contested meanings: tantra and the poetics of Mithila art

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In this article I attempt to unravel a mystery. The mystery is semiotic; it is about layers of meanings; it is about how meanings come into existence and, having once been said and repeated, become "truth"; it is about the power of articulateness over inarticulateness; it is about the gendering of local exegesis; and it is about the colonialism of academic interpretation. The ethnographic puzzle I ponder here is a corpus of ritual art painted by women of North Bihar, India, on the walls of their family compounds. For several decades this corpus has also been reproduced on paper for the international folk art market. A great deal has been written about this art (Archer 1949; Brown 1982; Jain 1980; Jayakar 1990; Lanius 1982; Mathur 1966; Vequaud 1977), yet the meaning it has for its makers, the women themselves, is obscured by the interpretive agendas brought to it by outsiders.

The issues here speak to several timely concerns for anthropologists. First is the fact that scholars carry their own intellectual preoccupations into the field with them, using the cultural productions of others as icons on which to meditate or as texts to interpret using alien hermeneutics. In recent years scholars have reflected extensively on this ethnographic problem, although the issues are hardly resolved (Asad 1986; Bell et al. 1993; Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Wolf 1992). To what extent do we reconstruct the material that we are examining through these alien paradigms? How much distortion of meaning are we willing to accept in the name of our own interesting theories?

Second, differently positioned persons or groups in a society may have fundamentally different viewpoints and produce different cultural constructions; yet all engage in meaning-making of their own constructions and of one another's. Another way of saying this is that all members of a society do not share equally in the construction, use, or exegesis of the cultural constructions that might theoretically be available to them. In North Bihar, for example, males of the Maithil Brahman caste control the domain of knowledge about the Shastrik texts and the Vedic rituals based on them. This is "malestream discourse" (Kumar 1994:22), for extraordinarily few women understand the Sanskrit in which the texts are written, and they are frequently kept away from the portions of rituals where the most Sanskritized elements are performed. Women might have interesting things to say about these texts and rituals, but their observations would

The art of the women of Mithila, known as Mithila or Madhubani art, has attracted a good deal of international interest as a folk art medium and a good deal of disagreement concerning interpretation. In this article I question those interpretations that view the art as tantric because they have been elicited from conversations among a few Brahman men with Western scholars predisposed to find tantric meanings. Using women's commentaries, contextual ritual analysis, and trope theory, I develop an analysis in which I see the art as reflexive—an iconic tradition of women's understanding of selfhood in patriarchal society. [art, India, Mithila art, women, tantra, ritual, trope theory]

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differ substantially from those of the male "experts." Similarly, domestic rituals focused on *kula devī* (the lineage goddess) and other goddesses such as Gauri are the women's domain; men play very minor roles in these rituals and do not produce any of the art that accompanies them. Yet, if asked about them, men do indeed produce interesting commentary, though it is not necessarily what the women would say.

No one is free, it seems, of semiotic urges; and this in itself is an interesting problem for anthropologists. For what, finally, does a thing "mean"? Surely, as Derrida (1991) and others (e.g., Bal 1994) have taught us about texts, a thing (a sign, a text, an icon) means whatever it means to any and all individual human meaning-makers; the "meaning" of a text is the encounter of a reader with that text. But perhaps there is a hierarchy of meanings, even if a tangled one, that an ethnographer ought to sort out if possible. Such is my effort here.

I also, of course, am engaged in semiotic activity. I am keenly aware, in working with these materials, of the conundrum in which anthropology currently finds itself. For when, as an American middle-class academic woman, I talk with and then write about men and women of Mithila or anywhere else, I inescapably impose external interpretive grids on those people. The words of one of my Maithil Brahman consultants, a Srotriya of highest rank, have been constantly with me as I have worked on this article: "It doesn't matter what we think anyway," he said with a sigh of resignation. "Foreigners go away and write whatever they want about us." In the end this is my analysis, not theirs; I, too, am reading and interpreting the text of my encounters with them. We cannot escape this impasse except by falling silent. But we can attempt to limit the distortions through self-consciousness about our methods, reproducing their voices and appropriately contextualizing them and, when possible, deconstructing the distorting interpretations of the past.

