper, a ritualistic image of the goddess. Amguri, Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal. Collected by the author in 2002.*

quite often, however, people do not usually have her image at home for a long time. Rather, they are treated like images of Kālī's, which are made from the soft trunk of the cork tree and paper (Photo 1), and destroyed after the ritual (FM 2002: Mainaguri). Manasā's story is well known and is often performed by the makers of Bengali illustrated rolls, narrated mythologies; they can be different in length, but today there is a tendency for them to be shorter, or even reduced to a couple of images representing the goddess and a few of the main characters. They can be used for ritual purposes, but are also sold as souvenirs at fairs and in markets.

Later I saw and recorded a Monośa-*pūjā*, listened to Monośa stories narrated by a story teller, *gidal*, in a house belonging to Dinesh Roy, my very helpful fixer and informant from Mainaguri. I ordered from an artisan from the *mali* caste several ritualistic artefacts and images of the deity Monośa-*monduś*. Along with several pots from Birbhum district, I donated a Monośa *ghat* (a ritual pot), compulsory for worship of this goddess, to the Ethnographic museum of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow. I had numerous discussions about the nature of this goddess with Dinesh Roy, Dilip Barma and other friends from Mainaguri and Jalpaiguri. In addition to North Bengal I later visited Goalpara and did some fieldwork there. It is a neighbouring district to Assam and a place of crucial events in the mythological story. Lastly, in 2018 I started documentation of *suknāni ojha-pallī*[7] – a tradition of epic singing in Assam dedicated to this very goddess, Monoha in Assamese. My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in rural parts of Jalpaiguri, Koch-Behar, Goalpara and Darrang districts of West Bengal and Assam, India, among Rajbansis, Bodo Kachari and Assamees.

The word Manasā initially appeared in the late *purāṇas*: *Devībhāgavata purāṇa* (see in Kauśika 2000), *Padma purāṇa* (see in Debroy and Debroy 2000) and *Brahmavaivarta purāṇa* (see in Chaturvedi 2005), all composed sometime around the 13th century, but possibly later. (However, Smith 1980 proposes that her cult possibly began in the 11th century.) According to the myth known from late *purāṇas* and *maṅgalkāvya* and repeated in oral narratives, Manasā is a snake and possible daughter of Śiva, at the same time having a metaphysical character. She was created by sage Kaśyapa in invisible form as an incantation against snake bite.

Incorporation of the Manasā myth into Śaivaism, in particular in its local variants, happened probably sometime in the 13th or 14th century. Later texts with the development of the goddess's story are half poetic, half prosaic *maṅgalkāvyas* of the 16th–18th centuries, where the myth is narrated in great detail (Dimock 1962). There are several

variations of this myth in Bangla and in Assamese, composed by various poets, the Bengali variant of Bijoy Gupta and Assamese by Sukābi Narāyanadeva (17th century) being most famous. *Dhyānas*, meditative invocations to the goddess, are still widespread in West Bengal and West Assam and they too give us some knowledge about her cult and ways of veneration (see Smith 1980).

In Bihar and Jharkhand the story is known only in oral versions with interesting details missing (such as the multiplication of Manasās in the form of five sisters – Maina Viśaharī, Ditīlā Bhavānī, Jayā Viśaharī, Padmā, Kumarī; see Maity 2001 [1966]: 126). Yet in general the oral tradition mainly repeats the same story, dwelling on some details and reducing others.

In short, it is a story of a divine being: Manasā in the body of a snake descending to earth to establish her cult and find human devotees.[8] She was initially disliked by many people but later forced some of them, including respected trader Chand (or Chando) Sadagar (Saudagar, Sadagar), to worship her. Manasā killed his six sons, as well as later the seventh and last son, Lakhindar (or Lokhinder, the spelling varies), who was resurrected along with his brothers on the command of Śiva. Chand was pressed to offer a flower to the goddess, which he did with open disgust using his left hand and turning his face away from the deity. *Maṅgalkāvyas* say that after this worship of Manasā was popular forever. It became fashionable to worship Manasā on the eleventh day of the waning moon every month. But in reality, as my fieldwork shows, this deity is sometimes worshiped more frequently, and sometimes less.

Manasā's story is widespread, carried by numerous folk storytellers, and is associated with certain sites in today's Western Assam and North Bengal; some *loci* in Bihar and Orissa are also claimed to be related to Manasā. There are quite a few places with the name Champak *nagar*, a homeland of Chand, one of the main heroes, one near Bogra (East Bengal, Bangladesh), another is Chaygaon in Kamarup (near Guwahati), another is near Kasba and there are several more. Sundarban is supposed to be the place where Netā lived and worked as a washerwoman.

I argue here that the story of the goddess, her mythological narrative, which recounts the evolution of the cult and a certain 'promotion' of the deity became extremely popular because of its creative potential. It is the story of a struggle in which each person, deity or not, wealthy householder or servant, is important, is an actor, possess a secret power and can change the future. It is the story of the challenges a person faces when dealing with dangerous divine power, which generates insecurity and uncertainty but at the same time rewards adepts with miraculous abilities. Mythological narratives offer an extremely flexible model for dealing with unusual and sometimes dangerous circumstances in which each person can rely only on him- or herself, and can even win against hopeless odds. The cult of Manasā is based on the preventative measures that people need to take in urgent situations.

