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Lidia GUZY

From Non-Brahmin Priests of the Goddess to Ascetics of God Mahima Alekha

ABSTRACT: This article deals with Mahima Dharma a contemporary vernacular ascetic religion of Odisha/Eastern India displaying a rich diversity in its regional configurations. In this paper the author proposes to look at the main protagonists of the religion, the ascetics (*baba*s), as non-Brahmin priests, who have incorporated *shakti*, the power of local goddesses into their disciplined bodies and in doing so have transformed the feminine element of the Hindu belief into the belief of the indescribable and abstract god Alekha. Mahima Dharma is seen in this contribution as a sort of micro structure on the one hand of *popular asceticism* in rural India and on the other hand as a recent religious reform movement integrating local non-Brahmin priesthood and the local belief in goddesses into the mainstream of the male Hindu pantheon. This article draws on the author's PhD fieldwork research (1999-2002), published in 2002 as a monograph (Guzy 2002)[1].

KEYWORDS: Mahima Dharma; Odisha; India; goddess; vernacular religion

Lidia GUZY is a Lecturer in the Study of South Asian religions at the Study of Religions Department, University College Cork (UCC), Ireland. She is a Director of the Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre (MEWSC) and a Board Member of the India Study Centre Cork (ISCC), School of Asian Studies, UCC. She is an Associate Researcher at the *Centre d'Anthropologie Sociale* (CAS-LISST, EHESS in Toulouse, France. She specialises in the anthropology of South Asian cultures and religions (popular Hinduism, indigenous Adivasi religions, ascetic and ecstatic traditions, goddess worship), media anthropology with a special focus on music, museum anthropology (religion and the museum), comparative studies in indigenous cultures and religions, and marginalised and endangered worldviews.

[1] This article represents a slightly modified reprint of the article 'From Non-Brahmin Priests of the Goddess to Ascetics of the God' published in 2005 in *Baessler-Archive*, (Volume 53, 149-158).

Introduction

Mahima Dharma is the name given to a contemporary monastic ascetic tradition in Odisha. Odisha is the Eastern region of India known for its rural and tribal character. For anthropologists and scientists of religions this region is of a particular importance. Here, many socio-anthropological structures representing diverse social formations, sociological and religious transformation processes as well as structures of common popular Hinduism can be depicted.

Mahima Dharma has existed in Odisha for more than one hundred years. The ascetic tradition is known for its two monk brotherhoods, the Balkaldhari and the Kaupindhari, and for its diversified lay groups. As a monastic organisation, Mahima Dharma is primarily dispersed throughout central Odisha (Dhenkanal). Its monastic centre is the holy city of Joranda, Central Odisha, where the majority of the most senior ascetics (*abadhuta samnyasin*) (Figure 1 and 2) live and where young ascetic students (*tyagis*) are educated.