Figure 1 is an example of Mithila art. It is rather abstract, although a circle of six clearly feminine faces surround a seventh in the center. It is line drawn, usually with red and black ink or paint, and it is identified either as *kohbar* or as *puren*. It is a paper version of the drawing that

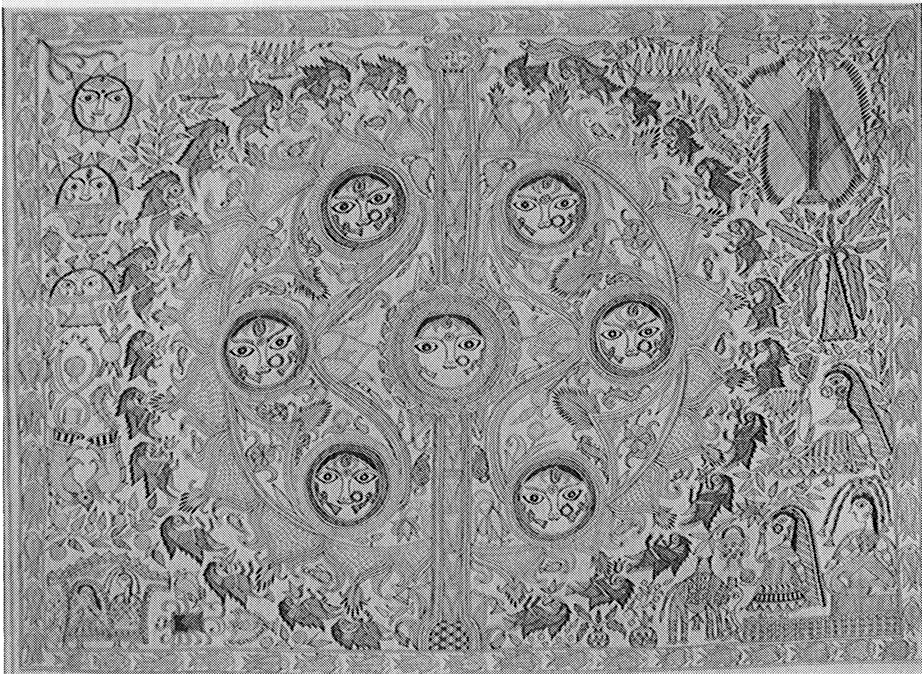

Figure 1. *Kohbar*, a professionalized work by the Brahman artist Puni Devi in the Kayastha style.

traditionally is painted on the wall of the room *(kohbara ghar)* in a Mithila compound where a bride and groom spend their first night together. There are Brahman and Kayastha versions of kohbar; this is the Kayastha version. To the Western eye it appears busy, every space occupied by themes drawn from Mithila's many ponds: birds, fish, leaves, blossoms, ants, worms, snakes, centipedes, turtles, and toads, suggesting a pervasive *horror vacui*. In the lower corners there are wedding scenes: a bride and groom worship Gauri; a bride and groom are carried by covered palanquin to the groom's home. But what is the long, pointed object with the smiling face at the top that runs through the drawing? Is it not phallic? Would anyone raised and educated in the West in the 20th century not float a Freudian hypothesis about the perpendicular rod thrust through the feminine circle depicted in the kohbar? Taken in context, when the context is a room where a new marriage is consummated and where other wall paintings may well have far more explicit phalluses aimed in anatomically appropriate directions at Durga or Kali, surely such a hypothesis is justified?

Mithila art

This piece is just one from a whole corpus of folk art being produced by women of the Brahman and Kayastha castes in Mithila, the region bordered to north and south by the Himalayas and the Ganges, and to west and east by the Gandak and Son rivers in North Bihar. The Maithil Brahmans are one of the five great North Indian castes who, since British times at least, have been the dominant landowners and are still the most politically powerful caste in the northern half of the state of Bihar. They are divided into three major ranked subgroups, the superior Srotriyas, the Yogyas, and the Jaibar. One of the highest-ranking Srotriya families was the royal family of Raj Darbhanga, owners of one of the largest and richest of the great zamindari estates of British India. There are also other Brahmans in the region, most notably the Mahapatras, who, because they traditionally conduct the death ceremonies and absorb the death pollution of the higher castes, are considered inferior to Maithil Brahmans. Together, the Maithil Brahmans and Kayasthas are viewed—and view themselves—as the most pure and ancient embodiment of Mithila culture. Indeed, references to Mithila are found in the *Ramāyanā* of Tulsidas, where it is said that Janaka, the king of Mithila, rode forth from his capital with his ministers, fighting men, and noble Brahmans to meet the two princes from Ayodhya, Rama and Lakshman, and finally gave his daughter, the virtuous Sita, in marriage to Lord Rama (Growse 1978:135).