Analysis of the different sources of Manasā's myth – both written and oral – led me to some important observations.

Purāṇas and *maṅgalkāvyas* tell two different stories of the goddess's origin: she emerged either from the sage Kaśyapa, or the god Śiva, although in both cases she shows great independence.

According to *purāṇas*, Manasādevī (or Mānasā, the spelling varies) is a goddess who originated from sage Kaśyapa's meditation (Mani 2002: 474) and existed in his mind

only in the form of mantras. However, Kadru, a mother of *nāgas,* has also been mentioned as her mother. The goal of this creation was to cure snake bites and to prevent people from being poisoned in general. Here the goddess appears to be an instrument of a particular intention. The *Mahābharata* mentions Mānasa as a snake born into the family of Vāsuki or Dhṛitarāṣtra, and burnt to death along with other snakes (see in Ganguli 1883–1896: *Ādi Parva*, Chapter 57, *śloka* 5 and 16; see also Mani 2002: 474).

The story of the origin of Manasā as a creation of Śiva's mind is told in Manasā-*maṅgalkāvya*, an oral and literary genre popular in Bengal, Assam and parts of Bihar and Odisha (see Haq 2015). Many North Bengali poets also composed versions of Manasā-*maṅgalkāvya*, such as Durgābari Bibhūti in the 16th century and Jagajjīvan Ghosāl, Jīban Kṛishṇa Maitra in the 18th century. *Manasā-maṅgalkāvya* or *Padmā purāṇ* by Bijay Gupta (Gupta 1992) and *Manasā Vijaya* by Bipradas Pipilai from 1495 (see in Sen 1953) tell the story of the goddess in great detail, in contrast to the *purāṇic* stories. Here Manasā is described as a daughter of Śiva, created out of his semen when it fell onto the lotus leaf, born in the underground kingdom of the serpent king, Vasuki. According to *Manasā Vijaya,* Manasā was born when the statue of a girl that had been sculpted by the serpent Vasuki's mother was touched by Śiva. Vasuki accepted Manasā as his sister and granted her control of the poison that was produced when king Prithu milked the Earth as a cow. When Śiva saw Manasā she proved to him that he was her father. Śiva took Manasā to his home where his wife, Caṇḍī, suspected Manasā of being Śiva's concubine; she insulted Manasā and burnt out one of her eyes, leaving Manasā half blind.

As per her caste 'identity' the goddess has an intimate relationship with the lower strata of society both in West Bengal, and in East Bengal, or Bangladesh, making an association with the previously mentioned Śītalā and Ṣaṣtī, for instance, as well as other deities of 'small', local traditions. However, local traders and even Brahmanic groups occasionally perform *pūjā* to her.

Local folk elements are very evident in the *maṅgalkāvyas.* Mokammal H. Bhuiyan (2009) writes about the local features of Śiva in Bengal and how he turned out to be a folk deity, so Manasā could be regarded as the daughter of a very familiar, local, peasant deity. There was also an insertion of Manasā into the main stories about Śiva, for example there is praise to the goddess as a 'remover of poison' because she was supposed to have saved Śiva after he drank poison when emerging from the milk ocean.

When Manasā is a mental creation she has no 'problems', but when she took the corporeal form of a young lady she became an object of scandal. For example she seems to have been abandoned by her father, she needs, but cannot find, somewhere to live, and her identity is largely unclear and disputable.

Manasā's lifestory is a struggle to overcome her marginality, justify her divine status and establish (often violently) a connection with devotees. The fluid boundary between deities, witches and human beings is an essential part of both her myth and her cult. Manasā has an extremely ambivalent character; according to the narratives and ritual practice she is at the same time welcomed and unwanted.

According to the *purāṇas* and epic texts Manasā's life, and particularly marriage, were unhappy. Today people also know this, but try not to focus on it so as not to irritate or displease the goddess. Yet, Manasā's loneliness is supposed to be the cause of her moody character.

Manasā happens to be a so-to-say divorced, abandoned goddess – an extremely

inauspicious status according to Brahmanic Hindu moral norms. As is known from the epic stories, Kaśyapa married Manasā to sage Jaratkāru, who practiced severe austerities and had decided to abstain from marriage. The following stories are well known, and were told to me by my informants in Jalpaiguri district (FM 2002; 2003; 2004; 2006: Jalpaiguri). Once he came across a group of people hanging from a tree upside down. These were his ancestors, who were doomed to misery as Jaratkāru had not performed their last rites. So they advised Jaratkāru to marry and have a son who could free them of those miseries by performing the ceremonies. Jaratkāru agreed to marry Manasā on the condition that he would leave her if she disobeyed him. It was Caṇḍī who ruined Manasā's wedding night. Caṇḍī advised Manasā to wear snake ornaments and then Caṇḍī threw a frog in the bridal chamber which caused the snakes to run around the chamber. As a consequence, the terrified Jaratkāru ran away from the house.

