

BEATRIX HAUSER

How to Fast for a Good Husband? On Ritual Imitation and Embodiment in Orissa

Once in a year, girls in southern Orissa observe Jahni Osa, an extensive votive rite in honour of goddess Brundabati.¹ Her worship lasts for the duration of a month. It unites the girls of a street who for this occasion create a temporary altar at one suitable semi-public site in their neighbourhood. This ritual is commonly known as an attempt "to get a good husband" and is therefore repeated several times until a girl's marriage. At the beginning of the 21st century, many participants did not believe in the purpose and efficacy of this votive rite. They performed Jahni Osa with mixed feelings, if not as mere imitation of what they considered as tradition (*parampara*). In local discourse, this attitude was understood as a result of raising female education and as a negative side effect of globalization. From this perspective, girls in earlier times did not reflect on the meaning of this votive rite. Their sincere devotion rather than convention had motivated the performance. In any case, there is no historical data to verify this hypothesis. Considering the practice of child marriage prevailing in the Orissan countryside until recent decades, one might assume that the participants of Jahni Osa were at least young enough to approach the ritual in a playful manner. Conversely, doubts about the effectiveness of a ritual to get a good husband could be observed already in the early 1960s, yet among urban girls in Calcutta.² No matter, in what respect the attitude towards Jahni Osa and its performance might have changed, in this essay I shall approach its contestation from another angle.

Recent anthropological theorizing on ritual practice in South Asia has shown that a critical or even uninformed perspective on the significance of a

Since this essay deals with ritual practices in Orissa, the spelling of Indian terms follows local pronunciation. Therefore names of deities might appear slightly different from their Hindi or Sanskrit counterpart (Brundabati instead of Vrindavati, Krusna instead of Krisna etc.).

² There is a similar Bengali ritual to get a good husband (Siba Brata). During the fieldwork of Roy (1972: 38) in the early 1960s, girls in Calcutta openly discussed their doubts about the aim and effectiveness of this votive rite.

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ritual does not enforce its abandonment. Devotees rather consider and also invent a variety of interpretations in order to make sense of their own ritual performance. Starting from this observation, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994) propose to understand ritual as a particular *mode* of action rather than a kind of event.³ According to their theory, rituals are defined by a certain personal attitude and awareness of its participants ("ritual commitment"), i.e. a particular stance with respect to one's action. Following Humphrey and Laidlaw's thinking, the crucial point seems to be by what (observable and culturally situated) operations rituals become credible. That is not to consider the success of a ritual literally, if this could be estimated at all. Rather the focus turns to the process of embodiment, i.e. the psychophysical participation in rituals in its capacity to bring about a sense of truth, well-being and trust that encourages performers and others to undergo the ritual procedure at another apt occasion (or conversely, a process that reveals one's action as meaningless, annoying and inappropriate). This process certainly interests in case of explicit believers. Yet some rituals contradict the ratio and pragmatics of everyday life easily and for various reasons raise doubts. In this case, ritual commitment seems to be an emergent result rather than a precondition of action. Keeping this in mind, I shall focus on the performance of Jahni Osa although the participants do not (appear to) take it serious.

Central to my investigation are the effects of this ritual performance with respect to the emergence of credibility. I am interested in the ways young women make sense of their observance of Jahni Osa. From this angle, I consider the ritual as a body practice that contributes not only towards a religious feeling (belief) but also to the production of female identity, i.e. how young women think and feel about themselves as gendered beings. How does the performance of this ritual influence adolescent girls in their search for an appropriate example of maturity? Does the pious and devote image of a woman, as perpetuated by the discourse on Jahni Osa, compete with the desire for love (marriage) or alternative role models that are not at all based on the institution of marriage? To what extent do the intentions to perform the ritual vary, and how does this influence its experience? On the basis of a case study in southern Orissa, I shall evaluate how girls reflect on their observance of Jahni Osa and what they attain through their ritual activity.⁴

³ Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994.

⁴ The data evaluated in this paper were gathered during anthropological fieldwork in and around the city of Berhampur, southern Orissa. During 1999 and 2000 I joined seven different groups performing Jahni Osa. Their social status could be stereotyped as (1) "urban/middle class/high caste", (2) "urban/upper class/Brahmin", (3) "rural/high caste", (4)

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It will turn out that Jahni Osa is not only understood as a ritual limiting teenagers to a very specific gender role but that the participants are fascinated by their new social recognition as women. Girls are given the responsibility for the independent performance of a class of rituals (so-called votive rites) that make them agents to secure the well-being of others, most prominently their own prospective family. In this sense, Jahni Osa serves as a site for the somatic realization of ritual agency as perpetuated by the Hindu discourse on gender. The performance of rituals allows already young girls to frame and legitimize their activities in terms of religion and hence to follow their interest in such a way that cannot be denied by social superiors. To do so, however, means to reconcile oneself to the traditional female role model. With respect to the somatic process initiated and sustained by the performance of Jahni Osa, I suggest that the mere psychophysical participation in this ritual creates a kind of bodily memory that constitutes some resonating background against which the action itself becomes meaningful and valid. In this respect, the imitation of Jahni Osa to please one's family differs not fundamentally, but only gradually from its sincere observance. I argue that the contestation of Jahni Osa as a Hindu ritual results considerably from the novelty of this religious practice in the biography of its performers. It is the first time that girls assess the idea of female ritual agency through their own lived-in bodies, an experience that might be deepened by the observance of other votive rites after marriage.