For centuries the women have painted certain figures and designs on the walls of their mud homes for ceremonial occasions, particularly weddings and boys' sacred thread ceremonies. In the 1960s they were encouraged to begin putting their art on paper in a laudable effort to bring new sources of income to an impoverished region of India and especially to its women. Mithila art, also called Madhubani art after the nearest district capital, is now a widely recognized folk art tradition. In Mithila villages rural women pull out tattered copybooks in which are recorded brief passages by collectors from Germany, Britain, Israel, Japan, France, and the United States. The increasingly professionalized art is finding its public through such organizations as Ray Owens's Ethnic Arts Foundation, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Madhubani, and Oxfam International. UNESCO did a Christmas card collection of Mithila art, and it can also be found on calendars, incense boxes, and hotel walls in Bihar. There have been a number of traveling museum collections, among them a Smithsonian SITES collection and a Visual Arts Resource collection from the University of Oregon. Mithila art graces the covers of half a dozen scholarly books on topics ranging from mythology to feminism, including *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (O'Flaherty 1980), *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* (Walker 1988), *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Kinsley 1988), *The Religious Culture of India:*

Power, Love, and Wisdom (Hardy 1994), and, most recently, *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture* (Harlan and Courtright 1995). An English language film, *Munni,* by Ray Owens and a French film by Yves Vequaud have been made in the last decade, and a recent video (1994) titled *Mithila Painters: Five Village Artists from Madhubaṇi, India* has been produced by Joseph Elder and Ray Owens at the University of Wisconsin. Members of the public interested in folk art want to know what this tradition is all about.

The best source might seem to be Yves Vequaud's *The Women Painters of Mithila: Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom* (1977; see also Brown 1982). But as one reads the introductory text to this collection of paintings one encounters a truly remarkable, if not implausible, people. There, on the plains of North India, he claims, is a matriarchal society. There are "regular gatherings of young men to which girls who want to marry come" (1977:17). The girls choose a desirable young man, then draw a kohbar to present to him as a "marriage proposal." These drawings, he tells us, are "heavily charged with tantric symbolism" (1977:17). The kohbar is composed of a central lingam (phallus) that "penetrates the circular beauty of a yoni, the symbol of the female genitals, often drawn as a fully-opened lotus" (1977:17). In another place he makes the point even more dramatically:

> These pictures, used as the means of such a proposal, exemplify their artists' knowledge of the symbolism and arcana of tantrism: at the centre is a painted lingam, the phallic symbol, which pierces a yoni, symbol of female sexuality. The six surrounding yonis signify freedom of choice. [1977:68]

Even readers who do not know India well will be surprised at this characterization of a North Indian society. There is no ambiguity about the patriarchy and patrilineality of Maithil Brahman and Kayastha communities. Both groups keep a class of professional genealogists known as *panjikārs* who maintain permanent records of their named patrilineages. These are many generations deep—in the case of the most elite group, the Srotriyas, to a depth of 24 generations. To be a Maithil Brahman is to be a member of such a patrilineage and to have one's lineage recorded in the palm-leaf genealogical books. Moreover, rural women of both groups observe purdah. There is an annual "fair," Saurath Sabha, conducted by the Maithil Brahmans for the purpose of arranging marriages, but no woman, and certainly no potential bride, is present at this event. In 1980 I was the sole woman among ten thousand men who had gathered to negotiate marriages for their sons and daughters.

Vequaud's finest passage portrays a wonderfully egalitarian, sexually free Indian society: "There is no question of male or female dominance, but life itself is venerated; so that the simplest and most intimate ceremony in which a man and a woman may participate is both cause and effect of the kohbar which is unique in the history of the world's art—a glorious crucifixion seen on the walls of every bedroom in Mithila" (1977:17).