Once, when Jaratkāru was awakened by Manasā, he became upset with her because she awakened him too late for worship, and so he left her temporarily. Yet, one child, Āstika, was born from Manasā and Jaratkāru. Āstika freed his paternal ancestors, and also helped save the *nāgas* from destruction when king Janamejaya decided to exterminate them by sacrificing them in his *yajña*. Oral Bengali stories mention several children, produced by Monośa, after the single night with her husband. Yet, neither Jaratkāru nor their issue play a role in the following part of Monośa's life, in which she remains single, with only her washerwoman, Netā, as companion, adviser and helper.

Manasā's image both in text and in modes of worship appears to be flexible and variable. The best-known time to worship snakes and snake deities is Nāga Panchami, during the month of Śravana (July-August), while in Bengal Manasā can be worshiped at any time.

In *dhyānas* she is a vigorous semi-divine lady, a *yoginī* who can take any shape she desires. She is referred to as the mother of snakes and is accompanied by snakes. She is the mother of Āstika and the daughter of Śiva. Her appearance has been described in detail: she rides on a swan, wears a red garment, has prominent breasts, shines like a golden lotus, etc.

There are also many varied visual images. The earliest image that venerates her is on an earthen pot full of water, as well as a twig from the *sij* tree.[9] Later, her anthropomorphic form shows her standing on a lotus, covered with a hood of snakes. In some sculptures (10th–13th centuries) she is depicted as a beautiful lady with a third eye (Bhattacharya 1921: 55; Bhuiyan 2009: 76). In images made of Indian cork and widespread in West Bengal, and particularly in North Bengal, she looks like a snake, a lady, or a bouquet of flowers. Often she is depicted as just a beautiful lady standing on lotus. The main attributes of the image are that she has a canopy made from the hoods of snakes, and her hands and body are covered by snakes. Sometimes, she is depicted with a child on her lap.

Actually, her appearance is fluid, she escapes direct observation, often acting almost invisibly. She is the source of various types of trance, affecting humans and gods. Yet, there are several examples of long-term connections between Manasā and her devotees, both individuals and groups and although these can be fruitful, attachment to her is always a matter of risk.

There are several issues in Manasā's life story that prove how she is truly unwanted by almost everyone. Many of the biographies of mythical heroes are shadowed by mul-

tiple curses and counter-curses: Chand, in his previous life a saint Paśukor, was cursed by birds by mistake (it was a snake who ate the eggs); Behula, in a previous life an *apsāra* Ushā, was cursed to become a widow on her wedding night, etc.

The goddess's origin is a matter of occasion: once upon a time on a beautiful spring day Śiva is walking in the forest and embraces a tree, becoming suddenly aroused. His semen falls and goes under the earth, where it meets snakes and gives a birth to a girl. Her appearance from that moment is unclear: she is a snake, with features typical of snakes, but she is also 'half-goddess' (or a goddess in question) and has several supernatural abilities.

Manasā can change her image so that she looks like a beautiful girl. But now and then her snake identity is revealed. A common theme is that "she is brought in a basket", something widely quoted both in written *maṅgalkāvya* and in oral performances (FM 2002: Mainaguri) and which appears to be a way of implying a snake without directly saying so. These poetic names for the deity possibly show a mixture of two feelings towards her: deep respect, and deadly fear. The deity is very active and has always been engaged in aggressive and collaborative activities. She is extremely ambitious in her wish to establish herself as a Devī, something for which she really struggles. Her life is represented as a set of scandals, which are actually motivated by the complex of previous actions and events and which can have cultural and psychological explanations and interpretations. The first, according to the mythological narrative, is her quarrel with Caṇḍī, Śiva's wife. This occurred when Manasā, born a snake in the underground world and never seeing her father, visits the house of Śiva and is misunderstood by Caṇḍī as a possible concubine or lover. When Caṇḍī kicks her, Manasā renders her senseless with her venom. A quarrel and battle between the two ladies ensues and only with great difficulties is her status of daughter proved and accepted. Shiva made a place for Manasā under a tree, and created a companion for her from his tears of remorse, called Neto (Netā), traditionally imagined as a washerwoman. Manasā is depicted as being quite dependent on Netā for ideas and moral support.

A story about Manasā's marriage goes on to shows that she was even an unwanted bride and how no good groom was interested in marrying her. Śiva himself takes the trouble to get her married off, and finds a groom with a very specific nature, an ascetic who is not eager to be married at all. With the help of magic he is persuaded, for the wellbeing of his relatives who are no more, but because he is celibate they simply cannot marry and are instead trapped in a tree like overripe fruit that cannot fall to the ground. The morning after the wedding a quarrel breaks out between Manasā and her husband. Manasā is not willing to cook or serve and it seems that she cannot do it properly, for example giving him improperly boiled rice. The pair separate immediately, but the aim of having children has already been achieved and Manasā gives birth to six little snakes – who are not mentioned much in her life story thereafter.

