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Bengal Blackie and the Sacred Slut: A Sahajayāna Buddhist Song

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And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?
WALT WHITMAN, *I Sing the Body Electric*

In the eighth century in rural Bengal there arose a heterodox Buddhist cult, a Tantric offshoot, Sahajayāna—the ‘vehicle’ of deliverance which is ‘innate’ or ‘spontaneous,’ the way which is ‘natural.’ The attitudes and practices of the Sahajiyā-cult are preserved and reflected in a collection of esoteric verses, the *Caryāpadas*, ‘Wanderer-Songs.’ These recondite songs, attributed to various Buddhist adepts (*siddhācāryas*), were written in Old Bengali (or Early Eastern New Indo-Aryan). They would have been sung by homeless, orderless Buddhist mendicants, *yogins* who earned their offerings, perhaps, by singing as they wandered from village to village. The songs are mysterious and rude, compelling and vulgar, sometimes playful and sometimes dreadful. I have translated here one by Kāṇha (v.1. Kāhnu < Skt. Kṛṣṇa—‘The Black One’) which I find particularly haunting. To appreciate this stunning song one might try to imagine it being sung by a man who is naked or wrapped in an animal skin: his hair is matted and his body is smeared with ashes; he carries a cranial begging bowl and perhaps a club or a crude musical instrument; he sings aloud as he wanders in the Bengal countryside, as he rests for the night in a grove of palm trees, or as he enters an impoverished village where the First Noble Truth of Buddhism is all too obvious. The rhymed couplets are chanted to a particular melody, in a particular musical mode (the *deśakha rāga* in this case). The wanderer cries out:

*Outside the town you go toward your tattered hut,
You go touching priests and touching monks, you slut.* (1)

*I’ll fuck you, slut, I Blackie, so full of lust,
I naked skullbearer, so far beyond disgust.* (2)

*She climbs upon the flower, there assumes a stance—
On the many petalled lotus the slut performs her dance.* (3)

*I sincerely ask you slut, and I truly want to know,
'In whose boat are you coming, in whose do you go?'* (4)

*Sell me a basket, slut, and a piece of string;
For you I've given up my own, given everything.* (5)

*You are the slut, I the beggar—a skull is all I own;
For you I wear the garland made from bits of bone.* (6)

*The slut eats the lotus root; the pond is full of strife;
And so I kill you slut,—I must take away your life.*¹ (7)

Through ambiguous language and esoteric allusions the poet simultaneously describes an internal, yogic process and an external, Tantric ritual; at once he delineates a philosophical system and intimates a mythological event. Divergent realms of experience and various levels of insight converge. The song is about the actualization of the *sahaja* state, the inherent state of 'great joy' (*mahāsukha*) in every human being which Kāṇha equates with *nirvāṇa*.² In this living 'body electric' the *sahaja*-adept realizes his freedom—he is beyond the touch of death, full of divinity, ecstatically aware. The *sahaja* state is a great mystery, ineffable and elusive. All efforts to explain it are, according to Kāṇha, as vain as the dumb man's efforts to explain what he knows to the deaf—the more one says about *sahaja* the more mistakes one makes.³ With this dictum in mind and convinced that the song is meant to be elusive, that its mysteriousness is a crucial aspect of its meaning, I have endeavored, nevertheless, to untangle some of the implications and ramifications of the images and allusions through a couplet-by-couplet exploration of the song, adding a literal rendering of each. This analysis is not intended to reduce the song to a particular meaning or message, but rather to open the song up, to show the many levels of meaning which are possible, the many dimensions of vision which are coalesced in it.

1. *nagara bāhiri re ḍombī tohori kuḍiā;
choi choi jāsi bāmha nāḍiā.*

Outside the city, O Ḍom woman, is your hut;
You go touching the Brahmin, touching the shaven-headed.