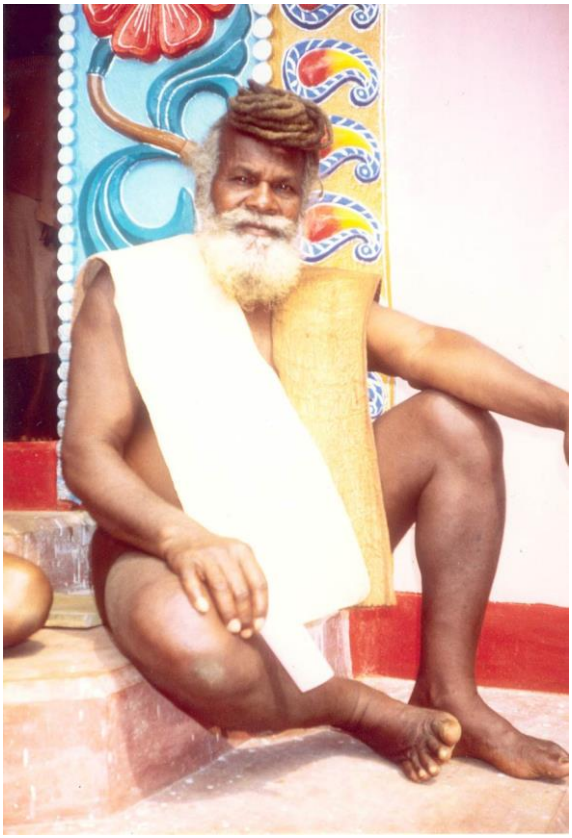


Figure 1: Senior Abaduta sannyasin Joranda, 2002. Copyright: Lidia Guzy

After *dikhya*, the initiation, ascetics who have examined their abstemious stamina for at least 15 years of practice vow a life-long celibacy. They

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abandon their houses forever and devote themselves to world renunciation in one of the monastic fraternities. Monasticism in Mahima Dharma illustrates a strong hierarchy of religious seniority and exemplifies an institutionalised corpus of the religion. On the other hand the laymen maintain an unsystematic diversity and plurality in their belief and worship.



Figure 2: Two senior ascetics, Joka village, 2002. Copyright: Lidia Guzy

Monks and laymen embody the ascetic religion Mahima Dharma, which literally means 'the glorious *dharma*'.[2] The primary features of this new religion are asceticism, in terms of a strict discipline of body and mind, a vegetarian diet, and a denial of caste. Mahima Dharmis worship Mahima Alekh as the highest, unwritten (*a-lekha*[3]), indescribable God. Mahima Alekh is understood to be *sunya* – the void – all and nothing. This God can only be approached by meditation, an ascetic life-style, and the ritual practices. These ritual practices mainly consist of 1) fire rituals performed by the ascetics (Figure 3) and 2) individual prayer practiced by ascetics as well as by laymen. The religious concepts and values go back to

[2] Dharma is a polysemic socio-religious concept of South Asia. It can be translated as 'religious code. For discussion see O'Flaherty and Derrett (1978).
[3] *a- lekha* was explained to me as 'not to write/unwritten' referring to everyday usage. In Sanskrit the term itself means 'without writing' indicating a pejorative meaning.

the founder of the religion, Mahima Gosvami, who lived at the beginning of the 19th century. His origin is unknown, but for his devotees, Mahima Gosvami is considered to have been the incarnation of Mahima Alekh.