Reading these breathtaking passages, one begins to suspect that Vequaud indulged in some free-floating symbolic interpretation. While this may be harmless, even creative, and conceivably even therapeutic, it is certainly bad ethnography. Furthermore, given the fact that we do tend to build on each other's hypotheses and analyses, it has meant an increasingly elaborate superstructure of misinterpretation. More generously one could say, borrowing from Baxandall, that Mithila art is being viewed with "the period eye": "the equipment that a . . . painter's public [brings] to complex visual stimulations like pictures" (1972:38). Western culture, and particularly the constructions of psychodynamic psychology, has trained the modern Western eye to recognize certain forms as certain types of representations. "If it's long and pointy, it's a penis, all right," Gregory Bateson once said (personal communication, 1974). We cannot help but see them wherever we look: in our dreams, our architecture, our iconography—and also in other peoples' dreams, architecture, and iconography.

Although Vequaud's text on Mithila art seems original, he had his (uncited) sources. In a 1949 article in *Marg* titled "Maithil Painting," one finds:

> The most prominent images which loom largest on the walls are the bamboo tree and the ring of lotuses, the *kamalban* or *purain.* Both of these forms symbolize fertility not only because of the speed with which they proliferate but also because they are diagrams of the sexual organs. The lotus circle is not only a lotus but a symbol of the bride's sex while the bamboo tree is a bamboo as well as representative of a phallus. This latent symbolism reaches its height in the many paintings in which the bamboo tree is depicted not as aloof and apart but as driven through the center of a clinging circle. [Archer 1949:28]

This rather blunt analysis was written by W. G. Archer, the Subdivisional Officer in Madhubani in 1933 and 1934. He was among the first Westerners to recognize the quality of the ceremonial wall art of Maithil Brahmans and Kayasthas when in 1934 an earthquake broke open the rural mud houses and exposed their interior beauty to outsiders. Although he was only in Madhubani for two years, Archer worked in various parts of Bihar from 1931 to 1948. He was coeditor of *Man in India* with Verrier Elwin from 1942 to 1948 and later was Keeper of the Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1963 he published a collection of love poems by the Maithil poet Vidyapati (Archer, ed. 1963) that, strangely, was illustrated not with Mithila art but with Rajput painting.

Archer's simple glosses on Mithila art motifs are questionable: the lotus represents "the bride's sex"; the *purain* (also puren) are "diagrams of the sexual organs"; the bamboo is a phallus. How did he elicit this lexicon? Did village women explain all this to the young British official? Or perhaps their husbands whispered these explanations into his ear? But he tells us that the symbolism is "latent," so the basis for this interpretation is all the more important.[1]

Archer's interpretations,[2] and even his exact phrases, have been quoted by almost every scholar who came after him. In his *History of Mithila* Upendra Thakur tells us that the bamboo tree and the ring of lotuses represent diagrams of the sexual organs (1956:388–389). Quoting freely from the *Marg* article, but perhaps reluctant to credit an Englishman with this interpretation, Thakur instead names Mulkraj Anand, the editor, in his source citation. Even Jayakar, whose discussion is on the whole far more balanced, does not refrain from similar observations: "As diagrams of the generative organs, the female is an open lotus, the male is the bamboo. The meeting of the two symbolizes sexual encounter and union" (Jayakar 1990:129). Most recently Raheja writes that "the bamboo and the lotus come, in a Maithili women's song, to stand for the penis and the vagina that will come together in the marriage chamber" (1995:48). No one cites Archer, the original source of this gloss, perhaps because no one knows any longer that he is the source.

Yves Vequaud, however, goes even further. "Not only does the painted lingam, the phallic symbol . . . pierce a yoni, symbol of female sexuality," but the pictures "exemplify their artists' knowledge of the symbolism and arcana of tantrism" (1977:68). A few other scholars have also taken up the tantric theme (Lanius 1982). These interpretations are evidence of the Western fascination with India's tantric tradition. Kakar is certainly correct in saying, "In the emerging global civilization . . . the rumor about tantra has reached most educated persons" (1982:151). Articulating precisely what constitutes tantra, however, is another story. For the moment, let me provide a definition from Rawson, whose rhetoric has been responsible for much of the popular exportation of tantra: "Tantra is a cult of ecstasy, focused on a vision of cosmic sexuality. Life-styles, ritual, magic, myth, philosophy and a complex of signs and emotive symbols converge upon that vision. The basic texts in which these are conveyed are also called Tantras" (1978:7). Identifying Mithila art as tantric is a new interpretation. Archer never claimed it was tantric. Yet when I tracked down Vequaud's source on this in the summer of 1984, I found that it was Maithil Brahman men. I interviewed several Brahmans of the highest rank of Srotriyas; they were elite, English-educated, and familiar with the writings of Archer, Thakur, and Vequaud on the subject of Mithila art. All insisted the art was tantric. Surely we are on firm ground now?

tantric discourse and Mithila art

Even the brief discussion above indicates the interest of Western scholars in things tantric. Tantric studies has been an intellectual growth industry in recent decades. I argue that it has also been a hegemonizing discourse, claiming for itself increasing conceptual territory by ever more broadly defining aspects of Hindu beliefs and practices under increasingly vague definitions of tantra.