The 'slut' or '*ḍombī*' refers to a woman of the despised, low Ḍom caste—they earned their living as laundresses, vendors and prostitutes. Kāṇha calls the *ḍombī* a 'whore' (*cchināli*), a 'woman of the lowest caste on account of lust' (*kāma-caṇḍālī*).⁴ Tantric *yogins* employed them for the performance of sexual rituals. The Sahajiyā adept could demonstrate in her arms his transcendence of

caste distinctions and social taboos—for him the lowest was the highest, the most profane was the most sacred. The *ḍombī* is equated in the ‘Wanderer-Songs’ with the Buddhist ideal of ‘selflessness’ (*nairātmyā*) and with the personification of that ideal as the Goddess Nairātmādevī, the consort of the God Heruka. She is Sophia, Wisdom, Prajñā. She is the female energy or power, the *śakti*, and as such she finds her place in the elaborate syncretic system of correspondence which typifies Tantra. She is both within and without, both human and divine, both abstract and concrete. She is the *śūnyatā*, the ‘emptiness’, of the Buddhist tradition; and she is also the *kuṇḍalinī* of the Hindu tradition, the psycho-physiological ‘serpent power’ that is raised through *yoga*, awakened and made to move through the various plexuses (*cakras*) of the human body.

As the *ḍombī* moves she touches ‘priests and monks’,⁵ touches those who dare not touch her. That she is untouchable to the orthodox suggests that they have no access to wisdom (*prajñā*), to the absolute or void (*śūnyatā*). The ‘Wanderer-Songs’ are generally scornful of orthodoxy—Saraha explains that if a shaven head is the sign of spiritual perfection then a ‘girl’s ass’ must have attained such perfection.⁶ That they are sullied by contact with her and that she is not, proves her the more invulnerable, the more perfect. The more base or forbidden a thing is to the Hindu priests or Buddhist monks, the more splendid and desirable it is to the Sahajiyā-Wanderer.

The phrase ‘*bāhma nāḍī*’ plays on the Sanskrit ‘*brahma-nāḍī*’, a term used in yogic literature for the *susumna*, the central vessel in the body through which the *kuṇḍalinī* moves from *cakra* to *cakra*. Thus the image of the low-caste woman touching the monks and priests, suggesting the superiority of the heterodox vehicle, can also be construed as a description of the internal, physiological journey of the female energy through the *yogin*’s body—the city or town (*nagara*) is a traditional, Indian metaphor for the body. And so in order to get to her hut (*kuḍiā* < Skt. *kuṭīra*) the slut moves through the city touching priests and monks just as the *kuṇḍalinī* moves through the *yogin*’s body, via the *susumna*, to return to her true abode which is outside the body, beyond empirical existence, in the mythological realm. There the lowest woman becomes the highest Goddess.

2. *ālo ḍombī toe sama karaba ma sāṅga;*
nighiṇa kāṇha kapāli joi lāṅga.

Oh Dom woman, I shall perform copulation with you;
I am without aversion, Kāṇha (the Black One), a naked Kāpālīka.

The Kāpālīkas or ‘Skullbearers’ were Tantric adepts so named because they carried human skulls which they used as begging bowls, the receptacles for their food. The term originally referred to Śaiva ascetics, devotees of Śiva in his terrible form as the Great Destroyer, particularly known for their antinomian practices, their orgiastic indulgences and ritual violence. By the time of Kāṇha the

epithet could be used for any ascetic vagabond who carried the skull and pursued the 'left-hand' or 'sinister' (*vāma*) sexual rites which Buddhism seems to have absorbed from Śaiva Tantra. The Sanskrit commentary on the 'Wanderer-Songs' provides a false, but intriguing, etymology of the term—a 'ka-pālika' is one who guards or maintains (*pālayati*) the 'ka' which it defines as the 'great joy', the goal of Sahajiyā ritual ('*kaṃ mahāsukhaṃ pālayatīti kapālikaḥ*').

As a Kāpālika Kāṇha is 'beyond disgust' or 'without aversion' (*nighina* < Skt. *nighṛṇa*)—he can have sexual intercourse with the 'slut' without feeling revulsion for either the ordinarily polluting act or the normally repugnant woman. Early Buddhist asceticism was typified by the cultivation of aversion and disgust through contemplation of the bodily organs and processes. Through aversion to the senses and sense-objects, to the body and women in particular, the monk might cease desiring and in that cessation, that extinction, find liberation from this ever-burning world of old age, disease and death. In reaction to orthodox Buddhism, the Sahajiyā Tantrics cultivated desire, desire as a means to overcome the aversion, revulsion and fear which they felt limited freedom and blocked the way to the 'great joy' of liberation in this world. The body, with its internal cosmology, its vibrant network of vessels and plexuses, became the vehicle of liberation. The Tantric adept transcended the categories: pure and impure, good and evil, void and plenum, *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. 'There is no difference,' Kāṇha declared, 'between virtue and vice.'⁷ The most polluting objects—flesh and liquors, low-caste women and funerary remains—became ritual objects in the midnight liturgies. Initiates demonstrated that they had overcome aversion and discrimination, the usual human impulses. Lust was the same as disgust, libertinism the same as celibacy, violence the same as *ahiṃsa*.