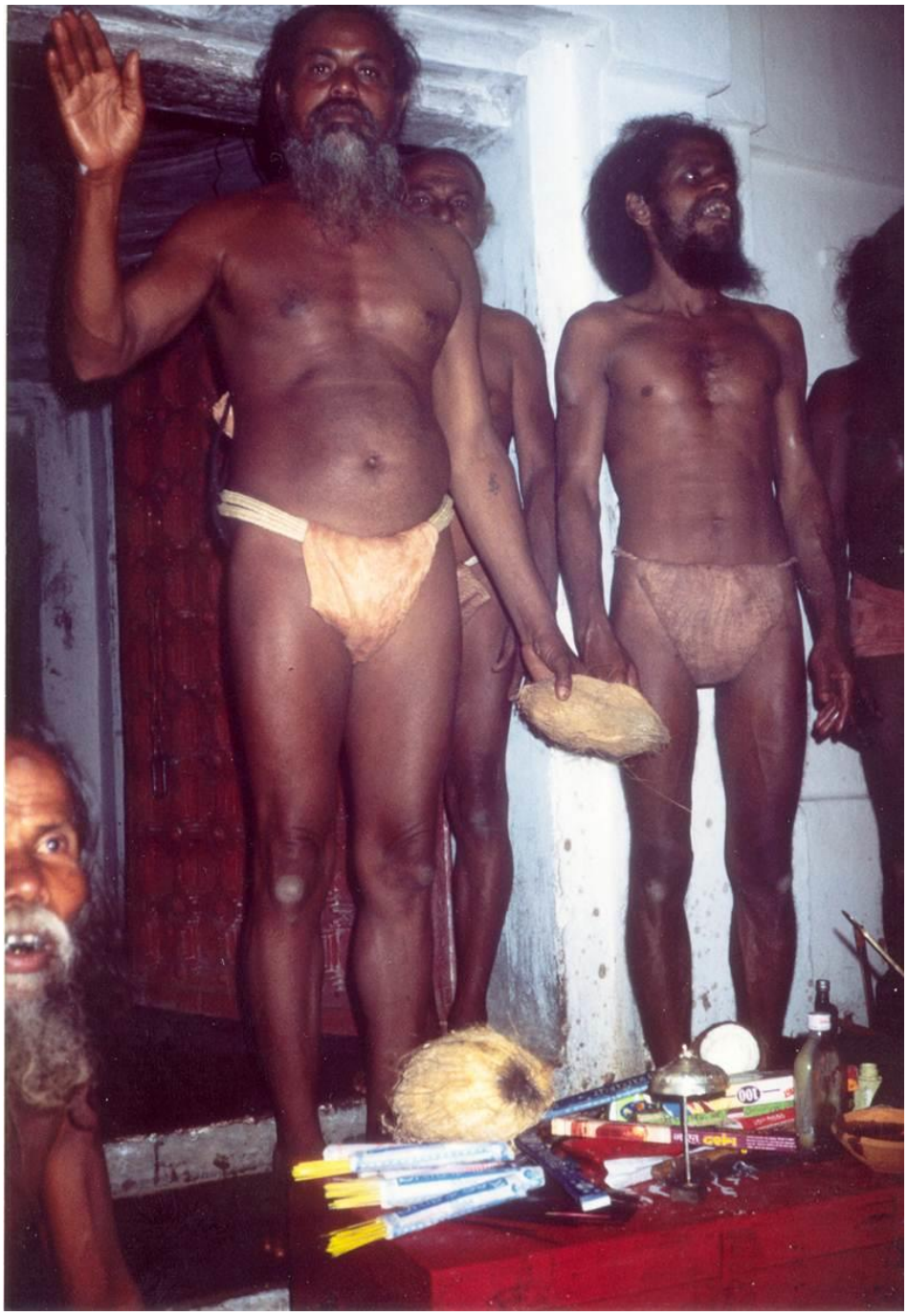


Figure 3: Joranda blessing ascetic at fire ritual, 2001. Copyright: Lidia Guzy

The itinerant ascetics are covered with only one reddish orange (*gerua*) coloured piece of clothing. For their living they accept only food

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from donors and, as a shelter from rain and sun, they carry with them an umbrella made of dried palm leaves. Ascetics, in particular, worship the only God Mahima Alekh conceptualised as *sunya* (the void), the all and nothingness of existence. For the wellbeing of their patrons in particular and for the good of the community in general, Mahima Dharma ascetics perform fire rituals (*ghiopuro*, *jagia*). While playing *konjoni*, a small tambourine-like membranophone, iron bells (*gini*) and singing religious songs (*bhajana*), ascetics pursue their religious tasks and worship.

The followers of Mahima Dharma belong mostly to the rural non-Brahmin population that consists of both wealthier peasants and marginalised social strata, known as Harijan (Scheduled Castes) and tribal (Scheduled Tribes) groups/categories. In recent times especially, the Mahima Dharma religion proselytised among tribal converts in Southern Odisha (Eschmann 1975, 9-22; ibid 1986, 386-387; T.R.B. 1968-9; Guzy 2002a).