According to Padoux (1987:273), the word *tantrism* was coined in the 19th century, and its adjectival form, *tantric,* is a Western term, there being no Sanskrit equivalent. In recent years, he notes, "with the interest evinced in the West for Tantrism," there has been a "somewhat larger number of people" in India claiming to be tantric practitioners. But what is this phenomenon that is attracting such renewed interest both in India and abroad? After noting that the borderline between tantric and nontantric religious groups in Hinduism is difficult to determine clearly, Padoux argues for defining

> Tantrism as a category of its own and defin[ing] it generally as a practical path to supernatural powers and to liberation, consisting in the use of specific practices and techniques—ritual, bodily, mental—that are always associated with a particular doctrine. Elements of the doctrine as well as of practices may also be found elsewhere in Indian religions, but when both are associated and welded into a practical worldview, Tantrism is there. [1987:273]

These specific practices and techniques include initiation *(dīkṣā)* into a sect; the recitation of sacred formulas (mantras) and meditation on sacred diagrams (yantras); rituals usually aimed at awakening the kundalini energy that lies dormant and coiled like a female serpent in the subtle body in order to bring about a spiritual transformation of the adept; conceptualization of the whole cosmic process as the work of the feminine energy (shakti) in its different forms; and transgressive rites either symbolically ("right-handed") or literally ("left-handed") involving the use of forbidden substances, including sexual union with an initiated woman whose female organ (yoni) is "equated with the Vedic altar on which the male seed is the offering." The forbidden substances are usually identified as the "Five M's" *(makāras)*: *matsya, māmsa, madika, mudrā,* and *maithuna.* To capture the shock value of tantric practice, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty suggests the five "M's" be translated as five "F's": flesh, fish, fermented grapes (wine), frumentum, and fornication (1989:xiii).

The recent Western fascination with things tantric is replete with disagreements about how to view its practices and doctrines. An older and still dominant view (Brooks 1993; Padoux 1981, 1987) accepts tantra's totalizing posture regarding liberation through a yoga of ritualized encounters with female powers and transgressive substances without asking questions about gender or about the socially or psychobiologically positioned subjects. But others have noted the androcentric bias of tantra, growing, perhaps, out of male psychobiology and certainly out of the dominance of men in most Hindu discourse fields, in which women are marginalized as objects of male ritual action and yogic self-actualization (Bharati 1975; Kakar 1982). More recently a few scholars have asserted women's full and equal participation as adepts, as leaders of circles, as writers of tantric texts, and as practitioners of magical powers acquired from their yogic skills (notably Shaw [1994], who, however, focuses on Tibetan tantra). The latter view has been part of a larger movement that questions assumptions of women's marginalization, voicelessness, and domination in patriarchal India (Raheja and Gold 1994), and that seeks the alternative view of women's place in society that women themselves express in such formats as songs, stories, and life histories. Here I will adopt the latter stance and argue that tantra as it exists at present in rural Bihar is largely a system of ideas, rarely of ritual action, and that it appeals to males because of psychobiological assumptions that correspond to male embodiedness, because it provides a religious language in which to imagine and talk about socially

dangerous matters of sexuality, and because outsiders come to India with such keen interest in tantra.

One may feel considerably clearer about tantra when reading about it in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Eliade 1987) than when trying to trace it on the ground in Indian social life. In his study of the form of tantra embraced by orthodox Vedic South Indian *smarta* Brahmans, Brooks found they "do not wish to be called 'Tantric' or to associate with things 'Tantric' " (1993:405), yet they privately cherish certain tantric symbols and texts and they claim descent from an early 20th-century adept. "No one in the Mandali was 'as yet qualified,' however, to employ the convention-defying elements of a full-fledged Tantric ritual" (1993:422). To *mention* such things within the confines of ritual was not a problem; "only if we were to do these things would there be a problem" (1993:422).[3] Tantra for this group appears to be a matter of flirting with taboos rather than breaking them. More conventional and widespread Shaktism (goddess worship) has been appropriated by these so-called tantric adepts and become "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1977:171–183) for acquiring worldly power and social prestige.

