



DESIRE, BLOOD AND POWER - GEORGES BATAILLE AND THE STUDY OF HINDU TANTRA IN NORTHEAST INDIA

DESEO, SANGRE Y PODER – GEORGES BATAILLE Y EL ESTUDIO DEL TANTRA HINDÚ EN EL NORESTE DE LA INDIA

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Abstract:

This article examines Hindu Tantra and goddess worship in northeastern India, by using but also critically rethinking several of Bataille's insights into eroticism, sacrifice, and transgression. Specifically, the article examines the worship of the goddess Kamakhya and her temple in Assam, which is revered as one of the oldest "power centers" or seats of the goddess in South Asia and as the locus of the goddess's sexual organ. In many ways, Bataille's work is extremely useful for understanding the logic of transgression and the use of impurity in this tradition. At the same time, however, this example also highlights some tensions in Bataille's work, particularly the question of female sexuality and women's agency. In the case of Assamese Tantra, female sexuality plays a central and integral role in the larger phenomena of transgression, expenditure, and ecstatic religious experience. As such, it can be fruitfully put into dialogue with Bataille's work for a critical "theory of religion" today.

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza el tantra hindú y la adoración de la diosa en el noreste de la India. Para esto se vale de varias de las ideas de Bataille sobre el erotismo, el sacrificio y la transgresión, al tiempo que las repiensa de manera crítica. Específicamente, analiza la adoración de la diosa Kamakhya y su templo en Assam, que es venerado como uno de los más antiguos «centros de poder» o asientos de la diosa en el sur de Asia y como el centro del órgano sexual de la diosa. En muchos sentidos, el trabajo

de Bataille es extremadamente útil para comprender la lógica de la transgresión y el uso de la impureza en esta tradición. Al mismo tiempo, sin embargo, este ejemplo también pone de manifiesto algunas tensiones en el trabajo de Bataille, especialmente, la cuestión de la sexualidad femenina y la representación de las mujeres. En el caso del tantra asamés, la sexualidad femenina juega un papel central e integral en los fenómenos más amplios de la transgresión, los gastos y el éxtasis en la experiencia religiosa. Como tal, se puede poner fructíferamente en diálogo con el trabajo de Bataille para una «teoría de la religión» crítica en la actualidad.

Keywords / Palabras Claves: Sacrifice, Transgression, Eroticism, Sexuality, Gender, Women, Tantra, sacrificio, transgresión, erotismo, sexualidad, género, mujer

But the embrace restores us, not to nature...but rather to the totality in which man has his share by losing himself. For an embrace is not just a fall into the animal muck, but the anticipation of death...The point is that the totality reached...is reached only at the price of a sacrifice: eroticism reaches it precisely inasmuch as love is a kind of immolation.

--Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*¹

Merely by worshiping the female sexual organ [yoni] the worship of the Goddess as Power [Shakti] is performed. The adept should worship with the blood flowing from the sacrifices of birds, etc. and with the words “yoni, yoni,” while reciting his prayers.

-- *The Yoni Tantra* (16th century)²

Although he described his own work as a kind of “atheology,” more concerned with God’s death than with God’s existence, Georges Bataille must be counted as one of the 20th century’s most important theorists of religion. From his own *Theory of Religion* to his work on mysticism, sacrifice and erotic spirituality, Bataille has influenced a wide range of theorists from philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to anthropologists and historians of religions such as Michael Taussig and Amy Hollywood.³

To date, however, most of the work on Bataille and religion has focused on his implications for the study of Christianity, particularly Christian mysticism, a subject that interested Bataille himself intensely. With a few exceptions,⁴ there has been little effort to explore the implications of

Bataille's work for the study of Hinduism, Buddhism or any other Asian tradition. This is ironic and unfortunate, given Bataille's own interest in Tibetan Buddhism and in Hindu traditions such as yoga and Tantra.

As Andrew Hussey notes in his study of Bataille's mysticism, "although Bataille disparaged any appropriation of Eastern methods which recognized any form of cephalic 'sommet' as the 'point seul' of meditation, and although the vocabulary he uses to describe the movement of inner experience belongs largely to the Western tradition, Bataille was well-read in Classical Hinduism and Buddhism."⁵

Bataille was quite familiar with the works of Alexandra David-Néel on Tibetan Buddhism, Mircea Eliade's work on yoga, and Romain Roland's biographies of the Hindu saints Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. He was particularly interested, for example, in the Hindu goddess Kali, dark mother of time and death, whom he described as the goddess of "terror, of destruction, of night and of chaos."⁶

Moreover, in late 1938 and 1939, Bataille also began to practice yoga and meditation himself, a practice that, he recalls, helped him realize the "fundamental connection between religious ecstasy and eroticism" and the "infinite capacity for reversal" that characterizes his own atheological form of mystical "inner experience."⁷ In short, Bataille's own work on religion was significantly influenced by his encounter with Hinduism and Buddhism; and in turn, his insights into religious experience have the potential to shed some useful light on non-Western traditions, as well.