Mahima Dharma has established diverse local religious features within its ascetic doctrine in the East Indian region Odisha. In Central Odisha (Dhenkanal) Mahima Dharma has grown from a subaltern reform movement (Dube 1999, 2001) into a powerful landowning ascetic religious formation (*sampradaya*)[4]. The monastic organisation in Central Odisha is often connected with local ruling elites who provide for the ascetics (*babas*). In Dhenkanal, the asceticism of Mahima Dharma reflects the patronage system between local leaders and ascetics. Politics on a rural level operate in Central Odisha within the idiom of patrons in relation to ascetics. By sponsoring the holy men, rituals as well as the places of worship, worldly patrons gain religious benefits and the moral reconfirmation of being a good ruler (Guzy 2003, 211-229).[5]

In Western Odisha (Beltz 2001, 2006) Mahima Dharma has developed into a religion of its own that is centred on the legendary devotee Bhima Bhoi and the Sambalpuri literature written in the regional language Sambalpuri. Bhima Bhoi, a Khond in origin, according to the legends, was a mythical, blind poet who is regarded as having been the first enthusiastic propagator and devotee of the religion. Bhima Bhoi, the layman, is understood to have been surrounded by his followers in the 19th century. His popularity has been especially widespread in the former Redhakhol (Rairakhol) State where his sanctuary – Khalliapalli near Sonepur – has risen to great importance. Bhima Bhoi's devotion to Mahima Gosvami has left impressive masterpieces of Oriya literature.[6]

[4] *The New Indian Express*, Bhubaneshwar reports on Dec. 4th 2003 about juridical disputes between the Kaupindharis and Balkaldharis concerning land properties.
[5] For a broad discussion on the topic of patronage and kinship in theories about South Asia, see Quigley (1999).
[6] See Mohapatra (1983).

Bhima Bhoi's literary creations have been assembled in collections called the '*Stuti Chintamoni*' and the '*Bhajan Mala*'. With regard to the formation of a theology of the Mahima Dharma religion, these poetic compositions have gained status as holy books with an obligatory character. Nevertheless, Bhima Bhoi's tradition displays something of an ambivalent character. As the followers do not respect the authority of Joranda and its ascetics rather they consider Bhima Bhoi to be their main *guru*. The community of Bhima Bhoi represents a separate tradition within Mahima Dharma[7].

In Southern Odisha (Koraput) Mahima Dharma displays its locally specific tribal profile of asceticism. In Koraput professional ascetics are rare, appearing only once a year from Dhenkanal to initiate new devotees (*dikhya*). In an indigenous context the new teachings have become ever more popular due to the ecstatic vocal rituals of the *alekh gurumai*, the local ritual specialists of the new religion. It is here that the ascetic ethic finds its expression in the local shamanic tradition of ecstatic dialogues with the Divine. These ecstatic song séances of *alekh gurumai* are considered to be holy healing sessions. They play the crucial role in propagating the ascetic doctrine (Guzy 2002b, 2004).

Mahima Dharma as Local Religious Transformation

The Mahima Dharma doctrine illustrates a dialectic transformation process from a local ascetic and religious movement to the brink of becoming an institutionalised religion. Actions of religious substitution of local concepts as well as of the integration of local beliefs into a new philosophy seem to interplay with the implementation of the scripture in order to organise and systematise a monastic order. The ascetic religion rejects the dominant Brahmin tradition on the one hand; on the other hand it seems to reproduce some of its dominant ritual features. On the one hand ascetics of the Mahima Dharma religion (*sampradaya*) carry out ritual functions similar to Brahmin priests and, in doing so, deny the existence of local goddesses. On the other hand they continue to perform the ritual functions of former local non-Brahmin priests who are especially responsible for the ritual worship of local goddesses. The differences between local forms of Goddess worship and belief consist in Mahima Dharma asceticism of a) the rejection of blood sacrifices in ritual worship and b) in the negation of the existence of the Goddess within the ascetic theology. Instead of the Goddess, Mahima Dharma ascetics venerate the concept of *sunya* - the void - and the God Alekha - the absolute and the unwritten. The theology and ritual practice of the void both substitutes and integrates the theology of the Goddess.

[7] See the works of Beltz (2001; 2007).