Votives Rites in Hinduism

There is a wide range of religious activities to be followed by Hindu women. Basically, they take care of the house altar, the family deity and ancestral spirits. They prepare the offerings and other ingredients for the conduct of life cycle rituals and seasonal Hindu festivals. Women may visit nearby temples and also go on a pilgrimage. However, in the northern half of the Indian subcontinent, the paradigm of female religiosity is the performance of votive rites (Skt.: *vrata*).⁵ The term *vrata* (Oriya: *brata*), literally promise, refers to a par-

"rural/multi caste", (5) "urban/untouchable", (6) "urban/multi caste", (7) "urban/multi caste/lower class". The participant observation was followed by narrative interviews with some of the devotees. Their statements were verified by discussions with other women. The perspective of those girls who avoided the performance of Jahni Osa, however, is not central to my argument.

⁵ Several studies show the popularity of votive rites in different regions: see Fruzetti 1982 (Bengal), Gupta 1999 (Bengal), McDaniel 2003 (Bengal), McGee 1987, 1991 (Maharashtra), Tewari 1991 (Uttar Pradesh) and Wadley 1980 (Uttar Pradesh).

ticular set of rituals initiated by the formal decision of a devotee and performed to attain some (rather wordly) goal. These sets are differentiated and named according to the deity addressed, the time and procedure of worship, as well as corresponding food restrictions. Due to these dietary measures, these sets of rituals are also known as fasts (Skt.: *upavasa*, Oriya: *osa*). Although from the perspective of religious scholars there is a slight difference in the meaning and performance of a „vow“ and respectively a „fast“, women use these terms as synonyms. Moreover, the colloquial Oriya designation *osa-brata* does not require any further distinction. Which votive rite is to be called by either of these names depends on convention.⁶

There are a great number of votive rites distributed throughout the year. Each (lunar) month, each weekday and other regular dates of the Hindu calendar (for instance full moon) have their suitable votive rite, some limited to half a day, others lasting up to one month. Some are carried out alone, some are observed in a group of up to twenty persons. Most of them are intended for married participants, some for unmarried girls and some for elder women (after menopause) and widows. While some votive rites are limited to a certain stage in life, others are performed yearly or, contrarily, only once in a lifetime. In this respect, the performance of votive rites reflects the seasonal as well as the biographical rhythm. An Oriya manual lists altogether 83 different types of *osa-brata*.⁷ Some of them are hardly known at the turn of the century, others have merely regional importance. In any case, most women consider only a selection of these *osa-brata*, corresponding to their personal liking, family tradition and social circumstances (and hence also caste). After all, the performance of votive rites has to be arranged in accordance with other duties, whether household chores or office hours.

In the academic (and also feminist) discourse on South Asia, the performance of votive rites is a highly ambivalent issue. First of all, they constitute a primarily female religious practice for the benefit of men. Their purpose is often the long life of a husband, the protection of sons or the welfare of brothers.⁸ In this respect, the celebration of Karvacauth seems to be the model of a *vrata*. On this day, out of devotion for her husband (*pati*) a wife worships him like a god and also washes his feet with sacred water.⁹ This votive rite is

⁶ In English publications this class of rituals is also termed "votive observances", "domestic rituals" or "fasts and festivals".

⁷ Misra 1994.

⁸ Certain votive rites are also intended for male performers, yet their aim is not the well-being of women, see McDaniels 2003: 97-104.

⁹ On the concept of *pativrata* see also McGee 1991:78.

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known all over North India, its Orissan equivalent is celebrated as Somnath Brata. While several scholars understand votive rites as a symbol of a wife's submission that exemplifies orthodox Hindu doctrine, there are different interpretations as to how women themselves consider this situation. According to Sanjukta Gupta, women seem to incorporate a brahminical male bias. Hence the frequent observance of a fast would serve as a female strategy to overcome and compensate pollution.¹⁰ A more pragmatic view is sketched out by Laxmi Tewari: "Since a woman's happiness indeed depends mainly on her male relatives, the performance of rituals in favour of their prosperity, good health and kind-heartedness made absolute sense." Other authors claim that women follow these votive observances mainly for themselves.¹¹ It gave them the opportunity to express personal faith and to engage in devotion to god.