In contrast, Maithil Brahmans of North Bihar claim that their ancestors founded Hindu tantrism in India. The caste has a reputation as tantrics that they not only enjoy but promote. There are rumors of practicing tantric priests and villages famous as centers of tantric practice in the past. While, for most devout Hindus, tantra's reputation is dubious and its canonical postulates shocking, there seems to be no shortage of racy tantric talk in the villages of Mithila if one goes looking for it. Just as there may be more books on witchcraft than actual witches in North America, there are certainly more people talking about tantra than practicing it in India.[4] In Mithila one finds nothing so organized as the Shrividya cult of Madras studied by Brooks. I spent most of one summer dividing my time between a village famous for its Mithila art, Ranti, and a nearby village famous for being the home of great tantrics in the past, Mangarauni, with the intention of tracking down and piecing together the tantric aspects of Mithila art. It is said that Mangarauni, because of its tantric reputation, was the village to which Maharajadhiraj Kameshwar Singh turned when seeking his second wife in hopes of begetting a son. But here I could only turn up a single pandit who, although he considered himself primarily an orthodox Dharmashastra scholar, was knowledgeable about tantra. From him I received a lengthy, bookish lecture contrasting the vedic and tantric paths, identifying the powers acquired by adepts who control tantric mantras, and describing in a theoretical way the ritual of the Five M's. Nowadays, he said, "nothing much is done of a tantric nature; tantric gurus are rare now." He thought there were two leftists in Harinagar, but he was not sure. This man, a conservative village Brahman who speaks no English and is less detached from the life of rural Maithil Brahmans than are the sophisticated English-educated Srotriyas I mentioned earlier, insisted that Mithila art has nothing to do with tantra: "it is its own separate thing."

My field notes contain stray and puzzling remarks that never formed a clear picture. From another Brahman source I heard a typically conflicted view of tantra, followed by a discussion of it as a mode of magical control over natural processes:

> I believe in tantra but I have no guru. The guru is always Lord Shiva. I do not believe in [performing?] this karma. Even good work is lost. You'll find people knowing nothing but still having vast knowledge. A few days ago I was returning home on the train; a lady had great pain in childbirth and women were crying that she had died. I asked them to bring water and I gave a mantra: "Lord Ganesh give her safe delivery." This is a tantra mantra. Delivery took place within ten minutes on the train. This was to save the mother. I couldn't think of a mantra for saving the child's life.

Another Brahman informant showed me a "Cultural Map of Tantric Mithila" in which the *bindu* of the Shri Yantra was Janakpur, Sita's birthplace. The north-south flowing rivers were distorted to produce a vaguely vaginal oval, and a circle in the middle represented the highest-ranking Srotriya villages and some important temples. Not only was geography represented in tantric form, but geological process was said in one case to be controlled by it:

In 1920 or so, perhaps earlier, say 1910, the Maharaja was a tantrist. He had a thousand Brahmans come to meditate on the side of the Kamla River at Rajnagar. It was endangering the new palace. Within minutes the river could have washed the palace away. Its course changed; the tantrist stood in the water and changed its course.

The claim that the Maharaja was a tantrist is probably correct. He is said to have maintained a room in the basement of his palace at Rajnagar for tantric ritual. People who knew him well were certain that he was a follower of the tantric path. In his memoirs the esteemed Mm. Dr. Sir Ganganath Jha, a close relative of Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh (1858–1898), wrote the following:

Somehow Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh came under the influence of some teacher of [tantra]; we were told that he had become initiated. But we never suspected anything regarding the objectionable methods with which the system had become associated from the stupidity of its votaries. So guarded was the Maharaja's behavior that we used to deny stoutly his connection with it. When we went to Darbhanga and joined the Raj service we found that again through the stupidity of some person's propaganda Tantra had been introduced at Darbhanga and some people were initiated. My father knew about this business. When he came to Benares to die, one day he warned my brother against this form of worship. When the propagandists approached my brother he told them frankly of father's warning and thereupon said that he was going to obey that warning for life. When I joined the Raj service as librarian I began to read all sorts of books and somehow the first book I took up was the Mahanirvana Tantra, as I had read nothing of Tantric literature til then. This news reached the propagandists and they hoped that I was on fair way to joining them. My reading of the books of Tantra, however, confirmed me that the path of Tantra was a very difficult one and never meant for the common man; he was sure to come to grief if he entered it; the conditions of discipline prescribed were too strict to be observed except by one already possessed of superhuman power. A great pandit friend of mine who was in the circle approached me one day and told me that by keeping away from the circle we two brothers were cutting ourselves off from the highest places in the Raj to which our high qualifications entitled us. I told him I had read some books and found the path too difficult. He said: "All this is quite true, but who is there who observes these strict rules? People in this circle drink and make merry." [Jha 1976:51]

This passage reveals the same kind of dichotomized view of tantra that Brooks describes in South India. The dominant Brahmanical view is voiced by Ganganath Jha's father and accepted by himself and his brother. Yet the appearance of the cult at the highest social level, the court, suggests that Bharati's assertion that "very few Brahmins would undertake *vāmācāra* ["left-handed"] worship unless they were prepared to court complete ostracism" (1975:231) was not true in Mithila; it was, instead, an entrée to court. It was symbolic capital monopolized by an elite in-group along with their monopoly on other resources such as the wealth of Darbhanga Raj and the highest administrative positions. It also appears to have been a cult practiced in canonical form, rather than tantric discourse applied to a range of supernatural powers and methods and potentially to all things sexual.

Another set of statements from Srotriyas who insist on the currency of tantrism in Mithila suggests that discourse about marital sexuality has been appropriated by tantric discourse. A Srotriya who claimed to be a "right-handed tantric" (he "isn't the sort who takes wine and all those things") insisted that Srotriyas must be given tantric initiation (diksha) just before marriage because, without a wife, a Brahman cannot perform the domestic rites. As the sacred thread ceremony *(upunayana)* initiates one into the Brahmacharya stage, tantric initiation, in the form of a mantra given by a woman of the family (preferably one's mother), initiates one into the householder stage. Another Srotriya said, "People aren't doing tantric activity unless they are married. Without marriage Srotriyas can't perceive Shiva-entity. The Srotriyas believe they can get *moksha* through conjugal relations." It may be that some Brahman men, for whom there is a normative split between their roles as husbands and householders and their roles as priests and ascetics,[5] are using tantric discourse as a way of mediating this experienced contradiction. This sense of tantric initiation, then, however limited its distribution, is very far from joining a "lineage" descended from a tantric guru; there is no cult and there are no rites except for ordinary conjugal sexuality. It seems to be a way to appropriate both Shaktism and the conjugal life to tantric discourse, a safe flirting with a powerful but dangerous symbol system that many

people—that is, Brahman men—like to talk about but do not have the nerve or the interest to pursue actively and canonically. It seems particularly significant that in my many conversations with Brahman women—both Srotriya and non-Srotriya—about the complex rites of marriage, not one mentioned anything identifiable with this tantric initiation.

Statements from women about tantra are much less assertive than those from men and more often display a faint puzzlement. A well-informed senior woman describing one part of the wedding ceremony tells me, "A lamp is lighted on a tortoise shell and a diagram in lampblack is drawn in the courtyard in order to protect from evil. This must have some tantric significance." Another woman says, "The [triangular] *havan* where *hom* is done must have some tantric explanation." Here, she is drawing a conclusion based on the association of the triangle with the yoni of the goddess; in fact, the triangular altar for the fire sacrifice is one of the oldest, Vedic, and certainly nontantric elements of Brahmanical ritual practice. Another woman, discussing the clay pot with a flame burning inside that is a part of almost every ritual, says that it "must have a tantric meaning." In each case the woman, who can think of nothing illuminating to offer the questioning anthropologist about a practice of instrumental power that uses female signs (the triangle, the pot), invests the practice with possible tantric significance. Sitting in the tiny front room of a well-known female Kayastha artist in the village of Ranti, we discuss the kohbar (see Figure 1). Her husband hovers meekly in the background; she is clearly in charge when discussing her art. Many foreigners have come to talk to her, not to him. I ask her whether this design has some tantric significance. She responds negatively: It is about marriage. Her husband nods in agreement; it has nothing to do with tantra.