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Asceticism and Theological Transformation: From local Goddess to Sunya

In rural Odhissa the worship of local goddesses with their manifold names and manifestations is omnipresent. Village goddesses are represented by the earth, stones, natural altars (trees), red ant hills, iron and bronze animal figurines and finally in the ecstatic human bodies of their priests.[8] Ritual worship of local goddesses is mostly bloody, ecstatic and associated with fertility. Loud drum rhythms stimulate the goddess to come down to her priest in order to dance, to speak, to heal and to bless. The sacrifice of domesticated animals (i.e. duck, hen, goat, pig, and buffalo) always represents the climax of local ritual.

Mahima Dharma doctrine is largely opposed to the ecstatic and non-vegetarian worship of local goddesses. A transformation of local structures of priesthood, theologies and rituals can be traced in the concept of *sunya*. *Sunya* is synonymous to the God Alekha. Alekha is considered to be the highest, unwritten (*a-lekh)*, indescribable, and only God. This God can only be approached by meditation, a vegetarian and disciplined lifestyle and through certain vegetarian ritual practices. The connecting axis between the abstract, eluding concept of the void and the practiced religion is the idea of asceticism. Asceticism means *niyam* or the respect of the rules and regulations of the Mahima Dharma ethic. A basic concept within the ascetic ethic of Mahima Dharma is the divination of the human body through discipline. The idea of a disciplined body through the rules of celibacy and daily prayer makes the ascetics' bodies sacred (Figure 4). In the context of Mahima Dharma asceticism, the body itself is the medium of *darshana* – looking at the divine. The body thus represents a central concept in the ascetic philosophy. Through the everyday performance of the bodily prayer the Mahima Dharma doctrine inscribes its ideas into the bodies of ascetics and devotees.[9] In contrast to the classical concept of *darshana* where the images of gods and goddesses serve as a medium for 'seeing the divine', the ascetics' bodies themselves represent the image of divinity.[10]

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[8] See Mallebrein's works (1998; 1994; 2004) and exhibitions 'Living Gods on Earth' in Delhi, Madras, Culcutta, and Bombay.

[9] By using the metaphor of inscription into the body by bodily exercises and techniques I refer to the research on local theatre of Odisha and its bodily expressions by Schnepel, Burkhard (2000). Der Körper im 'Tanz der Strafe' in Orissa. In: Köpping, K.-P. and Rao, U. (Hrsg). *Im Rausch des Rituals*. Hamburg, Lit. Verlag, pp. 156-171.

[10] In the context of Mahima Dharma *darshana* does not refer to the common visual devotion (see Eck, D.L. (1881). *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Chamberburg, Anima) to the deity, but to the physical exercise performed by the devotees in order to praise the God Alekh.