A related point of discussion concerns the voluntariness of votive rites. According to Hindu theology, a *vrata* offers men and women alike the option to look after their own spiritual development without leaving their family relations behind. In this respect, votive observances are considered optional. Yet Mary McGee has shown that this view contrasts with women's own experiences.¹² At her research site in Maharashtra, they perceived the performance of votive rites as *stridharma*, i.e. their (religious) duty as wives and mothers for the welfare of their male kin. If women are said to be responsible for the (possibly bad) fate of a family, they are indeed bound to care for their self-presentation as pious wives. This is particularly relevant in case of a joint family household. There the control of other women forces the regular performance of votive rites.¹³ After all, most women do not learn about a *vrata* through studying Sanskrit scriptures but by the means of oral transmission from their mother, aunts and later their (female) in-laws. Besides, there are several devotional booklets available in the market. On about ten to thirty pages they inform about the required prayers, hymns and also the legend (*hatha*) that explains how women came to observe a particular votive rite.¹⁴

Another issue in the academic discourse on votive rites deals with their classification and religious significance. On the one hand, they are hardly recognized as a ritual practice equivalent to other Hindu types of worship. Some scholars rather consider them as folklore, taking into account the often highly

¹⁰ Gupta 1999:96.

¹¹ Tewari 1991:16-17.

¹² See Freeman 1980:126.

¹³ McGee 1991:73-74.

¹⁴ According to Tewari (1991: 18) the rise of nuclear families contributes to the declining popularity of votive rites.

On the relevance of devotional literature for the conduct of a ritual see Hauser 2004a.

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elaborated aesthetic form.¹⁶ Although I would agree on the visual and oral richness of votive rites, this category underplays their religious relevance to women. On the other hand, the performance of votive rites is conceived of as a subversive religious expression. According to Pupul Jayakar (1989), a *vrata* offers a sort of cultural resistance to brahminical domination since it can be performed independent of temples and male priests.¹⁷ This argument seems to be underpinned by the attempt of religious scholars to make a distinction between "fasts" as folk (*Jokika*) practice and "vows" that are recognized in Sanskrit scriptures — and hence show their inability to deal with this religious practice beyond their control.¹⁸ Kunja Behari Dash even suggests that the differentiation of women's rituals is rather arbitrary and hence shows the socio-political interest of priests who may "exploit" certain local forms of worship "greedy of fees and good dinner".¹⁹ Some votives rites indeed require a Brahmin to conduct the main ritual. Moreover, the observance of these rites does not only imply the abstinence from ordinary foods but also the offering of particular cakes and delicacies that are later distributed among the participants. Hence it cannot be generalized whether the performance of votive rites gives "active control of events", as Susan Wadley suggests, or rather contributes to women's submission.²⁰ The quality of its experience seems to be highly dependent on personal expectations and framing, the performative circumstances as well as the context of interpretation.

The Performance of Jahni Osa

Jahni Osa is embedded in this South Asian tradition of votive rites. Its performance is limited to Orissa and specifically popular in the southern part where it is observed by both Oriya and Telugu speaking girls of the age of ten to twenty-five years.²¹ It is usually the first *osa-brata* in a woman's ritual bi-

Votive rites require the creation of wall and floor paintings, of ritual objects shaped out of clay, foods or kitchen utensils, and also the transmission of verbal arts.

¹⁷ Jayakar 1989:117-118.

¹⁸ See Raut 1988:73.

¹⁹ Dash 1991: 107.

²⁰ Wadley 1980:109.

²¹ In publications on Orissa, there is very little reference to Jahni Osa. Only recently, the actual performance of this votive rite was considered a topic worth of investigation. In her dissertation, Tokita-Tanabe (1999: 35-37) discussed the performance of votive rites in central Orissa and also focused on Jahni Osa. Besides, several authors refer to Jahni Osa songs and legends as if they dealt with timeless social and historical facts (for instance see Dash 1991: 114 and Raut 1988: 82). In the same manner, this votive rite is described in Oriya

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ography and followed by several others in later years. Although the observance of Jahni Osa conveys a particular local flavour, it has some parallels with religious practices followed in other parts of India. On the one hand, it corresponds to similar votive rites that are performed to get a good husband, like Siba Brata in Bengal.²² On the other hand, it reflects the popular worship of *tulasi*, the Indian basil plant that is considered all over the subcontinent to personify a goddess. Hindu women adore this sacred plant, which is commonly grown on a small platform in the courtyard of their house.²³ *Tulasi* leaves are considered to be very pure and serve as offerings, to avoid evil spirits and as home remedy for many forms of sickness. Goddess Tulasi is associated with the male deities Narayana, Krsna and Jagannatha.