She is represented as acting along after this, leading a lonely life with the help of a small number of people, such as Netā. If one can classify Hindu goddesses into two major categories, married and unmarried (often Tāntric in ritual practice), then Manasā falls out of this types, constituting a third category of divorced goddesses, an extremely un-auspiciously state according to Brahmin moral norms that is probably worse than being unmarried. This state probably is the cause for her moody, passionate and quick-tempered character, and led her sometimes to open violence.

The longest and most violent scandal that is part of the mythical narrative is about her struggle with the trader Chand Sadagar, who refused to worship her despite his wife doing so secretly. Manasā started to terrorise the family of Chand. She destroyed his property, sinking several boats full of goods and killing his six sons. Lastly, she took the challenge to enter the iron house made by Chand for his last son, Lakhindar, and survive the wedding night. Manasā bribed the workers to leave a little hole, and one snake, Kālānāg, entered and bit the poor man, who died.

The story of Behula and Lakhindar is one of great virtue and fantastic stoicism. Interestingly, according to *maṅgalkāvyas*, it starts with a fight between Manasā and the god of death Yama for the souls of two celestial persons, Ushā and Anirudha. The goddesses won, took them, and arranged their rebirth from Sumitrā and Saunakā, mothers of Behula and Lakhindar. So the future development of the story could be interpreted as a certain 'theatre' with a known scenario and result.

Behula is the main hero of the whole story. She does the impossible when she overcomes death, bringing the funeral boat upwards to the source of the river, to the city of gods, a Tāntric way, indeed. She meets gods, and specifically Śiva (her father in law Chand is a devotee of Śiva), requesting that he persuade Manasā to give back the stolen goods, the lives of the six brothers, and Lakhindar's life. Judgment is organised in the city of gods, and Behula wins. She gets Lakhindar's life, all his brothers and lost goods back. She travels back home and Chand is pressed by the female members of his family to make a *pūjā* for Manasā. So he is doing that, using his left hand.

The resolution of the myth is clear – everyone got what he or she wanted. The family is united and after horrible events and losses, peace is established, wealth, health and even life are restored. Manasā achieved her goal, her cult on earth, and made several devotees.

Since that time Manasā *pūjā* plays an important role in daily life in several areas, and is surely predominant among Rajbansis of North Bengal and several communities of Western Assam. In Assam, veneration of Monoha is part of Marai *pūjā* (in Goalpara) and part of a singing epic story (*suknāni ojha-palli*) with dance and trance of *deodhani*; it is also known in Darrang, Kokrajhar, Kamrup and Goalpara districts.

WORSHIP OF MANASĀ, POSSESSION AND/OR TRANCE

Many museum collections in India contain statues and images of Manasā as a beautiful lady adorned by snakes. However, worship of these kinds of image today is rare.

Usually there is no permanent image of Manasā in the village shrines of West Bengal and western Assam. The common method of Manasā worship is the use of a pot or pots sometimes called *Manasār-bāri*, usually plain but also engraved (Photo 2). This is the only method of her worship depicted in the epic. The pots are installed to represent the goddess and to contain donations. In some sense these pots can be compared with the *garba*, holy pots, of Gujarat, both as container and symbol of Amba Devī, and with many other local goddesses all over South Asia whose symbol is an earthen pot. Earthen anthropomorphic icons of the goddess are also known, but possibly are a late invention and an imitation of Durgā worship. Herbert Hope Risley (1891 vol 1: 41) describes the image of Manasā in the end of 19th century in the following way:

a four-armed effigy of the goddess, crowned by a tiara of snakes, grasping a cobra in each hand, and with her feet resting on a goose, is carried round the village with much discordant music; and finally thrown into a tank.

Manasā is also worshiped emblematically as a branch of the *sij* tree, and in stones usually placed under these trees. The evolution of Manasā's image from aniconic to anthropomorphic was studied by Bhuiyan (2009).

Places for worship are different and could be inside the house (in the kitchen or near ovens or hearths), or in the open air near trees (*sij*, banyan, fig, *tulsī*) and sometimes near rivers.

In both North Bengal and West Assam Manasā *pūjā* is performed in village shrines called *gharam-tān* just outside the house. This can be a small earthen patch, or a small hut left empty until the day of worship, when Monośa-*monduś*, temporary images of the godess, are installed.

Photo 2. Monośa ghot*, from Bankura district, West Bengal. Collected by the author in 2002.*

Manasā can be represented in the form of flowers, or as a lady holding, and surrounded by, snakes. In the famous Kāmākhyā temple near Guwahati there is a place to worship Manasā just in front of the primary entrance to the main shrine, but originally there was no idol there, just as there is no anthropomorphic idol at Kāmākhyā. Once a year, from the last day of the month of Śravana until the second day of the month of Bhadra a festival, sometimes called *devadhavni utsav* (Baruah 2018: 103) takes place here, as part of which *deodha*, male devotee of gods and goddesses, their *janki* (Assamese *jank* 'a state of possession by deity'), or *ghoṛa*, 'a horse for gods to ride', vehicles, dance ecstatically. The participants are people of various origins, often of a very low rank in society. They prepare for this festival for at least one month. For the three days of festivity they come and dance wildly, at which time they can see the future. (Baruah 2018: 259).