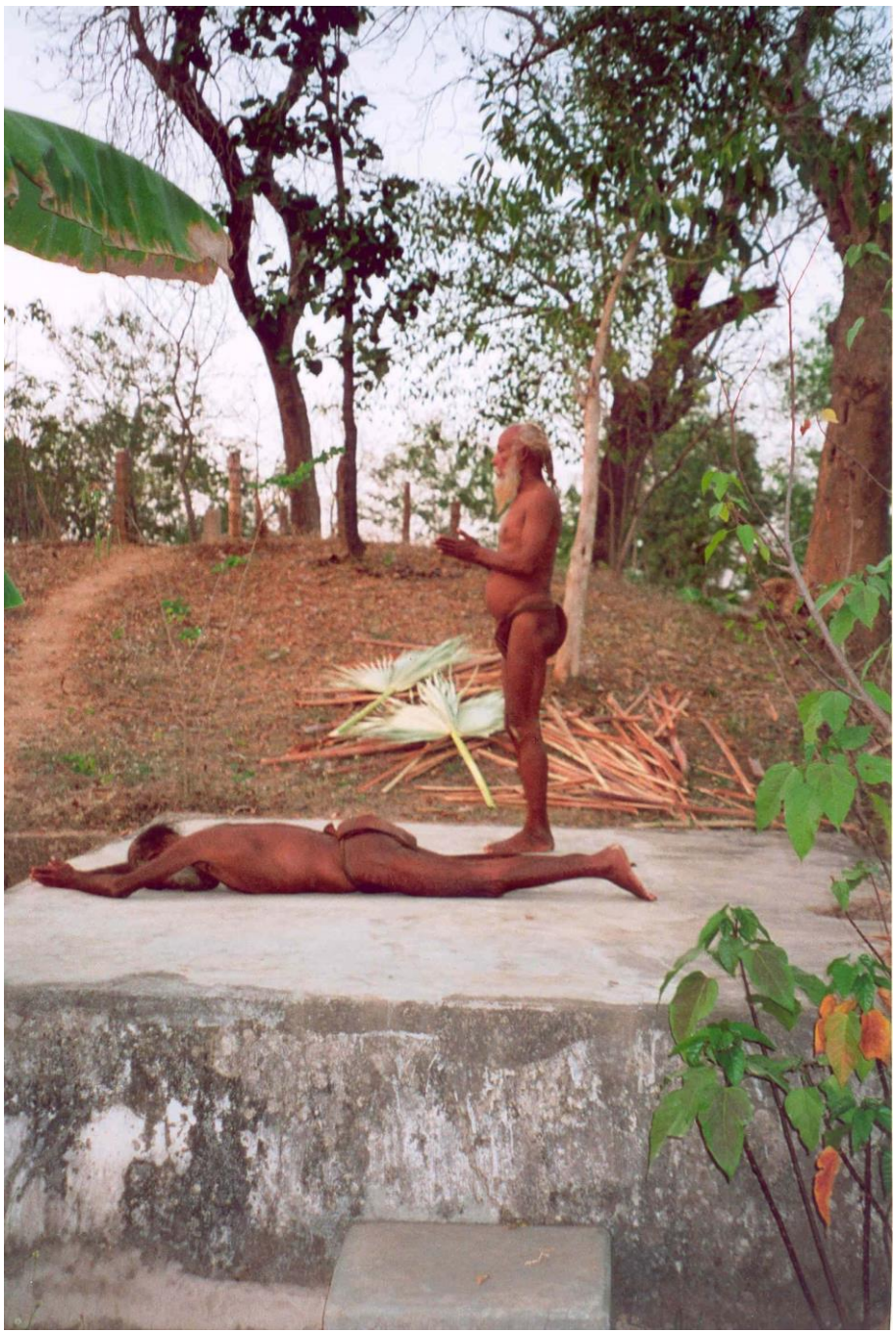


Figure 4: Ascetics performing daily prayer, Jaka, 2002. Copyright: Lidia Guzy

The asceticism of Mahima Dharma controls, in particular, the body and mind of its ritual specialists. The strict celibacy of the ascetics transforms them into representatives of *shakti*, the traditional concept of the power of the Goddess. The idea of the disciplined and thus sacred body in the Mahima Dharma doctrine integrates the theology of the Goddess in the concept of *shakti* and in the concentration on the body of a ritual specialist as a crucial matrix of the divine. In their disciplined bodies

ascetics incorporate the divine strength and at the same time they become the vegetarian and controlled priests of God Alekha (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Baba showing his hair, Joranda, 2001. Copyright: Lidia Guzy

As such, ascetics carry in their bodies the old power of the Goddess and the new supremacy of the God Alekh. With this divine strength they perform fire rituals for their peasant donors and followers. Laymen consider the ascetics to be living representatives of higher values and of the power of God Alekha in addition to all of the other divine powers.

For lay devotees, asceticism means bodily control but not celibacy, vegetarian diet, prayers twice a day and the wearing of only *gerua* coloured pieces of clothing as a symbol of the permanent presence of the God Alekha (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Promot Baba and Vira Baba in Jaka, 2000. Copyright: Lidia Guzy

Whereas ascetics worship only the indescribable and unwritten God Alekh, the laymen may still include some local Hindu or tribal gods and goddesses in their prayers. The *gerua* coloured clothes of ascetics and laymen allude to the red colour of the earth in Odisha which itself is the symbol of the earth goddess.