The celebration of Jahni Osa is scheduled in the Hindu month of *aswina* (September-October). It promotes an extensive worship of goddess Brundabati, a manifestation of Tulasi. About five to fifteen girls from one neighbourhood join to construct a temporary altar where they pray to the goddess twice a day, from the first to the last day of the month. The main worship (*puja*)²⁴ place in the evening and may last for one to two hours. Throughout the month, girls who observe Jahni Osa have to be particularly strict to maintain ritual purity. To qualify their body, they also abstain from certain foods like meat, fish, eggs, garlic, onions and others. It is completely forbidden to cut, prepare or eat ridge gourd (*jahni*). Although the blossoms of this gourd vegetable are essential for the performance of Jahni Osa — literally the ridge gourd-fast — girls are not allowed to pluck them (instead they are given to the girls on request).

Jahni Osa is celebrated at an open space, for instance a terrace or some other (semi-) public site that achieves religious status for the duration of this month. The place consists of a small altar with a basil plant (*tulasi chaura*), a circle of sacred pots (*kumbha*) and several other ritual items. The daily maintenance and arrangement of this site constitutes a major part of the evening ritual. It serves to invite the goddess. First, the floor has to be purified and covered with red soil. This base is decorated with abstract and floral ornaments (*jhuti*) made of coloured rice powder. The centre is reserved for a highly decorated pot of raw clay that contains the basil plant. It is raised on a

manuals for prospective devotees (like Misra 1994: 81-84). Yet most girls who observe Jahni Osa simply keep a small booklet with the relevant songs, prayers, hymns and stories. It is regularly reprinted and sold in the local market (*Jahni osa ba Tulasi puja katha*).

²² On the performance of Siba Brata see Gupta 1999: 94, McDaniel 2003: 32 and Roy 1972:37.

²³ On the mythology and altars related to the worship of Tulasi in Orissa see Huyler 1994.

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small platform and surrounded by the sacred pots. At the beginning of the month, every girl who aims to join Jahni Osa has to contribute and consecrate one of them. In front of the *tulasi* plant, girls place a small wooden pedestal, heap up some sand and put sacred betel nuts inside.²⁴ All other items required for the *puja* are kept in the front: a small basket, a booklet with songs, a bowl of curd, milk with rice grains, cowry shells, a bell etc. The whole area is decorated with *jhani* and other kinds of flowers. Vermilion and sandalwood (paste) serve to draw auspicious signs. Fruits, puffed rice, cakes and other sweets are arranged on special plates, ready to be offered to the deity. Finally, small earthen oil lamps (*dipa*) are lit and also some incense sticks. The participants sit down in front of the altar and start the evening ritual with the auspicious uttering of *hulahuli*, a shrill sound that characterizes female ways of worship.

The procedure of the ritual can be divided into three, fairly consecutive but usually intermingling parts: Firstly the singing of Jahni Osa songs and associated religious hymns, secondly the enactment of mythological episodes, and thirdly the presentation of offerings and other general features that characterize a Hindu *puja*.

(1) In the beginning of the evening one girl personifies and concentrates on Brundabati.²⁵ She will fold her hands in a prayer and balance a basket on her head, including a small burning *dipa* and several *jahni* blossoms. The remaining group fans smoke of glowing resin (*jhuna*) towards her face and sings why and how one should celebrate Jahni Osa. A total of five songs narrate several incidents when the votive rite was *not* performed properly, either due to mistakes or because a girl was ridiculed and prohibited to participate in the worship. Out of anger, the goddess had sent a deadly snake, made hands to cripple and employed other forms of punishment so that people realized her power. The verses stress that a girl's own wish to worship Tulasi is a legitimate concern that cannot be denied by anybody without serious consequences. Additional prayers and hymns highlight the religious significance of Tulasi, of related sacred plants (like *jahni*) and deities, particularly goddess Mangala. The girls call on the glory of Brundabati and request her to save them from disease and widowhood, and also to answer their desire for prosperity and a place in heaven.

This arrangement suggests that the betel nuts represent deities. Yet there was no agreement as to which gods they represented. Mostly, they were identified as Jaganatha, Subhadra and Balaram, others claimed that they signified Krusna, Tulasi and Baruna.

²⁵ Like all the other ritual tasks, her role might alternate every evening.

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(2) The following songs are not only recited but enacted with gestures and movements that visualize the content of the verses, i.e. popular episodes from Hindu mythology.²⁶ The first sequence is known as the "churning of curd" (*dadhi manthana*) and describes an incident from the childhood of Kṛṣṇa. This god is notorious for his pranks and lust for curd and butter. The song narrates how Kṛṣṇa in his sweet and naughty ways pressurizes his foster mother Jasoḍā to interrupt her work and feed him. During the evening ritual, one girl of the group takes her role. To imitate Jasoḍā's housework (the churning of curd) the girl takes a small flower and stirs milk in a tiny pot. Meanwhile the remaining group tries to touch her body and chants the matching verses that should arise feelings of motherly affection. Finally, the fresh "butter" is offered to Kṛṣṇa, personified by a consecrated betel nut on the altar. Then the group begins to enact another heavenly scene, the "game of cowry shells" (*kaudi kheld*). This episode narrates how Nārāyaṇa gambles with his wife Lakṣmī and by doing so loses not only his ornaments and wealth to her, but all in all his heart. While the girls collectively chant the witty dialogue between this exemplary divine couple one by one takes the cowries, gives them a shaking with her hands and passes them on to the next person in the row. This game is usually performed at a wedding ceremony where it should help the newly wed couple to approach each other in a less formal way. Playing cowries during Jāhni Oṣā, however, brings about the vision of one's own prospective marriage as well as romantic feelings about a lover who in his enthusiasm forgets his own self (like Nārāyaṇa does). In this way, the enactment of both episodes evokes strong emotions towards maternal and conjugal affection, realized through and by the physical movement of the girls' bodies.