As with other deities of West Bengal, Manasā is evoked in the form of painted scrolls, visual representation of the myth along with recitation of the story as both worship and entertainment. The artists who paint these scrolls originate from various districts in West Bengal, particularly Birbhum and Malda. They are mobile, wandering from village to village, selling their scrolls and pictures in markets.

There are permanent shrines to Manasā in North Bengal and Assam. One is near to the Vaśiṣṭha cave and temple complex on the border of Guwahati town. Interestingly, the whole space is located in the forest on the rocks and bank of the river. Snake worship must have been performed here without any permanent construction, which has been arranged recently. Tree worship with notes aimed at fulfilling wishes, particularly

childbirth, is an essential part of any visit here. Other Manasā temples seem to be buildings constructed in the traditionally outdoor fashion, playing host to occasional rites. In a remote village in Darrang district I visited a permanent Manasā shrine constructed and owned by one family (Photo 3). For them, she is so-to-say an *iṣṭa-devī*, a 'favourite, beloved goddess'. Here the Manasā idol has been made recently and installed in a small hut; meanwhile construction of a bigger, cement, building to serve as a temple is ongoing. The *pūjā* is performed by a priest (*pūjaris*), while on a daily basis male members of the family worship the deity. I was allowed *darśan*, auspicious sight of the deity, but no photo or video was allowed, even outside the hut. This was not to protect the sacredness of the idol from possible harm, but rather, as I was told, on the contrary, to protect me:

> She can kill you. She is maybe wrong, but she does not care. Nobody knows, what one can expect from her! […] She is like our mother. She is alive! We always come and tell her everything. We report when we are going to leave the village for some time, or when we are back. (FM 2018: Darrang)

Photo 3. Rajendra Nath Ojha and Mr. Sharma, owner of Monoha temple in Darrang district. Photo by the author in 2018.

Monośa-*pūjā* has several important elements: *ghat-sthapon*, installation of pots, *aśunbośun*, invocation and welcome, narration of the Monośa's story by Monośa *gidal* (in North Bengal) or *ojhā* (in West Assam), which includes in some cases trance, especially during a Behula dance (Behula *natch*). This dance always includes a collaboration of both male and female performers and a dancer lady who becomes possessed, or *deodhani*. *Ojhā* and *gidal* sing, dance little bit, narrate, at the same time doing meaningful hand gestures, compulsory for the ritual of the invocation. These hand movements also

have some specific qualities in that they can bring a dancer into trance, and take her out again later.

An extensive study of the *deodhani* tradition in Western Assam was carried out by folklorist Purabi Baruah (2018), who collected rich ethnographic material and undertook a fundamental analysis. In in her hometown Tezpur in November 2018 we discussed the phenomenon of trance and spirit possession, as well as their relationship with the Manasā story. Trance is an unavoidable part of Manasā worship. Both in myth and in ritual we observe several trances, which are narrated and in some cases are regularly performed, although in storytelling and in rituals they differ.

According to fieldwork material collected by Baruah (2018: 152), in Māre (Marai) *pūjā* in Mondolgram, Goalpara district, Assam, there is the practice of *Dokot pora*[10] – five states of trance, which are enacted and performed over the three nights of the *pūjā*. Five states of trance were also extracted from the Manasā myth: *phool dok* is enacted to recollect the moment when Śiva's wife, Caṇḍī, while collecting flowers in a garden, became tired and then unconscious, and is woken only by Śiva; *durgā dok*, when Caṇḍī or Durgā became unconscious and was attacked by Manasā, or Padmāvatī, turning into a snake; *gohai dok*, Śiva's trance when he fell down because of Manasā's poisonous gaze; *sāya-māya dok*, which reflects the moment when Lakhindar fell down during his wedding ceremony because of the presence of Manasā; and *Lokhi dok*, which depicts the death of Lakhindar due to the attack of snake Kālināg at Merghor. (Baruah 2018: 143–145) These trances are performed by *deodhanis*, although today their number is few – in several districts where earlier this tradition was very widespread (such as Darrang district, Assam) they have almost disappeared. In November 2018 I documented *suknāni ojha-palli*, performed by Rajendra Nath Ojha. This expedition was organised in collaboration with Lopamudra Das, an investigator of the *ojha-palli* tradition. We did not spot a single real *deodhani* in the whole district, although the performance of the *deodhani* dance as an imitation of trance was performed by a young lady. The practice of bringing *deodhani* dance on stage has been widespread in Assam since the 1990s – I interviewed several ladies in their 40s and 50s (and a few younger) who perform the dance. Today the *ojha* often invites not real *deodhanis*, who become possessed, but rather dancers to perform this ritual. Baruah says (FM 2018: Tezpur) that the social attitude towards real *deodhani* is very bad and these ladies are largely frustrated and feel that they are outcasts. It was very difficult to perform ethnographic research with them due to their lack of communication and unwillingness to tell their life stories and it took two years for her to achieve a certain level of trust.