In this chapter, I will focus on the tradition of Hindu Tantra⁸ and goddess worship in northeast India, employing but also critically rethinking several of Bataille's key insights into the relations between eroticism, sacrifice and transgression. Specifically, I will examine the worship of the goddess Kamakhya and her temple in Assam, which is revered as one of the oldest, most important "power centers" or seats of

the goddess in South Asia and, indeed, as the locus of the goddess' *yonī* or sexual organ.⁹ As the very embodiment of divine desire (*kama*), Kamakhya temple is also the site of the goddess' annual menstruation, which takes place for three days each summer and is the occasion of her most important festival. At the same time, Assam is also often identified as the original homeland of Hindu Tantra and particularly of Tantric sexual rituals, which involve explicit transgressions of conventional social boundaries and the oral consumption of menstrual and other sexual fluids as the ultimate source of spiritual power.¹⁰

In my analysis, I will by no means attempt to simplistically apply Bataille's work to this South Asian example. Instead, I want to use but also *critically modify* some of Bataille's basic ideas of erotism, the link between sensuality, death and mystical experience, and his analysis of sexual and religious transgression. Bataille, I will suggest, is extremely useful for understanding the logic of transgression and the systematic use of impurity in Hindu Tantra. Whereas the Tantric traditions have long been misunderstood by modern scholars – both Indian and Western—Bataille gives us some key insights into the role of ritual transgression in Tantric practice. Drawing on Bataille, I will suggest that Tantric practice involves a kind of “unlimited transgression” that aims to shatter not just conventional social norms but the very boundaries of the finite self in intense union with the divine. However, as various feminist authors have pointed out, Bataille's work reflects a consistent masculine and phallic bias, with a general lack of attention to female sexuality or to women as active agents.¹¹ In the case of Hindu Tantra in Assam, I will argue, female sexuality holds a central place and plays an integral role in the larger phenomena of transgression, expenditure and ecstatic religious experience. As such, we can also use this South Asian example and

Hindu concepts of desire and power to critically re-imagine Bataille's work for the contemporary study of religion, as well.

Matrix of Power: Kamakhya and The Shakta Pithas in South Asian History

Since at the least the 8th century, the temple of the mother goddess Kamakhya has been revered as one of the oldest, most important and most powerful seats of goddess worship and Hindu Tantra in South Asia. As the locus of the goddess own sexual organ (*yoni*) Kamakhya temple is literally the "mother of all seats of power." In this sense, Kamakhya temple is can be called the "matrix of power," as both the maternal womb (*matr*, etymologically related to Latin *mater* and English *matrix*) that gives birth to the universe and all its elements (*matrkas*).¹²

From its origins, however, this temple is intimately tied to the dual themes of sacrificial violence and sexual transgression. Indeed, it is a stunning illustration of what Bataille calls the "similarity between the act of love and sacrifice" and the ways in which the *petit mort* of sexual union often mirrors the larger death of ritual killing.¹³ According to a widespread series of myths that appears in the Hindu epics and mythological literature, the origin of Kamakhya goes as follows: Once upon a time Lord Shiva (the cosmic destroyer in the Hindu pantheon) was married to the goddess Sati. However, Sati's father, Daksha, very much disliked Shiva, who is a frightening, wild, outsider deity; so when Daksha threw a huge sacrificial feast and invited all the other gods, he intentionally did not invite Shiva. This dis-invitation was such a profound insult that Sati threw herself onto the sacrificial fire, making herself the tragic victim of the ritual. Shiva then went into a rage, destroyed the entire ritual, and beheaded Daksha, thus making his father-in-law the ironic victim of his

own sacrifice. Shiva then carried the corpse of Sati away on his shoulder, and his anger was so intense that it threatened to destroy the entire universe. To defuse the situation, the other gods dismembered Sati's body, and the various pieces of her corpse fell in different holy places of India, which then became the "seats of power" or *shakta pithas*. Among the holiest of these became the seat of her *yonis*, which fell in Assam, and it is here that Shiva and Sati eternally reside in secret sexual union. As Lord Shiva declares in one 11th century text from Assam, "in this most sacred *pitha*...the goddess is secretly joined with Me. Sati's sexual organ, which was severed and fell there, became a stone; and there Kamakhya is present."¹⁴

Since at least the 11th or 12th century, Kamakhya temple has been famous not simply as the primary seat of the goddess' sexual organ but also as the locus of her annual menstruation. To this day, the most important festival here is Ambuvaci Mela, which celebrates the goddess' menstruation during the summer month of Asadha (June-July). Occurring at the beginning of the monsoon season, with the coming of the rains after the heat of summer, Ambuvaci marks the flow of the goddess' life-giving blood to the earth. But it is also a celebration that reflects the profound ambivalence of the goddess' blood and the power it embodies, a power that is tied to impurity and to the dangerous potency of sexual fluids.¹⁵