(3) The second half of the evening session is dominated by ritual acts that are constitutive of any *pūjā*, like the offering of food, incense, flowers and rice grains, or the circular movement of a flame (*arati*) in front of the altar. This is supplemented by other regular features of Hindu worship that were performed right from the beginning of the evening, like the sprinkling of water to purify the sacred site. Besides, girls have to water the basil plant and also to circle around her altar (circumambulation), two ritual acts that characterize the worship of Tulasī. After a final *hulahuli* the participants prostrate themselves on the ground. The blessed offerings (*bhoga*) are distributed among the girls and their family members.

²⁶ Episodes illustrating the divine play of Kṛṣṇa are also performed during another votive rite that is followed by Orissan women after menopause (Freeman 1980).

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Every morning, one or two girls repeat the ritual in a very condensed form. They do so on behalf of the others who mostly attend school. Occasionally, some devotees will also miss the evening ritual due to menses, sickness or some other duty. In these cases, the remaining group takes care of an individual's sacred pot and in this way help a girl to fulfil the observance of Jahni Osa. On certain occasions none of the participants will miss the *puja*. This is above all on the first day of the month, when the sacred pots are installed, and also on the last day that ends with their immersion. On these days, the girls observe a "complete fast", i.e. they eat nothing else than in the evening the blessed food from the altar. Since the most important festive period of the Hindu year (Durga Puja, Dasahara) coincides with the second half of Jahni Osa, the general mood of celebration encourages the girls even more. At Dasahara they arrange baskets with a mixture of seeds that gradually starts sprouting.²⁷ Five days later, the month of *aswina* commences on the full moon day called Kumar Purnima, known all over India as an occasion to play and to gamble. After the evening ritual, the girls proceed with their sacred items towards a river or pond, accompanied by their family, some music and firework. At the waterside, they repeat the *puja*. Next the *tulasi* altar, the sacred pots, seedlings etc. are immersed and the goddess is given farewell (*bisarjana*). Back home, the girls enjoy a great variety of fruits and sweets. They spend the whole night with singing, playing cards or other games.

While girls usually stress that their way of doing Jahni Osa follows the prescribed "rules and regulations", the ritual performances practically differ from one *puja* site to another. These variations concern the required items to conduct the ritual, the order and kind of ritual acts, as well as the number and variety of devotional songs. Most girls do not search for the meaning of these and other ritual features, although some openly wonder, why they should abstain from eating ridge gourd and not perhaps tomato. None of the performers I met was able to explain the logics of the cowry game or why the performance of Jahni Osa is associated with goddess Mangala (rather than Laksmi, like in mythology).²⁸ What mattered to them was not the cognitive knowledge about the ritual and its performance but their feeling to follow everything according to a paradigm version. However, the differences in the design and procedure of the ritual were recognized. Some girls openly competed against other groups in their neighbourhood for the most appealing altar and celebration of Jahni Osa. Aesthetic features were considered a legitimate strategy to

The sprouting of seedlings is a common element in the worship of a goddess.

²⁸ The relevance of goddess Mangala for the conduct of Jahni Osa was already mentioned by Rajguru ([1895] 1992). On the significance of this goddess see also Hauser 2004a.

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attract deities and, in the second place, devotees. The concept of competition did not interfere with the girls' understanding of religiosity.

Rationalizing Ritual

In public discourse, Jahni Osa is observed to get a good husband. Conversely, most girls stress other reasons and some even reject this rationale at all. According to them the performance of Jahni Osa is motivated by the wish (*manasika*) for a divine favour, the mere pleasure of its performance or by convention. Indeed, several girls start to observe Jahni Osa without giving it a second thought. They simply follow the example of an elder sister or remember the colourful and lively *puja* site from previous years. The occasion usually attracts anybody from a neighbourhood since the collective chanting of religious songs not only invites the goddess but also laughter, enjoyment and a feeling of communal togetherness. Other girls observe Jahni Osa because they were encouraged by their family. While they feel obliged to meet their parents' expectations, according to the religious songs it is a girl's own choice that has motivated her participation. By the daily repetition of these verses, girls learn that the aim to serve god cannot be denied. To stop a young woman from her decision to perform an *osa-brata* (properly) is considered a sin (*pap*). In this respect, the religious narrative prompts how to frame personal longings in terms of a religious promise. While the songs enumerate all kinds of desirable amenities, including material gains like "rice for the year... gold for the ear", they do not appeal to the boon of a (good) husband.²⁹ Similarly, the performers of Jahni Osa did not mention by themselves that the votive rite would serve this purpose. Upon my question some girls yet confirmed that others might have this intention.