Kāṇha rejected all traditional practices—incantation, recitation, oblation, meditation—'Without your constant love, dear girl how can one attain wisdom (*bohi* < Skt. *bodhi*) with this body?'⁸ Sexual intercourse was the central activity of the Sahajiyā Tantric *sādhana*. 'If one is not released while indulging in sensual pleasure,' Saraha asks, 'how can one talk of complete knowledge?'⁹ This ritualized copulation often involved an esoteric visualization—the *yogin* and *yoginī* were to imagine themselves to be the god and the goddess and they were, thereby, to experience human intercourse as divine union resulting in divine pleasure. Kāṇha making love to the slut enacts the primordial and eternal unity of Heruka and Nairātmā. A Sanskrit commentary on Kāṇha's *Dohā-kośa* explains that just as 'the world is destroyed by passion (*rāga*), so too one is liberated by means of passion (*rāgeṇa vadhyate loko rāgeṇaiva hi mucyate*).'¹⁰ Sexual intercourse was, for the Sahajiyās, a means of producing the semen which they valued as the material manifestation of the *bodhicitta*, the 'mind of enlightenment,' the very stuff of wisdom and illumination. This *bodhicitta*-sperm was retained during sexual union and then raised by the adept through the various *cakras*, following the internal *kuṇḍalinī-dombī*, and forced up and into the *uṣṇīṣa-kamala*, the cerebral lotus. When that lotus was so 'fertilized' the *yogin* experienced the 'great joy' (*mahāsukha*), the Sahajiyāna Buddhist term for

nirvāṇa. *Nirvāṇa* was, quite literally, conceived to be a perpetual and forceful, an eternal and infinite, orgasm. Elsewhere Kāpha sings of gaining release from rebirth by marrying the slut, by engaging in sexual intercourse with her day and night, not leaving her for a moment, utterly ‘crazy (*unmatto*) with *sahaja*!’¹⁰

3. *eka so padamā caūsāṭhi pākhuḍi;*
tahi caḍi nācaa ḍombi bāpuḍi.

One lotus which has sixty-four petals—
You mount it, poor Ḍom woman, and there you dance.

The sixty-four petalled lotus (*padamā* [< Skt. *padma*] *caūsāṭhi* [< Skt. *catuḥ-ṣaṣṭhi*] *pākhuḍi*) refers to the lumbar plexus, the first *cakra*, the *nirmāṇa-cakra* located behind the navel. The *kuṇḍalinī-ḍombī*, having begun her ascent of the *suṣumna*, dances in the internal lotus, animated by the heat of the *bodhicitta*-semen and inciting it to follow her. From this *cakra* she must be inspired to journey to the *dharma-cakra* in the heart and then to the *sambhoga-cakra* in the neck. These three plexuses correspond (although not in order) to the traditional Mahāyāna ‘bodies (*kāyas*) of the Buddha:’ the *nirmāṇa-cakra* (the ‘plexus of creation or transformation’), the *dharma-cakra* (the ‘plexus of the law or absolute’) and the *sambhoga-cakra* (the ‘plexus of enjoyment’). The modification of the six *cakras* of the traditional yogic schema and the ascription of Buddhist technical terms to them, transforms the Hindu physiological system into a purely Buddhist one. And in this syncretic process ‘enjoyment’ (*sambhoga*) has been made higher than the ‘law or teaching’ (*dharma*). And higher than enjoyment, highest of all, in the lotus of the mind, is *sahaja*.

4. *hālo ḍombi to puchami sadabhāve;*
āisasi jāsi ḍombi kāhari nāve.

Oh Ḍom woman, I ask you sincerely,
‘In whose boat, O Ḍom woman, do you come and go?’