In order to understand the deeper significance of this festival, therefore, we need to understand the place of menstruation and menstrual blood in the Hindu imagination. Like all bodily fluids, and particularly sexual fluids, menstrual blood is considered to be an extremely powerful but ambivalent substance. It is, on the one hand, the sacred power of life and procreation itself. But it is also, on the other hand, extremely impure and polluting. As David Gordon White observes,

"Indian traditions have always viewed sexual fluids, and most particularly menstrual blood, as polluting, powerful and therefore dangerous substances."¹⁶ And the act of menstruation is likewise regarded as a powerful and creative, but also dangerous and polluting event. As Madhu Khanha notes, "A woman during menstruation is compared to a fallen woman...[The] temporary untouchability attributed to women and the overwhelming number of menstrual taboos imposed on them go to show that the first three days of menstruation were looked upon as dangerous and threatening."¹⁷

Thus, when Kamakhya menstruates for three days each year, she is considered to be in a state of "impurity, just like the impurity of woman due to her menstruation,"¹⁸ and her temple must be closed to all visitors during these days. But it is this very same impure, dangerous and potentially destructive blood of the goddess that is believed to bring life and creative energy to the earth and to her devotees. Thus on the fourth day after her menstruation, the temple doors are opened up again, and red cloths representing the bloody menstrual flow are distributed to the thousands of pilgrims who thereby receive the power and grace of the goddess. As one cotemporary priest explains, the red cloth represents the *nirmali* of the goddess' menstrual flow -- that is, the sacred "remains" of an offering or sacrifice. It is this bloody remnant of her powerful impurity that brings grace and life to the pilgrims' homes: "as the sacred remains of this festival, the goddess' red garments (the cloth she was wearing while in her menstrual period) are very fruitful, and the pilgrims wear them as amulets, considering them to be very holy."¹⁹

As such, the powerful but impure blood of the goddess is a striking illustration of Bataille's key insight into the dual nature of the sacred – a sacred that is not simply pure but rather contains both "pure and impure," both light and dark, both "right" and left-hand" aspects. "The

realm of sacred things is composed of the pure and of the impure,” Bataille suggests, “...Pure or favourable sacredness has been dominant since pagan antiquity. But ...impure or ill-omened sacredness was there underneath.”²⁰ As David Shulman likewise comments in his discussion of goddess worship and sacrifice in South India: “in a religion that ultimately asserts the divine nature of terrestrial existence, power – however dark its workings, however terrible its effects, never loses its sacred character.”²¹

This dynamic of purity and impurity, sacrality and power is also reflected in the primary forms of public worship of the goddess Kamakhya. Since at least the 10th century, the most important public ritual offered to the goddess has been blood sacrifice, the regular performance of which is represented in numerous royal copper plate inscriptions and in rigorous detail in Assamese texts such as the *Kalika Purana*.²² And sacrifice is in turn part of a larger ritual complex and circulating flow of blood and power. Just as the goddess menstruates each year, offering her fertile, life-giving blood to the earth, so too, blood is returned to her periodically in the form of animal (and at one time human) victims.²³

The form of sacrifice we see at Kamakhya, however, is quite different from the traditional forms of sacrifice described in the Vedas, the priestly scriptures that lie at the foundation of all later Hindu traditions. Indeed, sacrifices offered to the goddess are in many ways based on explicit inversions and deliberate transgressions of traditional Vedic rites. Whereas the Vedic sacrifice allows only pure, that is, domestic animals, such as horses, cows, sheep and goats, Assamese texts such as the *Kalika Purana* recommend the sacrifice of everything from buffaloes, boars, alligators, and lizards to rhinos, lions and even elephants. Later Assamese texts such as the *Yogini Tantra* (17th century) also recommend

offerings of rabbits, tortoises and a range of other wild animals. As various scholars have noted, this motley assortment of victims probably reflects, not any traditional Vedic rite, but rather the sacrificial practices of the many non-Hindu indigenous traditions of the northeast hills, who have long offered sacrifices of boars, fowl and other non-Vedic animals.²⁴

Even today, Kamakhya's most prized victim is the buffalo -- a highly non-Vedic offering, which is killed in a clearly non-Vedic manner by beheading. Whereas victims in the Vedic rite were dispatched by an unbloody act of suffocation, the buffalo is killed in a quite bloody act of beheading, and the focal point of the entire rite is the presentation of the blood and the severed head to the goddess. Again, this is a practice that is much closer to local tribal rites of northeast India than to any Vedic practice.²⁵ As Madeleine Biarreau points out in her discussion of sacrifice and goddess worship, the impure and non-Vedic offering of the buffalo is, paradoxically, perhaps the most fitting offering for the goddess as destroyer of evil: "the buffalo is a savage beast, a stranger to the sacrificial world. Vedic literature does not count it among its permitted animals. But it is apt by this fact, to play the role of the principle that is antithetical to the goddess, the incarnation of total evil."²⁶ As such, the buffalo is very much a "victim, sacred and cursed" in Bataille's sense -- that is, "the accursed share" that is withdrawn from the mundane order of things in order to be "utterly destroyed" in sacrifice.²⁷