Literality and Orality in Mahima Dharma

Paradoxically, even if the central concept of the Mahima Dharma doctrine focuses upon the theological idea of the God Alekha, the nothingness and the unwritten, many literal sources exist in Mahima Dharma and the monastic centre Joranda as the vital point in literary production. In discussions ascetics and laymen always refer to the literal works of Bhima Bhoi, the legendary blind poet considered to have been the first propagator of the God Alekha and of the ascetic religion. Religious books and theological brochures are published in the monastic centre Joranda and are circulated among laymen and ascetics. Regardless of whether or not one is in Joranda and among laymen and ascetics a strong reference to this script is noticeable. The worship and reference to the new God Alekh are prevailingly oral. The singing of *bhajana* and prayers are important elements in ritual devotion directed toward the God Alekh and to the ideology of abstention. The ritual worship of the God Alekh remains oral

as it consists of the performance of fire rituals (*ghiopura*, *jagia*) by ascetics and of the singing and dancing of Bhima Bhoi's *bhajana* by ascetics and laymen during the ritual. The strong oral character of ritual worship appears to be a sign of the incorporation and substitution of the worship of the Goddess in the doctrine of Mahima Dharma. Local ritual worship of the Goddess focuses upon oral ritual structures. Local priests of goddesses invocate the divine through singing and playing specific instruments. Their ecstatic speech and voice become a manifestation of the Goddess. In Mahima Dharma the devoted ritual singers and musicians are ascetics. With their tambourines (*konjoni*) and bells (*gini*) they sing religious songs (*bhajana*s) with all their devotion but in a controlled manner. No ecstasy will overcome them and the songs are not sung on the basis of a sudden inspiration. They are, however, learned from *Stuti Chintamoni* or *Granthaboli*, religious books containing *bhajana*s, prayers and poetics composed by Bhima Bhoi. After the evening prayer the laymen occasionally recite from *Stuti Chintamoni* or *Granthaboli* while others listen to the recitations.

For some marginalised social groups a literal shift is important to develop greater self-esteem. In rural Odisha literacy and the possibility of recitation demonstrate a high social status or high self-esteem as it refers to either the value of education or to the traditionally intellectual elite understanding of the Brahmins.[11] Modern transformation processes in South Asia, called processes of 'sanskritisation' or 'brahmanisation' indicate a phenomenon of marginalised social categories imitating the ancient dominant script culture of the Brahmins.[12] Through this process they seek to obtain a higher social status. Within Mahima Dharma, the reference to literacy in terms of the value of the script can be regarded as emancipation from the dominant idea that only Brahmins can be the representatives of knowledge. For Mahima Dharma as a doctrine in the making, literality is more important for the creation of a new religious canon which will give a directive to ascetics and will create a systematisation of the diversified beliefs of the laymen. The ritual practice nevertheless prevails to be of oral character and it is evident that for an understanding of the Mahima Dharma doctrine as an ascetic reform movement on the verge of becoming an institutionalised religion, both techniques of knowledge transmission are of equal importance.

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[11] For this see Malamoud, Ch. (1977). *Le Svadhyayaya. Récitation Personnelle du Veda. Taittiriya Aranyaka, livre III. Texte Traduit et Commenté*, Paris: Publication de l'Institut de civilisation indienne (diffusion E. de Boccard).

[12] Srinivas, M.N. (1962). A Note on Sanscritisation and Westernization, in ders., *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*. London, Asia Publishing House, pp. 42-62. See also Singh, Y. 1996. *Modernization of Indian Tradition. A Systemic Study of Social Change*. Jaipur and New Delhi, Rawat Publications, pp. 1-27.