The ‘boat’ (*nāve* < Skt. *nau*) in the arcane language of the ‘Wanderer-Songs’ is an ambiguous image. Kāpha equates it with the Three Refuges of Buddhism; the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha of the exoteric tradition and the Body, Mind and Speech of the esoteric tradition. Saraha identifies the boat as the ‘body’ (*kāa* < Skt. *kāya*) and Kambalāmbara associates it with yet another Buddhist term, *karuṇā*, ‘compassion,’ or that ideal personified as the divine male consort of Śūnyatā-devī, ‘Lady Nothingness.’ The conventional Buddhist association would be with the vehicle (*yāna*) with which one crosses the ocean of existence. In one song the *ḍombi* is said to navigate the boat to that other shore and to ferry passengers in it without charging a fee. Bhusuku equates the boat with the *bāja* (< Skt. *vajra*), the thunderbolt-penis-god, moving in a canal

which is the *pāuā* (< Skt. *padmā*), the lotus-vagina-goddess.¹¹ To preserve the ambiguity of Kāṇha's question, it might be paraphrased, 'In what *form* are you active?'—in which of her many forms, the personal, mythological, physiological or philosophical, can the female energy, personified as the 'slut', be known?

5. *tānti bikaṇaha ḍombi abara mo caṅgidā;*
tohora antare chāḍi naḍa piḍā.

Sell me string and a basket, O Ḍom woman;
For your sake I have given up my basket of reeds.

The basket (*piḍa* < Skt. *piṭa*) which Kāṇha has given up might suggest the orthodox teachings of Buddhism, the *tri-piṭaka*—he now wants to buy a new basket (*caṅgidā* < Skt. *caṅgerī*, possibly related to the adjective *caṅga*, 'understanding') and a string (*tānti* [Bengali for 'loom'] < Skt. *tanti*) suggesting and playing upon the word *tantra*. The Sahajiyā adept gives up his traditional understanding of Buddhism and is initiated by the *ḍombi-yoginī* into the Tantric understanding of Buddhism. The phrase '*naḍa-piḍā*' can be understood as an 'actor's kit' (Skt. *naṭapīṭa*), a make-up or costume basket, implying that the initiate has given up the illusory, empirical self, stripped away the phenomenal *persona*. In that Kāṇha frequently lengthens or shortens vowels for the sake of meter, '*naḍa*' can be taken, given the context, as a reference to the physiological channels (*nāḍi*, derived from *naḍa* as 'reed' or 'tube' in any case) in the body through which the breath and energy travel. Keeping the previous couplet in mind, this line may be an invitation to the slut-goddess-*kundalinī* to 'come and go,' to navigate her boat, in the purified channels in Kāṇha's body, a meaning consistent with Sahajayāna *sādhana*.

6. *tu lo ḍombi hāu kapālī;*
tohora antare moe ghalili hāḍeri mālī.

You are a Ḍom woman and I am a Kāpālīka;
For your sake I have donned the garland of bones.

The garland of bones (*hāḍeri mālī*) is a code phrase in the secret language (*sandhā-bhāṣā*) used in these songs and in other Tantric texts. In the *Hevajra Tantra* the 'garland of bones' (*asthya-ābharana*) is said to signify the 'unconditioned mind' or the '*nairātma*,' the psychological form of the female energy which manifests mythologically as the goddess, personally as the slut and physiologically as the *kundalinī*. Kāṇha sings: 'the wise keep her on (or 'it in') their neck.'¹² Thus the phrase 'I have donned the garland of bones' can suggest not only Kāṇha the ascetic with a Tantric ornament on his neck, but Kāṇha the sexual *yogin*, his neck embraced by the slut-consort. He is, furthermore, Heruka

embraced by Nairātma-devī, and he is Kāpha the *haṭha-yogin* who has forced the *kuṇḍalinī* into the *sambhoga-cakra* in his neck and has thereby attained the state of empty-mindedness, which preceeds *sahaja*, the ‘great joy,’ the orgasmic *nirvāṇa*.

7. *sarabara bhāṇjia ḍombi khāa molāna;*
mārami ḍombi lemi parāṇa.

The pond has been disturbed (or invaded); the Ḍom woman eats the
lotus-root;
I’ll kill you, O Ḍom woman, I’ll take away your life-breath.