In short, the public ritual performances at Kamakhya represent a cyclical flow of power, embodied in the physical form of blood: the impure but life-giving blood of the goddess flows to the earth each year during her divine menstruation, and blood is regularly given back to her in the form of animal offerings -- and particularly offerings of non-Vedic, impure animals such as buffaloes. But this circulation is also intimately linked to impurity and to the "left hand" or "dark" side of the sacred in Bataille's

sense; indeed, it is precisely through the systematic manipulation of impurity – in the form of menstruation and the offering of impure animals by bloody beheading – that one can tap into and unleash the tremendous energy of the goddess that lies within the cosmos and the social order.²⁸

The Sacrifice of Desire: Sexual Rites and the Secret Sacrifice

In addition to the public performance of animal sacrifice, however, Kamakhya has also long been worshiped in esoteric Tantric rites that, again, focus primarily on the circulation of blood and power. According to a key 10th century text called the *Kaulajnana Nirnaya*, it was in Assam that the great sage Matsyendranath first learned esoteric sexual rites from the many female *yoginis* dwelling there; and these techniques then became the basis for one of the oldest schools of Tantric practice, the Yogini Kaula tradition.²⁹ And here we see the links between death and sensuality, between “bloody sacrifice and sexual rites, eros and thanatos,” articulated more explicitly than even Bataille himself might have imagined.³⁰

In many of the Tantric texts from this region, the sexual rite is explicitly compared to a sacrificial ritual and is really the esoteric counterpart to the public ritual performance. Following a very old metaphor dating back to the Upanishads (7th-4th century BCE), the sexual rite is described as the “lineage sacrifice” or “primordial sacrifice” (the *kula yaga* or *adi yaga*), with the shedding of semen likened to the offering poured onto the sacrificial fire of the *yonis*.³¹ The focus of the rite is the oral consumption of sexual fluids, particularly menstrual blood, as a sacramental meal. While considered highly impure outside of the ritual context, these fluids become the ultimate source of both worldly and otherworldly power in Tantric practice. As described in the *Kaulajnana Nirnaya*, these rites

center primarily on the oral consumption of menstrual blood, semen and other bodily fluids, which are first emitted, then collected and eaten as a sacramental meal. Thus, “One should fill a vessel with blood together with an equal amount of semen. Menstrual blood, a woman’s nectar, and semen are mixed with alcohol by the Brahmin...Together with a prostitute or a maiden, the preceptor should place the sexual fluid into the mouth of the initiate. Thereafter he becomes a yogin.”³²

One of the most explicit descriptions of Tantric sexual rites occurs in the *Yoni Tantra*, a 16th century text from Cooch Behar, immediately adjacent to Assam, which is closely connected to Kamakhya’s worship. Here the body of the female partner or *shakti* is here imagined as the female embodiment of the goddess herself. Her *yonī* is said to be identical with the great *yonī pitha* itself, and, by entering it, one is entering the *pitha* and worshiping the goddess in her secret form. In this account, the sexual rite is both *compared* to and *accompanied by* the offering of animal sacrifice. The sexual rite is a sacrificial offering (*bali*) that involves the oral consumption of semen and menstrual blood as a food offering (*naivedyam*); and it is accompanied by the offering (*bali*) of various kinds of animal flesh. Sexual union here should also ideally take place while the female is menstruating -- normally a highly impure and inauspicious time for intercourse³³ -- and in the inverse position -- with the woman on top -- and the focus is primarily on her menstrual fluids as a sacramental offering:

He should make a sacrificial offering [*bali*] with his own semen and the menstrual blood... At the beginning of the night he should make an offering [*bali*] of cooked fish, a fowl’s egg, mouse flesh, buffalo flesh, human flesh, wine, meat and flour cakes...With great effort, he should penetrate the *yonī*, having first caressed her breasts. The goddess herself is in the form of the *shakti* [female partner], if the intercourse is performed

in the inverse position [*viparitarata*]. Meditating on the goddess, he should worship the goddess, which is in the form of the *shakti*...With the vulva and penis, with the washing of the vulva...and with the nectar of the vulva and penis, the best of adepts should make a food offering [*naivedyam*].³⁴

As J.A. Schoterman points out in his discussion of the *Yoni Tantra*, the offering and consumption of the sexual fluid (the *yonitattva*) is many ways a Tantric analogue of the consumption of the Soma beverage in the Vedic sacrificial rite: “Just as the pure soma juice is mixed with milk or water,” Schoterman notes, “likewise the *sadhaka* mixes the *yonitattva* with wine or water...The Vedic drinking of the Soma has been transformed into a yogic practice connected with the *yonitattva*.”³⁵