To ignore this motivation reflects partly a rhetoric strategy to avoid the topic of one's own wedding. It is considered shameful for a girl to speak about her own desire for a life partner, to show interest in a particular person or to take any appropriate steps to meet someone. Usually the parents arrange the marriages of their children, and girls (as well as boys) trust in their experience and selection. However, marriage negotiations are a very common topic for gossip, so girls get to know at a very early age how people judge the ranking of prospective candidates. They realize whether they meet the relevant criteria or whether people consider them "too dark" in complexion or "too modern" in their behaviour. Everybody knows about the politics of dowry, the

One may note that the Oriya term *bara* means either "husband" or "divine boon", but in case of these songs the reference is clear and does not invite any misunderstanding.

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social **Stigma** of an **unmarried daughter** and the **negative image** of female higher education among some strata. No matter whether girls **observe** Jahni Osa or not, they certainly **have** their own ideas about a good husband. He should come from a respectable and kind family, follow a promising career and be free of "bad habits" like drinking, smoking or chewing betel. Above all, he should be "very understanding". In accordance with romantic Hindi movies or foreign productions like *Titanic*, several Orissan girls dream of a male hero who would introduce them into a world totally different from their own. At best, he might take them to one of the Indian metropolises that promise a rather new way of life, at least with respect to the amenities of a nuclear family. Many girls wish to avoid the joint family system where a **young** daughter-in-law "cannot move freely" but has to show obedience to affines in the form of veiling and other restrictive practices. There she will be appreciated only after several years and the birth of sons.

As I was told, "all girls" dream about falling in love and indeed, their considerations about a good husband often imply the idea of love marriage. In Orissa, this type of marriage is a highly contested issue. It is understood to oppose the Indian value system — similar to the dangers of globalization — and like the latter threat it is anything but a new social phenomenon.³⁰ By the turn of the twenty-first century, fashion magazines, satellite television and also Internet were available in provincial towns, and gradually influenced the public discourse on female role models and gender relations. Still girls were hardly aware of the Indian Miss World, of female social activists agitating in the national politics, or the 25-year-old female weightlifter who won India's only (bronze) medal in the Olympics 2000. The modern media aim to reach India's rising middle class, but the participants of Jahni Osa had rarely access to such sources. Their considerations about a girl's subject position were yet challenged within their own locality. In one neighbourhood the police had to reprimand a teenage girl who did not stop to bother a boy with love letters, public intimacies and declarations of love. Some female students started to use the Internet in the market and discussed the prospects of virtual dating.³¹ Anybody knew several persons who transgressed the norms of an arranged marriage. Some participants of Jahni Osa clearly expressed that they would rather go for love marriage, although their own social environment did not enable them to do so. Other girls felt more save in trusting their parents' choice. At any rate, young women wanted to have a voice in the selection of

In this respect, "globalization" has only replaced the former catchphrase "modernity". That latter's morals were already satirized during colonial times.

³⁰ The first commercial Internet service point in Berhampur had opened in 1999.

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their husband and secretly hoped for their parents' permission in case of falling in love with someone. They were aware of the fact that the responsibility for the happiness of their natal family was loaded upon them. On and off somebody told about a sister who was not allowed to visit her parental home anymore since she had insisted to select a "good husband" on her own. Once a girl marries against her parents' will, she risks her basic kinship ties.

The performance of Jahni Osa does not invite discussions on these burning questions about love and future. Its participants rather pay attention to the different modes to serve Brundabati, Mangala, Krusna and others. Their central question is as to whether the gods are satisfied. No matter how faithful girls follow the ritual procedures, they cannot escape the public argument that legitimizes their own devotion: the attempt to get a good husband. This was obvious in their day-to-day self-presentation. Many girls tried to hide their ritual commitment towards Jahni Osa because they feared the comments of young men. Once College mates heard about it, they teased a girl mercilessly. Other performers with higher education were rather afraid of being considered backward, like a 25-year-old graduate of medicine. She memorized the final procession at Kumar Purnima: "Everyone was wondering: a doctor is observing Jahni Osa? And it was the whole street, this lane, that lane; everyone got to know that I am doing it. I was feeling so awkward. I told god: I cannot take the sacred pot on the top of my head, I will just hold it in front." Seemingly she felt more confident without this posture that contradicted her body practice in everyday life. But also being among themselves, girls displayed a reflective distance towards the general rationale of Jahni Osa. Even pious girls once in while made fun of others who apparently exaggerated the power of Jahni Osa. "Some women do this *puja* also to bring their husbands on the right path," a girl remarked with a smile. Upon my question whether it had worked, the whole group started to laugh: "Oh no, it remained just the same!"³² To cut jokes in this manner once more stresses how the general reason to perform Jahni Osa is regarded as a normative formula rather than an expression that corresponded to the girls' focus while observing the votive rite. Still, their attitude towards the ritual performance was anything but a subversive act. They considered Jahni Osa as an appropriate, gendered way to