I presume that these cases of narrated trance are not really possession. People in those trances are passive, they just lose consciousness or are intoxicated. The state of trance here is a symbol of Manasā's power in different circumstances and venues. Those trances emerge as a result of poisoning, where death also appears as one type of poison. All states of trance including death are temporary and uncertain. Trance is a very strange element of worship, although it is included in Māre *pūjā* as an enactment of the myth narration.

Apart from trance intoxications, one more trance type appears is in the story of Manasā, the origin of the peculiar Behula dance. In fact, this particular dance, and not the other trance dances, constitutes the repertoire of the dancers who just imitate trance for both ritualistic purposes, as I documented in Darrang district (Photo 4), as well as

for presentation on the professional stage. In a court of the gods Behula narrated the whole story of Chand's family and misfortunes. After that, as I was told by my informants in Guwahati (FM 2018: Guwahati), she was asked to perform a dance in front of the gods.[11] She unravelled her hair and started moving her head, waving it clockwise as if doing a certain *āratī*, offering of light to a deity. She was dancing an ecstatic dance, moving vigorously – all the sorrow, sadness and trouble she had experienced in the past were concentrated, and found a resolution, in this dance by Behula, a widow who on her wedding night brought her husband's dead body to the city of the gods. She became known as Sati Behula – 'real, truthful wife Behula'. In the story Behula was in a highly liminal position: widowed on her wedding night, she did not actually accept her status as widow. Rather, she believed, as Sāvitrī did, that the death of her husband was unfair and could be overcome. This trance was voluntary, aimed at the resolution of this situation, but it is also quite uncertain. Behula is very active. One more thing has to be remembered here, i.e. that according to myth, Behula is just a human manifestation of the heavenly dancer Ushā, and so this dance can be the most precise representation of her real identity. Interestingly, in the Bengali version of the myth by Gupta (1992: 91), Manasā also appears as a dancer before Chand in order to take away his chastity and great knowledge.

Photo 4. Imitation of an ecstatic deodhani *dance during a recitation of the Manasā story in Darrang district, Assam. Photo by the author in 2018.*

All trance types, the five *dok*, and the Behula dance, are manifestations of crisis. They are moments of extreme uncertainty, turning points that are pivotal to how the story will develop. There are only two people in the whole story who are not possessed: Manasā herself, and Behula, who appears to be the only adequate opponent of the goddess. Ultimately, Behula is the alter ego of Manasā: she can win precisely because she possess certain – better – qualities of the *devī*. Interestingly, the myth is sometimes named after Behula and Lakhindar, as the main heroes. Ultimately, this is the power of Behula: her devotion, patience and actions, including dance, became the transformative force that makes the unwanted Manasā wanted, welcome (although in the case of Chand this came about under pressure).

A common statement about both the cult and worship of Manasā is that they have a Tāntric outlook. Pradyot Kumar Maity (2001 [1966]: 68) says, "folk tales of Bengal, originated between the 8th to 12th centuries did not escape from Tāntric influences". Yet the question remains, what exactly does Tāntric mean – a relation to a particular *kula*, lineage, a particular vocabulary, or something else? According to my informants, it is mainly the miraculous abilities of Manasā, and as it turned out, Behula that makes the myth and its application Tāntric. For the majority of the village Rajbansis and the Assamies of Darrang and Goalpara districts, with whom I talked, Tāntrism means miraculous actions, particularly a strong divine protection and interplay between freedom (it is not caste-based and is gender flexible) and discipline. Maity (2001 [1966]: 69) rightly observes that the crucial aspect of the Tāntric approach is an "immortal, unconquerable salvation through individual effort" and the concept of Mahājñāna.

MANASĀ AS A GODDESS: WAYS TO BE HER DEVOTEE

The establishing of Manasā as a goddess constitutes a specific and very crucial problem for her cult. Its evolved, as analysed by Maity (2001 [1966]), developed from a local deity worship by cowherds, fishermen and several farmers castes,[12] particularly venerated by women of various lower classes, later picked up by women of upper castes. Sanakā, a wife of Chand, came to know about Manasā after visiting house of the fishermen Jālu and Mālu, from where she took home sacred pots and began to worship secretly the deity along with her six daughters-in-law. Sumitrā, a mother of Behula, also worshiped Manasā. Lastly, upper class men joint this worship, what went with much difficulties, as the whole story of Chand Sadagar clearly shows. Eventually Chand worshiped her not as gratitude for the resurrection of her sons, but only after his vision of the similarity between Caṇḍi, or Durga, and Manasā. The divine spouse of Śiva revealed before him this identity. Maity (2001 [1966]: 181) notes that in East Bengal the popularity of Manasā only grew because of this identification with the higher Brahmanic gods. The power of the goddess increased with the increasing number of devotees and the social 'promotion' of the snake goddess.

The questions that should now be asked are who is supposed to be an adept of Manasā? Why should people worship Manasā? Why be her devotee?