In sum, the esoteric or Tantric ritual cycle again forms a circuit or cyclical flow of power that is parallel to the public ritual cycle of blood sacrifice. Here the power of the goddess flows through the menstrual blood and semen of her human embodiments, the male and female *tantrikas*, and it culminates in the *yonitattva*, the combined male and female sexual fluids, which are first offered to the Goddess and then consumed orally by the initiates. At the same, however, this is also a highly transgressive and even inverted sort of sacrifice that focuses primarily on the impure, dangerous but also creative power inherent in the sexual fluids. Again, the Tantric rite or sexual sacrifice also represents a profound inversion of the Vedic model, by deliberately using substances that are profoundly impure and polluting by mainstream Hindu social standards. Not only should the sexual rite should be performed when the female is menstruating – normally an extremely impure sort of thing to do – but the intercourse explicitly violates normal laws of class and caste; and its final aim is not the normal mingling of

sexual fluids to conceive a child, but rather the oral consumption of the sexual fluids as a source of esoteric power. But again, it is this very impurity that releases the tremendous power of the goddess which flows through the bodies and sexual fluids of her devotees.

Yet this explicit use of impurity and transgression in Tantric ritual is by no means a matter of pure chaos or sexual anarchy. As Bataille suggests, the power of transgression does not lie simply in mere hedonism and sexual license; rather, it involves the careful dialectic or play (*le jeu*) between taboo and transgression, prohibition and the violation, through which one constructs and then systematically overturns the law. Indeed, “often the transgression of a taboo is no less subject to rules than the taboo itself.”³⁶ One must first carefully construct and even *exaggerate* the laws of purity before one can violate them; for it is precisely this dialectic of purity and impurity, law and violation, that unleashes the “explosive surge of transgression” and breaks down the boundaries of the isolated self:

The regularity of transgressions do not affect the intangible stability of the prohibition since they are its expected complement -- just as the diastolic movement completes a systolic one, or just as explosion follows upon compression. The compression is not subservient to the explosion...it gives it increased force.³⁷

Tantric ritual, we might say, functions like a kind of spiritual slingshot, which is first stretched as tightly as possible and then suddenly released in order to propel the adept into ecstatic liberation. Or to use a more apt metaphor, it works like a kind of socio-nuclear fission: it first exaggerates and then shatters the laws that make up the social organism at the most fundamental, atomic level, releasing an explosive burst of energy. As Alexis Sanderson suggests, the Tantric “path of power” sets itself up in

deliberate contrast to the orthodox path of purity. Whereas the path of purity seeks to eliminate the dangerous pollution of marginal and unclean forces, the Tantric path seeks precisely to “unleash all the awesome power of impurity and so achieve a kind of “unlimited power through a visionary art of impurity;” for “the absolute of the impure is absolute Power.”³⁸

Transgression without Limits

Like most Tantric literature, the Tantric texts from Assam discuss in great deal the sorts of powers and supernatural abilities (*siddhis*) that belong to the one who is able to unleash this tremendous energy of the goddess. He becomes indomitable in battle, he can control princes, kings and women; he can conquer the three fold universe, and so on.³⁹ Ultimately, however, the final aim of transgression goes far beyond the mere overstepping of social taboos or the acquisition of worldly power.

Here I would argue that Bataille’s work sheds some extremely useful light on the larger role of transgression in Tantric practice. As Bataille suggests, the phenomena of blood sacrifice, ritual violence and sexual transgression do all share certain common links; they each involve the breaking down of normal boundaries, overflowing the limits of both the social order and the physical self through the emission of blood and fluids: “The external violence of the sacrifice reveals the internal violence of the creature, seen as loss of blood and ejaculations.”⁴⁰ For they each work by breaking down the walls of isolation that separate individual beings, bursting through the limits of the finite, discontinuous ego and opening the self up to the limitless expanse of the infinite: “The embrace restores us,” Bataille writes, “not to nature...but rather to the totality in which man has his share by *losing himself*. For an embrace is not just a

fall into the animal much, but the anticipation of death...The point is that the totality reached...is reached only the price of a sacrifice: eroticism reaches it precisely inasmuch as love is a kind of immolation.”⁴¹ Thus the ultimate or “infinite transgression,” for Bataille, is not simply the release of power through bloodshed or sexual union, rather it is the transgression of the very boundaries of the self through mystical experience, the complete dissolution of the finite ego into a state of “divine continuity:”

In the region where the autonomy of the subject breaks away from all restraints, where the categories of good and evil, of pleasure and pain are finitely surpassed, where nothing is connected with anything any more, where there is no longer any form or mode that means anything but the instantaneous annihilation of whatever might claim to be a form or model, so great a spiritual energy is needed that it is all but inconceivable. On this scale, the chain releases of atomic energy are nothing...[T]he universe is the only limit of our revolt...an unlimited energy engages one in a limitless revolt.⁴²