Yet this laughter is ambivalent. Obviously, the person who was made fun of had been critical about her husband's character and hence stood out against the stereotype of a modest wife. In this respect, the laughter could also signify an attempt to expose her from a hegemonic (male) perspective. Indeed, those women who do not meet the social expectations seem to be the most serious followers of Jahni Osa, and in this way exercise the freedom of choice mentioned in the religious songs.

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worship god. In public discourse, however, the religious pursuit of women and their performance of votive rites were inseparably associated with the selfless devotion for the benefit of men. Following this implicitly male Hindu doctrine, the only imaginable motive why unmarried girls engaged in religious affairs was their desire for a good husband.

Bodily Experiences

"I am just doing it because I am getting pleasure (*kusi*) out of it. ... girls do this ritual to get a good husband. But I don't have this notion in mind. I simply started to perform the *puja* because everyone was doing so. I felt happy."³³ — The experience of Jahni Osa is basically a positive one. The girls enjoy their daily gatherings, the collective decoration of the altar, the singing of songs and the taste of the fruits offered to the gods. To meet in the evening and sit around a nicely illuminated altar (while all the others continue with their daily routine) constitutes an atmosphere that stimulates several senses. At first, there is the aesthetic dimension: the beauty of the altar with its lineup of sacred pots, pictorial ornaments, blooming flowers and auspicious signs; the sound of hymns, prayers and other devotional songs; the smell of incense and the glowing *jhuna*; the choreography of the mythological enactment; the playful approach to worship. Moreover, the atmosphere evokes a strong feeling of affection. This is not only due to the enactment of mythological episodes stressing the maternal and conjugal love of Jasoda and respectively Laksmi. Rather there is a general attitude of devotion that is identified with the presence of god Krsna. Besides, the collective worship deepens the attachment among girlfriends. Still the participants may also feel some tension as to whether everything has been performed according to the "rules and regulations". What they fear, however, is not the critical comment of an elderly lady watching the scene but rather the provocation of god. Unlike in childhood days, when rituals were performed on their behalf, girls have to gain their own religious merit (*punya*) and by doing so may also benefit others. Jahni Osa serves as the first occasion in their life when they are faced with this religious responsibility. Once in a while it happens that during the worship of goddess Brundabati a devotee gets absorbed in the ritual act to such an extent that her loss of body control is considered a form of divine possession. Usually it is the person who personifies the goddess in the first part of the evening. Through her body Brundabati may express her (dis-) sat-

This statement was given by an unmarried women who regularly performed Jahni Osa since fifteen years.

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isfaction about a particular ritual performance. This phenomenon contributes to the seriousness of the event, even if girls have only heard from its occurrence among groups.³⁴

Besides these kind of sensorial experiences, the participants of Jahni Osa acquire several skills. The different modes of worship, which they had merely watched during their childhood, now turn into a variety of concrete operations relevant to their own religious self. Girls exercise the general techniques of worship — for instance when and how to purify the site or to perform *arati* — and also those ritual acts that are associated with women and their specific understanding of piety. By repetition a girl learns how to prepare the different food offerings, the composition of a sacred pot³⁵, the moments to utter the shrill *hulahuli* or the method of drawing delicate ornaments (*Jhuti*) while rinsing rice powder of different colours through her fingertips.³⁶ This ritual expertise is transmitted among the performers themselves. There is no priest who might intervene. After watching the ceremony for a while, a girl may take the initiative in singing, decorating the altar or structuring the ritual. This gradual routine will help her to perform any other votive rite. Moreover, it serves as a precondition for marriage, since in her marital home a young wife is expected to conduct several religious functions on her own. Therefore whoever participates in Jahni Osa receives a lot of attention and social recognition. While a girl's initiative in other cultural spheres, like an interest in fashion or higher education, is often discouraged and criticized as selfish, any attempt to improve a *puja* site will raise her reputation. Hence she starts to experience the religious domain as a major sphere of self-realization (or rather one of the rare realms). Later it becomes a matter of self-esteem to refine this ritual competence.

In the long run, the performative routine of Jahni Osa will end in subtle change of a girl's embodied self. She will gain a "sense of ritual" (Bell), i.e. establish a permanent disposition that serves as a matrix for any further religious actions, feelings and thoughts. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and his concept of habitus, Catherine Bell (1992) had argued that ritual practices

In four groups (among seven, see footnote 4) girls had experienced goddess possession by themselves. Here I do not wish to concentrate on this cultural phenomenon any further since I discussed it elsewhere (Hauser 2004b and forthcoming).