The Mahima Dharma doctrine can be thus approached in terms of a semi-literality, as an interface between oral and literal culture.[13] According to the differentiation between oral and literate culture by Goody[14], oral culture is associated with all sorts of oral transmissions of knowledge as poetic speech, virtuous mnemotechniques, as well as rhythms of the body, songs and dances.[15] Literal cultures on the other hand render possible that normative sentences become fixed through the script. As such, they allow a 'de-contextualisation' or 'universalisation' of the ideas (Goody 1986) crucial for all proselytising religions. In this way the script becomes normative and encourages a new quality of knowledge transmission and its organisation. This ultimately generates new specialists and their specialised knowledge which leads to structured organisational forms of religion (temples, monastic orders) and to the phenomenon of religious conversion (Goody 1986).

Oral religions are generally characterised by the lack of any doctrine.[16] As the transmission of knowledge is oral, knowledge remains only vital through the performance of rites and ceremonies. Parents tell their children the stories of their own community and connect them with their own ancestors. All that if not ritually enacted or told will be forgotten.

In contrast to oral traditions, doctrine is crucial to all religions with a scripture. As the script forms new obliging references, systems and clear definitions of what is true or not, the scripture creates a new quality of religious transmission. The belief in the literal truth is the ultimate legitimisation for all proselytising activities of religions operating with religious writings. Within the doctrine of Mahima Dharma literality and orality are mutually interconnected to each other. Mahima Dharma can be considered to be an interface between both categories and qualities of knowledge transmission. Its monastic structure and ascetic specialisation represent a literal shift that is indispensable for an administrative organisation and its proselytising ambitions. The ritual structure and the diversity of lay beliefs, however, remain of an oral character.

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[13] See for this aspect of intermixture between orality and literality: Falk, H. (1990). Goodies for India: Literacy, Orality and Vedic Culture. In: Raible, W. (Hrsg.), *Erscheinungsformen Kultureller Prozesse*. Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, pp. 103-119; Falk, H. (1993). *Schrift im Alten Indien. Ein Forschungsbericht mit Anmerkungen*. *ScriptOralia* 56. Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag.

[14] For comparison see: Goody, J. (1986). *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

[15] Schlaffer, H. (1997). Einleitung. In: Goody, J. u.a. (Hrsg.), *Entstehung und Schrift und Folgen der Schriftkultur*. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, pp. 7-23.

[16] For example Fürer-Haimendorf, Ch. v. (1964). Die Religionen der Primitivvölker. In: Bareau, A., Schubring, W., Ch.v. Fürer-Haimendorf (Hrsg.), *Die Religionen Indiens III Buddhismus - Jinismus –Primitivvölker,* Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, pp. 243-294 or Bürkle, H. (1977). *Einführung in die Theologie der Religionen*. Darmstadt: Wiss., Buchgesellschaft, p. 94.

Conclusion

The Odishan material of Mahima Dharma illustrates some general structures of religious transformation in South Asia. It has been shown that ascetics of Mahima Dharma integrate the local concept of the power of the Goddess via the idea of their disciplined and thus sacred bodies. Simultaneously the theology of the Goddess is substituted with the new theology of God Alekha. Similar processes of integration and substitution are traceable within the mutual influence of oral and literate cultures in Mahima Dharma. A literal shift accelerates the dynamics of institutionalisation and systematisation of a not yet canonised doctrine. As such the script clearly contributes to the formation of a religion. It also creates a new religious self-esteem either of the non-Brahmin variety or of the socially marginalised followers. Further, oral values are assimilated into the literal culture of Mahima Dharma as all Bhima Bhoi's collected work is based on the lyrical inspirations of the blind poet. The strong oral transmission of ascetic ideas through the devoted singing of *bhajana* can be regarded as one of the reasons for the successful spread of the ascetic religion in the rural and tribal regions of Odisha.

It can thus be concluded that in the Mahima Dharma doctrine, processes of cultural substitution and integration are interlinked with each other and that the oral and literal knowledge techniques exist in mutual coexistence and influence. The diversified regional character of the Mahima Dharma doctrine, its non-Brahmin priesthood, its combination of the local *shakti* concept with ascetics and finally its intermixture between orality and literality indicate a micro-structural pattern of *popular asceticism* in the South Asian religions.

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