While surely not identical, Bataille’s description of radical and unlimited transgression does shed some useful light onto the nature of transgression in Tantric practice. As Alexis Sanderson concludes, the goal of Tantric transgression goes far beyond the overstepping of mere social or moral boundaries; rather its ultimate aim is nothing short of a radical overstepping of ordinary human consciousness and conventional reality itself:

This inhibition, which preserves the path of purity and barred his entrance into the path of power, was to be obliterated through the experience of a violent, duality-devouring expansion of consciousness beyond the narrow confines of orthodox control into the domain of

excluded possibilities, by gratifying with wine, meat and...caste-free intercourse.”⁴³

Thus the liberated *tantrika* has shattered not just the boundaries of social class and purity, but ultimately the limits of the human condition itself. Such a being has transcended any sense of disgust or fear; to him semen and menstrual blood, excrement and urine are pure; he can eat any animal flesh and drink any wine without fear of pollution.⁴⁴ Thus the key Tantric text, the *Kaulajñana Nirṇaya*, describes the state of ultimate liberation as one in which all dualities between and impure, merit and sin, sacred ritual and defiling pollution have been radically dissolved: “[the yogi] always perceives sweet smells and bad smells without duality...The sin of killing a Brahmin and the result of a horse sacrifice, bathing in all the sacred waters and contact with barbarians – the yogi surely does not perceive any [distinction] between these actions.”⁴⁵ Having exploded all the dualities of the limited human world, the yogi has thus become equal to the gods themselves. According to the *Akulavira Tantra*, a text also said to have been revealed to Matsyendranath in Assam,

He is Shiva, he is the Supreme Deity....He is an Arhant and even Buddha. He is himself the goddess and the god; he is the disciple and the guru. He is himself meditation and the one who meditates, and he is himself everywhere the deity [meditated upon].⁴⁶

Here we see that the ultimate transgression is the overstepping of the very boundary between human and divine. Neither mere hedonistic debauchery nor monistic abstraction, this is a far more radical experience that shatters the very boundaries of reality itself – an experience much closer to Bataille’s transgression without limits.

Conclusions: Gender, Power and Sexual Difference

To conclude, I would like to suggest that the example of Tantra in northeast India not only illustrates the ways in which Bataille's work can be used to shed light on South Asian traditions; more important, I also want to suggest we can also use the South Asian materials to critique and rethink certain aspects of Bataille, as well. The best use of Bataille – or of any modern theoretical approach, I would argue – is not just a simplistic application of his work to other historical and cultural examples, but rather a more critical dialogue in which both sides are transformed by the encounter.

Perhaps most significantly, the case of Assamese Tantra highlights an important tension and ambivalence in Bataille's otherwise very useful insights into the dynamics of sexuality, violence and transgression. On the one hand, Bataille clearly emphasizes the radical, orgiastic nature of sexuality and transgression, the power of erotism to dissolve and shatter fixed individual identities. Yet on the other hand, as various feminist critics have observed, Bataille's work is also largely focused on male and phallic sexuality, to the general exclusion of female, non-phallic eroticism. Not only does Bataille share with other French theorists such as Michel Foucault a certain "gender blindness" and a lack of attention to the ways in which male and female erotic experience is constructed differently in different historical and cultural contexts; more fundamentally, many critics have argued, he reflects a clear masculine bias and a general tendency to treat women as passive objects and victims. As Ladelle McWhorter observes, most feminists find Bataille "disturbing and, to varying degrees, anti-feminist if not misogynist. A cursory reading of almost any of his texts at any stage of his career gives

ample reason for this assessment....Bataille's perspective on the world was that of a heterosexual male, and all too often that perspective valorizes itself, seemingly to the exclusion of all others, so that Bataille begins to sound like a heterosexist masculine supremacist."⁴⁷ This phallic bias can be seen throughout Bataille's work, most notably in texts such as *Erotism*, which consistently emphasizes the primary, dominant, active and even violently destructive role of the male over the female:

The male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive female side is essentially one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled.⁴⁸

I must emphasize that the female partner in eroticism was seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer, both during the consummation losing themselves in the continuity established by the first destructive acts.⁴⁹

Yet despite this masculine bias and general absence of women as agents with perspectives or voices, some feminist authors such as McWhorter also argue that there is room for a radical theorization of difference and non-phallic sexuality in Bataille's work. Using the feminist approach of Luce Irigaray, McWhorter argues that Bataille "resists the primacy of...phallic subjectivity... [H]e resists the voracious incorporation of the other that marks so much of our masculinist, heterosexist culture; he refuses to reinstall the primal one in the void left by the individuated phallic subject... Bataille attempts to think difference set free from its servitude to the same."⁵⁰