³⁴ They have to fill an earthen jar with water, close it with an old coconut and add mango leaves, a piece of red cloth, red bangles and red cotton thread. Then they apply auspicious signs and flowers. Though the procedure might sound simple, to assemble the items smoothly needs some manual skill.

³⁶ While many features of Jahni Osa are memorized with the help of the songs (that are printed in a booklet), these techniques have to be learnt by heart and repetition.

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mould the human being similarly to other forms of practice. Thus the body is not only the object of "inscription", but also an agent by itself that structures the way people perceive and understand the world. The circular character of embodied practices to bring about what they denote is particularly apparent once the observers of Jahni Osa have to utter the shrill *hulahuli*. They know that women create this sound at very auspicious moments. However, in the beginning girls feel awkward to do so by themselves. It needs a forceful trembling of the tongue to produce this high-pitched and penetrating sound. Only after regular practice their voices will blend into one vibrating tone. The *hulahuli* will come spontaneously and by itself create a feeling of auspiciousness. Similarly, there are other practices that start to appear natural to the girls, like the gesture of covering one's head with a scarf (or the end of a sari) as a sign and stimulus of respect, or the mode of sprinkling water at the altar that gradually enhances the sensitivity to assess a situation in terms of purity and pollution. One might even consider the religious diet that produces a certain visceral feeling as well as another taste for food. In this regard, it is the psychophysical body that comes to realize and to signify a religious moment, day or month.

The most significant transformation that is invited by the performance of Jahni Osa, however, is the assessment of ritual agency in the lived-in-body of a woman. After all, the ritual routine does not only contribute to objectify certain "techniques of the body" (Mauss) as natural behaviour, but it also transforms the perception, i.e. the embodied self as the ground of experience.³⁷ This is not a self-conscious process. In case of votive rites, it contributes towards a realization of femininity as a precondition and privilege to share the eternal generative power (*sakti*). From this perspective, the religious necessity to pray for the well-being, protection and prosperity of male kin does not only belittle the self-esteem of women but also allows the complementary view, i.e. to consider and appreciate one's inherently female ritual competence for the maintenance of society. The development of such a gendered religious consciousness that comes with the regular performance of votive rites then allows women to frame several of their desires and actions within a religious matrix. At times, this may raise the suspicion of others, in particular husbands (or anthropologists). Although the concept of *stridharma* is suggested by the hegemonic discourse, it is hence nourished and personalized by women's autonomous performance of votive rites.

On embodiment and the phenomenological approach in Social Anthropology see Csordas 1993.

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Conclusion: The Temptation of Ritual

Jahni ośa serves as a paradigmatic votive rite to teach Hindu girls important ritual sequences and entitles them for the first time in their life, not only to watch but to perform a ritual by themselves, independently and with all spiritual consequences. Thus it can be considered an accumulative female initiation³⁸, similar to any other votive rite that comes first in a girl's life. Apparently, the purpose of the ritual (to get a good husband) is regarded as a formula from the normative (male) discourse on femininity and not taken literally by the performers. It reflects the public opinion that girls do not have any other (religious) concern than their future marriage. From the perspective of girls, Jahni Ośa serves as the first occasion to assess and to physically experience the power of ritual agency that is conveyed by a discourse on the religious significance of women as wife and mother. By the means of their ritual engagement (and fasting), women are considered the driving force of prosperity. Although this concept empowers women as ritual performers, it is embedded in a wider patriarchal structure and also subject to socio-historical conditions, as studies about the Indian colonial discourse on women suggest.³⁹

Within the framework of Jahni Ośa, the concept of ritual agency is not yet fully embodied. It also competes with other forms of self-realization that girls fancy during adolescence (no matter whether they are discouraged to do so). In this respect, the doubts about the effectiveness of Jahni ośa result from inexperienced bodies rather than a general scepticism about religious values and practices. Moreover, from the perspective of many Orissan girls, the success of social efforts to improve one's life seems to be as much out of control as the outcome of votive rites (that are, after all, a source of recreation and joy). Nevertheless, several young women avoid the performance of votive rites in general, and thus miss the option to experience this fortifying effect of female religiosity. If girls observe Jahni Ośa, however, their attitude towards its purpose does not really matter towards the efficacy of this body practice. It is not possible to merely imitate this ritual on a regular basis, for instance, to please one's parents. Even a critical way to rationalize one's participation does not prevent a subtle transformation in the personal stance concerning the actions at a *tulasi* altar. If the ritual is repeated in the following years, the lived-in body will contribute by itself to the emergence of ritual commitment and credibility.

This usage of the term certainly contrasts with the Hindu doctrine that considers only so-called "twice-born" men eligible to be initiated.

³⁹ Tokita Tanabe (1999:7-9) summarizes the different arguments in this debate.

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