According to Maity (2001 [1966]: 319), historically the increase in local deities such as Manasā might have occurred during medieval times because of the decline in high

Hindu cults that occurred with the Muslim invasion of Bengal. Yet, the relationship of Manasā with the lower classes of society remained constant, and continues today.

The reasons to worship Manasā, as my informants say, are manifold. She blesses people with wealth; her blessings are invoked during marriage, and later in the case of childlessness; she is supposed to be a rain giver, which puts her in another category of ancient agricultural deities; she cures people of snakebites, which is her direct domain; she treats bails, burns, wounds, skin complaints; she is supposed to be able to cure blindness and leprosy (Maity 2001 [1966]: 173); and last but not least, particularly in Birbhum, Bankura and Murshidabad districts (ibid.: 250), she is worshiped to avert epidemics such as cholera and smallpox.

She is also known as Śītalā, or Śītalā is supposed to be her 'sister', as mentioned above. Some of her names, such as Māraki, Morakī, Mārāi, Māreyī, are widespread in West Bengal, while Mārai or Marai in Assam are possibly derivations from Māri, Mari – 'pestilence', 'plague'. Maity (ibid.: 266–267) says, "in Assam Manasa is worshiped there by the name Marai only when an epidemic breaks out".

Marai (Māre) *pūjā* among the Bodo is perhaps one of the few cases of an extended and elaborated Manasā-*pūjā*, going on for three or four days and including trance and possession. It is not a hidden ceremony, but still quite intimate.

According to my observation, worship of Manasā encompass two types of rite: *nitya*, constant, fixed to a calendar, and *kāmya*, based on request. The only common time to worship snakes in India, including Manasā worship, is Nāgapanchami, the fifth day of the month of Śravana (Bengali Śrabon), which falls in July. Bengali women observe a fast (see McDaniel 2002) on this day and offer milk at snake holes. The rationality behind this worship might be related to the fact that during the monsoon snakes come out of the forests and move closer to the houses. However, in certain places, such as North Bengal, Manasā *pūjā* can be performed at any time. Rajbansis, Bodo and Assamese consider Manasā to be an extremely important goddess, although very dangerous.

Despite a certain Brahmanisation, in West Bengal Manasā is still worshiped more commonly among the lower castes, and predominantly by women. Her priests, *deyasi*,[13] originate from non-Brahman communities.

Worship of Manasā in North Bengal is generally family oriented: other people are not invited much. Certainly, it is not a public affair. According to my informants, worship can be as short as four hours, and is usually no longer than one night. The reasons for this are manifold: among Rajbansis it could be marriage, birth, any serious occasion mainly aimed at the prosperity of the family. Manasā turns out to be a guardian deity of the family – even if worshiped secretly and by only one woman, she is relevant to the whole family.

CONCLUSION

My research into the myth and cult of the goddess Manasā allows me to make the following conclusions.

The story of Manasā is very unusual compared to other deities. Although the authors of the various versions of the mythological narratives, i.e. poets, tellers of folk stories

and other adepts of her cult, are sure of Manasā's divine status, her story is often one of scandal, conflict and the achievement of divinity despite many problems.

I argue that Manasā is sometimes a questionable goddess in that she is not worshiped by everyone, rather by people of specific low castes – even Śiva's adepts are quite often unwilling to worship her. Chand's worship of Manasā, according to some informants, was worship of Caṇḍī/Durgā once he realised the common identity of the two goddesses. Chand can resist Manasā because he is protected by Śiva; despite all the calamities he remains unconquerable and was touched by immortality.

Manasā is a composite deity, a result of a synthesis of several cults of snakes and village deities, with elements of Śaktism, Śaivaism and possibly Tāntrism. The goddess perhaps absorbed different cults of various origins and functions, the variety of names and epithets proving Manasā's complicated, multilevel nature.

Manasā represents a fluidity between deities, witches and human beings, both at the level of myth and cult. Her various attricutes as one who is worshiped before marriage, as an object of veneration at the annual festival of Nāgapanchami, as one who can cure, etc., might have come from different former deities. Eventually she became one of the local goddesses, *ammas*, who are always powerful. She is 'hot' and actively intervenes in humans matters. She kills, but she also performs miracles and fulfils wishes. Miraculous abilities and actions are specific features developed by adepts of Manasā: Sumitra can boil iron pills, Behula performs miracles.

The goddess is terrible and confusing in her activity: she can kill and can restore any human creation, she can increase fertility and prosperity, and can destroy; even divine beings are in danger. Votive and promissory offerings to apply for her aid in overcoming danger and to obtain desired objects is the most relevant way to deal with her.

There are several ways to interpret the myth, from the model of folk belief to an elaborated Brahmanic system. Snakes are among the most ancient creations supposed to be dangerous for humans; they are the object of fear, the fear of death in particular. An apparent contradiction, a combination of both healing and destructive forces lies at the centre of the Manasā myth. Manasā is a personification of death and fear, a crucial role that is behind the popularity of the both cult and epic.

Mythological narrative is an important part of the Manasā cult and is essential for every worship. While listening to the story, everyone can figure out his or her alter-ego in it and identity themselves: both divine and human beings are equally active and closely intertwined here.