As such, the example of the Tantric goddess Kamakhya can be very fruitfully put into dialogue with Bataille and his ambivalent attitude toward gender. While Bataille remains torn between an ideal of radically

transgressive sexuality and a lingering masculine bias, the example of Kamakhya offers an ideal of sexuality and erotic power that is rooted primarily in the *yonī* rather than simply in the *lingam* or phallus. The concept of power (*shakti*) in Sanskrit is itself a feminine noun, imagined as the divine female energy that circulates through the cosmos, the body and human society alike; and its *dépense* or expenditure flows not just through semen but also through the menstrual blood of the goddess and the sexual fluids of the female partner. In the words of the *Yoni Tantra*, “without the vulva...everything would be futile. Simply by the worship of the *yonī*, one can obtain the fruit of all religious practices.”⁵¹ “Hari, Hara, and all the gods, the agents of the creation, maintenance and destruction of the universe are all born from the *yonī*.”⁵²

This is not to say, of course, that Hindu Tantra is “feminist” in any modern Western sense of the term; it certainly is not and contains many hetero-normative and essentialist assumptions of its own.⁵³ But it *does* contain a model of sexuality that is both centered on the radical logic of transgression *and* rooted in the non-phallic power the *yonī*. It embodies a powerful vision of “transgression without limits” that depends as much on the flowing energy of the female sexual fluids as on the virile expenditure of semen. As such, it provides a very instructive counterpart to Bataille’s work and thus an extremely useful way to think about sexual difference in contemporary discourse.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume II* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), p.119.

² J.A. Schoterman, ed., *The Yoni Tantra* (Delhi: Manohar, 1980), 3.16-17.

³ In addition to Bataille's own various writings on religion, such as *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), see also Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Michael Taussig, "Transgression," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp.349-364; Allan Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Andrew Hussey, *The Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000).

⁴ See Hugh B. Urban, "The Power of the Impure: Transgression, Violence and Secrecy in Bengali Shakta Tantra and Modern Western Magic," *Numen* 50, no.3 (2003): 269-308; Hugh B. Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp.68-9, 118-121.

⁵ Hussey, *Inner Scar*, p.65. See Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.78.

⁶ Bataille, ed., *Ecyropaedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p.55.

⁷ Bataille, *Tears of Eros* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1989), p.206. See also Jean Bruno, "Les techniques d'illumination chez Georges Bataille," *Critique* 195/196 (1963): 706-721. Bruno draws many parallels between Bataille's own unique method of meditation and Tantric practice. He suggests that Bataille achieved a "lucide somnolence" in 1938 and advanced states of *samadhi* like those described in the *Vijnana Bhairava*, a *tantra* from the Kashmir region, in which exterior and interior states are interchangeable (p.716). Hussey likewise argues that there is an "Oriental basis" to Bataille's method in works from this period such as "La pratique de la joie devant la mort." "Bataille here draws upon the cosmology of Tantric literature and in particular borrows from tantric meditative practice which aims at the annihilation of perceived chronological realizes" (*Inner Scar*, p.69).

⁸ Tantra is notoriously difficult to define and often misunderstood. In simplest terms, Tantra is a complex body of texts and traditions that spread throughout the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions of Asia since the 4th or 5th century. As Madeleine Biardeau suggests, perhaps the most unique feature of Tantra as a religious path is that it attempts to transform desire or *kama* – which is normally a source of bondage – into the supreme path to spiritual liberation. Tantra could thus be defined as a "means of harnessing *kama* – desire (in every sense of the word) – and all of its related values to the service of deliverance" (quoted in André Padoux, *Vac: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990], p.40). See also David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) p.9.

⁹ Various scholars have identified Assam as the "principal center" and "birthplace" of goddess worship in South Asia and as the "tantric country *par excellence*;" see Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1921), p.278; Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.305; D.C. Sircar, *The Sakta Pithas* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1973).

¹⁰ Material for this chapter is drawn from research in northeast India between 2000 and 2008, using sources in Sanskrit, Assamese and Bengali. Some of this material has been published in my book *The Power of Tantra*. For other discussions of Tantra in Assam, see Loriliai Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); K.R. van Kooij, *Worship of the Goddess according to the Kalikapurana* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972).

¹¹ See Ladelle McWhorter, "Is there Sexual Difference in the Work of Georges Bataille?" *International Studies in Philosophy* 27, no.1 (1995): 33-41: "Despite his emphasis on radical, orgiastic sexuality, Bataille pays little if any attention to the presence, the activity and the desire of anyone who is not phallic" (p.35). See also Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930s," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994): 61-79. Suleiman argues that Bataille had an obsession with "virility" conceived in masculine terms that "locked him into values and into a sexual politics that can only be called conformist in his time and ours" (p.79).

¹² Urban, "Matrix of Power: Tantra, Kingship and Sacrifice in the Worship of Mother Goddess Kamakhya," *South Asia* 31, no.3 (2008): 500-34.

¹³ Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), p.92.

¹⁴ B.N. Shastri, ed., *The Kalika Purana* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1991), 39.73.

¹⁵ See Urban, "Matrix of Power."

¹⁶ White, *Kiss of the Yogini: Tantric Sex in its South Asian Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.67.