As the lotuses grow in a pond, *cakras* are formed in the body—as the slut invades and disturbs the pond to gather the edible lotus-root or stalk (*molāna* < Skt. *mṛṇāla*) the female energy manifests in the *yogin*’s body to curl up in the ‘root-plexus’ (*mūlādhara-cakra*). The goal of Sahajayāna *sādhana* is to move the energy resting in the anal-root-plexus through the *suṣumna*-stalk up into the cerebral-lotus-plexus (*uṣṇīṣa-kamala*) and to keep it there, to absorb it completely and in that sense to destroy the female. Kāpha says that he became an adept by slaying the female, by killing the ‘mother-in-law, the husband’s sister, the wife’s sister, and the mother.’¹³ This is done through the control and eventual immobilization of breath, semen, and thought. Male and female are merged. The root and stem are no more—the process cannot be reversed or undone. The destruction of the female is her complete absorption—the male has taken over and arrested her ‘life-breath’ (*parāṇa* < Skt. *prāṇa*). On the mythological plane the god has reincorporated the goddess, reestablished the primordial unity out of which all things are evolved; on the philosophical level *karuṇā* and *śūnyatā*, *upāya* and *prajñā*, have become indistinguishable; on the physiological plane the *yogin* has absorbed the *kuṇḍalinī* and the *bodhicitta* into his mind; on the phenomenal level the slut and the skullbearer have experienced the ‘little death’, the suspension of ego activity, which is orgasm. Inner and outer, subject and object, are one. Body and soul are one. Thought, ego, sense, existence itself, all things have ended in an eternal moment of infinite joy and Kāpha sings in ecstasy:

mind
SAHAJA
fully-empty

body
gone
so what

how can you say ole’ Blackie’s passed away?
he pervades the world both night and day!

*fools are sad
seeing the seen
disappear*

*not seeing
the world
as-it-is
butter-in-milk*

*is the breaking of the wave the end of the ocean?
the sadness of our death is a very foolish notion!*

*universe
nothing comes
nothing goes*

*Black Yogī
delights
in this
TRUTH¹⁴*

NOTES

The songs have been edited by P. C. Bagchi and S. B. Śāstrī—*Caryāgītikoṣa of the Buddhist Siddhas* (Santiniketan, 1956)—and the textual numeration used in the notes refer to that edition. For the songs and *Dohās* of Kāṇha and Saraha I have used M. Shahidullah's *Les Chants Mystiques de Kāṇha et de Saraha* (Paris, 1928).

1. Kāṇha, *Caryāpada* 10.
2. Idem, *Dohā* 27: 'so eho bhāṅge mahāsuha nibbāṇa ekku re.'
3. Idem, *Caryāpada* 40: 'te jāi bolī te tabī tāla . . . kāle boba sambohia jāisā.'
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Taking *nāḍiā* as adjectival she touches 'shaven headed Brahmins.' Following the commentary, 'she touches Brahmins and boys.'
6. Saraha, *Dohā* 7: 'lomoppāṭṭane atthi siddhi tā jubāi nitambaba.'
7. Kāṇha, *Dohā* 10: 'pāpa-puṇṇa rabie kuccha nāhi . . .'
8. Ibid., 29: 'to biṇu taruṇi niraṇṭara nehe bobi ki lābhāi eṇa bi debe.'
9. Saraha, *Dohā* 21: 'jāi bhiḍi bisaa ramanta na muccaī pariāṇa ki uccaī.'
10. Kāṇha, *Caryāpada* 19.
11. *Caryāpada* 13 (Kāṇha), 38 (Saraha), 8 (Kambalāmbara), 14 (Ḍombī), 49 (Bhusuku).
12. Kāṇha, *Caryāpada* 18: 'bidujana loa tore kaṇṭhe na melai.'
13. Ibid., 11: 'māri śāsu naṇanda ghare śālī / māa māri kāṇha bhaīa kabāli.'
14. Ibid., 42: (kāmoda rāga)
*cia sabaje śāṇā saṃpunnā /
kāṇḍha biyoe mā bobi bisannā //
bhāṇa kāise se Kāṇhu nāhi /
pharāi anudina teloe samāi //
mūḍhā diṭṭha nāṭha dekki kāara /
bhāga tarāṅga ki sosāi sāara //
mūḍha acchante loa na pekkhai /
dudha māḷhe laḍa acchante na dekkhai //
bhāba jāi na āwai esu koi /
āisa bhabe bilasāi Kāṇhila joi //*