The role of Behula is particularly important. In many areas the story is known not as a story of Manasā, but rather as a story of Behula and Lakhindar – human counter-agents to the deity. Manasā, who creates obstacles and problems, and Behula, who overcomes them and wins, possess similar features and have the same nature. Interestingly, the story ends with a double victory: Behula gets what she wants after her visit to the City of gods and judgment arranged by Śiva, and Manasā's wish to establish a fully-fledged cult on Earth is also fulfilled.

The walking on the edge always was and still is a part of all contact with this deity. She is marginal in all senses – origin, locality, family matters, she is not intelligent and is dependent on her laundress Netā, although she is a genius in corruption and evil; actually she is mad, as are several other deities (see McDaniel 1989).

The health, wealth and family, as well as possession, trance and intoxication are at the centre of Manasā's cult and rituals. According to the narratives, and to ritualistic practice, and as with evil that is paradoxically productive, Manasā at the same time is, and remains, welcomed and unwanted. It does not matter how dangerous she is, Manasā is needed. Her story and cult constitute a peculiar local knowledge system, directly aimed at overcoming and transforming mundane life crises. This seems especially relevant in today's global crisis related to a new virus. Let us see what will happen to the cult of Manasā.

NOTES

1 Sanskrit *āviṣṭa* 'possessed [by spirits]', *āveṣa* '[spirit]possession'.

2 The cult of Śītalā as a protector of children and women, who saves them from the effects and fear of poxes, fevers and disorders, as well as all sorts of new threats such as global pandemics, addictions and environmental catastrophes was analysed in detail by Fabrizio M. Ferrari (2010; 2015).

3 Asutosh Bhattacharyya (1977: 153) believes the cult of the snake goddess Manasā originated from one source, in Birbhum district. He describes in detail other districts in eastern India and shows that her cult appears in several places from Assam to Punjab to Odisha. It is not equally popular everywhere in Bengal; in Malda district, for instance, it is widespread in some place but lacking in others. It is well known in Radh Bengal. The number of *Manasātala* or *Manasābari* (shrines or 'houses' of the deity, simple huts with mud walls) is really large in the Birbhum area, much more than in any other neighbouring districts. For a more detailed study of the evolution of the goddess, see Maity 2001 [1966].

4 See about the worship of Manasā *devī* in Rarh Bengal in general in Maitra 2008.

5 Thick narratives written in both prose and verse with various stories and myths, where the main focus is on the deeds of a particular deity in order to win their blessing.

6 This feature, and several other attributes, links Manasā with Saraswatī, who holds a music instrument called a *vīna*. Manasā, Saraswatī and Lakṣmī are all seated on a lotus (Bhattacharya 1921). Some Buddhist female images are also similar to Manasā (Bhattacharyya 1993 [1924]).

7 Also *ojhā* or *oja-pāli*.

8 In his 2015 book, Kaiser Haq, professor of English at the University of Dhaka and a poet, retells a composite prose translation of Manasā's story based on five extant versions of *maṅgalkāvyas*.

9 *Euphorbia lingulari*, *snuhi* in Sanskrit. In Birbhum and some other areas also locally known as Manasā's tree.

10 *Dok* or *dak* < *dankhan* 'bites', *parā* 'to be asleep'.

11 According to Maity 2001 [1966]: 140–142, there is a version (expressed by Kshiti Mohan Sen and a few other scholars) that also proves the the origin of the myth is in South India because the practice of pleasing the gods with dance is supposedly not typical to Bengal but rather a characteristic of Telugu areas. However, Maity does not supports this version.

12 Manasā is a tutelary goddess for Bagdi, Bauri, Māl and some others, and a village deity for fishermen groups in West Bengal (Maity 2001 [1966]: 273 and elsewhere).

13 Also *dyasi*, *deośi* or *devamśi* (possibly from the Sanskrit *devavāsī* 'who is associated/stays with/to gods').

SOURCES

FM – fieldwork material collected by the author. The article includes citations from fieldwork carried out by the author in the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Gujarat.
FM 2002; 2003; 2004 and 2006 = fieldwork in North Bengal (Jalpaiguri and Kuch-Behar districts of West Bengal). The informants were Dinesh Ray, Dipti Ray, Dilip Barba, Srimonto Mali, Sibapada Bhowmick, Jotindranath Ray, Shurendranath Ray, Dokuru Ray, Mukunda Ray, Aloka Ray, Arikdronath Ray Goshal, Promot Odhikari, Ganeshwar Odhikari.
FM 2018: Darrang = fieldwork in Darrang district, Western Assam, performed with Lopamudra Das (from Guwahati) and including talks and interviews with Rajendranath Ojha, Prafula Sharma, Sabitri Saikia.
FM 2018: Guwahati = Interviews with Jatin and Seujprija Goswamy Guwahati in Assam.
FM 2018: Tezpur = Interviews with Dr Purabi Baruah.
FM 2018: Irana = Interviews with Arpan Shobhana Naayak and many residents of Irana village, Gujarat.

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