¹⁷ Khanna, "The Goddess-Woman Equation in the Tantras," in *Gendering the Spirit: Women, Religion and the Post-Colonial Response*, ed. Durre S. Ahmed (New York: Zen Books, 2002), p.49. There is a vast literature on menstruation in India; see for example Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *Indian Puberty Rites* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1980); Susan S. Wadley, *The Powers of Tamil Women* (New York: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1980), p.164; Frédérique Apffel Marglin, "Female Sexuality in the Hindu World," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred and Social Reality*, ed. C. Atkinson et al (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 39-60; Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Ganga Sarma, *Kamrup Kamakhya* (Guwahati: Visnu Prakasan, 2002), p.23.

¹⁹ Ganga Sarma, *Kamarupa Kamakhya: Itihasa o Dharmmamulaka* (Guwahati: Visnu Prakasan, 2001), p.108

²⁰ Bataille, *Erotism*, p.121.

²¹ Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in South India Saiva Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p.29.

²² See Urban, *The Power of Tantra*, chapters 1-3.

²³ On human sacrifice in Assam, see Urban, *The Power of Tantra* chapter 3.

²⁴ B.N. Shastri, ed., *The Kalika Purana* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1991), 55.3-6, 67.3-5; See Urban, "Matrix of Power;" Bani Kanta Kakati, *Mother Goddess Kamakhya* (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1952), p.65.

²⁵ See Urban, *The Power of Tantra*, chapters 2 and 3.

²⁶ Madeleine Biardeau and Charles Malamoud, *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1976), p.146-47.

²⁷ Bataille, *The Accursed Share, volume I*, p.59.

²⁸ See Alexis Sanderson, "Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir," in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.190-216; Urban, "The Power of the Impure."

²⁹ P.C. Bagchi, ed., *The Kaulajnananirnaya and Some Minor Texts of the School of Matsyendranatha* (Calcutta: Metropolitan Printing and Publishing House, 1934), 16.7-8, 22.9-11. See White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, pp.213-15.

³⁰ White, *Kiss of the Yogini*, p.17; see Bataille, *Erotism*, p.115

³¹ The metaphor of sexual union as a sacrifice can be found as early as the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, where the female body is likened to the sacrificial altar with the yoni as the blazing fire; and this metaphor recurs throughout Tantric literature. See Urban, *The Power of Tantra*, chapter 4.

³² *Kaulajnananirnaya*, 18.7-9. See Urban, *The Power*, chapters 4-5.

³³ Hindu law books warn repeatedly of the dangers of sexual intercourse during the menstrual period; and Hindu mythological texts contain many examples of the monstrous, demonic and criminal offspring of such unions (Urban, *The Power of Tantra*, chapters 2-3).

³⁴ *Yoni Tantra*, 2.16-26.

³⁵ Schoterman, Introduction to *Yoni Tantra*, p.30.

³⁶ Bataille, *Erotism*, 65.

³⁷ Bataille, *Erotism*, pp.65, 116.

³⁸ Sanderson, "Purity and Power," pp.201, 199.

³⁹ See among other texts *Yoni Tantra*, 4.28, 1.8, 4.7, 6.6-7.

⁴⁰ Bataille, *Erotism*, p.115

⁴¹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share, volume II*, p.119. As McWhorter notes, transgression represents for Bataille "moments wherein the self is torn open and exposed to what is other to it. These movements may occur, for example, during religious ecstasy, extreme physical suffering, or erotic release. In these moments, individuation and identity are threatened and on some sense overcome; the boundaries between self and other tear apart or liquefy, melt away, and communication...occurs (McWhorter, "Is there Sexual Difference," pp.37-8).

⁴² Bataille, *The Accursed Share, volume II*, p.183-4. See Hussey, *The Inner Scar*, p.67

⁴³ Sanderson, "Purity and Power," pp.201, 199.

⁴⁴ See Dandisvami Damodara Asrama, ed., *Jnanarnava Tantra* (Calcutta: Navabharata, 1982), 22.30-32: "How can there be any impurity in excrement or urine? Undoubtedly, that is a false opinion. The body is born from a woman's menstrual blood. So how can that be impure, when by means of it one attains the highest state?"

⁴⁵ *Kaulajnananirnaya*, 11.27-9.

⁴⁶ *Akulavira Tantra*, in Bagchi, ed., *Kaulajnananirnaya* 24-26.

⁴⁷ McWhorter, "Is there Sexual Difference," p.34. See also McWhorter, "Bataille's Erotic Displacement of Vision: Attempts at a Feminist Reading," in *Panorama: Philosophies of the Visible*, ed. Wilhelm S. Wurzer (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp.117-127.

⁴⁸ Bataille, *Erotism*, p.17

⁴⁹ Bataille, *Erotism*, p.18.

⁵⁰ McWhorter, "Is there Sexual Difference," p.40.

⁵¹ *Yoni Tantra*, 7.27.

⁵² *Yoni Tantra*, 1.6.

⁵³ See Urban, *The Power of Tantra*, chapter 5.