My conclusion from this set of informants' statements is that in Mithila tantric discourse has merged on the one hand with talk about magical control of natural processes and other persons, and on the other with the more general shakta practices of Eastern India. These practices engage a much larger domain of goddess worship from that practiced in the great temples of Bengal and Orissa to the lineage goddess worship of individual households over which, for the most part, women preside. Those who take a totalizing view of tantra would classify this whole domain as tantric.[6] But tantra is only one discourse field with some concepts that overlap with other forms of goddess worship and women's domestic rites. Tantric discourse tends toward hegemonic domination of the whole field: anything *shakt,* anything about Devi, anything valorizing women, even anything about reproduction is potentially captured by tantric discourse.

One must finally ask of any discourse field: Who are the speakers and who is the audience? Who are the parties to the conversation? Tantric discourse is a male discourse, and its canon is read and known largely by men. There is evidence that its peculiar form of asceticism may, in fact, as I will show, run counter to the interests of women as wives and mothers and that its peculiar form of eroticism fans the male fantasy by combining ritual, ascetic, and sexual preoccupations in a single symbol system that mostly consists of talk and almost never entails actual ritual practice. One might alternatively say tantra is performative in the "making sense" sense rather than the ritual sense, for, to quote Faure, "the very expression 'to make sense,' suggests . . . that sense is not a mere given but rather a product—in other words, this interpretation itself is essentially performative" (1991:305). There is no evidence that rural Brahman and Kayastha women are either initiators or principals in tantric discourse or tantric ritual practice. When rural women of these castes are ritualists, their cults and symbol systems are different and the code of women's cults is not the code of either vedic or tantric ritual.

Finally, one of the audiences of Brahman male tantric discourse consists of Western scholars who have until recently also been almost all men. When a Western man asks Indian men about the meaning of the art that their women are painting on the walls for weddings, it is unlikely that they will say, "I don't really know; ask the women." Perhaps they have never even given this art any thought before, but, when asked about its meanings, they construct them; they

interpret the art out of their own universe of symbols. They know that the art is prominent at marriage; they know that it goes in the room where the marriage is consummated. It has to do with sex and fertility. For such characteristics of the social world they seek language that will represent it. "The tantric things occur in the marriage house [kohbara ghar]," says the Srotriya informant, meaning only that "the sexual things" occur there. Applying the term *tantric* in this sort of situation recalls Wittgenstein's remark: "Many words in this sense then don't have a strict meaning. But this is not a defect. To think it is would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary" (1958:27). The tantric discourse of males is a faint light cast on obscure objects in an unfamiliar realm: that realm consists of the inner domestic spaces onto which women project their own constructed selves.

kula devī and the metaphors of women: toward a poetics of Mithila art

I have argued that Western Freudian preoccupations, meeting male Brahman tantric ones, generated an interpretation of the women's art. Where were the women during this dialogue? They remained behind the curtain in the courtyard. Their subjectivity has been announced, rather than elicited, by Western and male scholars.

But Mithila art originated as a conversation among women. This conversation uses the iconic language of art rather than the linguistic conventions of song and story, which makes listening in on the conversation somewhat more difficult without a knowledge of the tropes by which the art conveys its meaning. We could come closer to understanding by hearing what women artists themselves say about the art they are putting on paper, but they do not have much to say about it. They tend to give brief and unreflective responses when asked about specific motifs or reasons for putting certain ones together ("they go together"); verbal exegesis is a discourse form used by Mithila men, not by rural women. Thus I turn to tropological theory in order to come closer to the unverbalized meanings that these images possess for the women who create and employ them. I argue that the verbal statements of women and the associated songs, rituals, and worship and life practices that occur in the immediate context, supplemented by a cautious application of trope theory, allow a reading of the art that does not import meaning so much as it discloses it.

In Mithila art, "image tropes"—"perceptual images that 'stand for themselves' " (Friedrich 1991:27)—are used to establish the field of discourse. Women are at work winnowing grain and carrying waterpots. Eight-armed Durga stands atop a tiger. Sita presents a garland to Rama. In the kula devī shrine, multiple handprints of the principal female worshipper identify her as part of the message of the art. In the kohbara ghar, the room where bride and groom consummate the marriage, bride and groom are painted on the wall. The sum total of the depictions establishes the field of discourse: Mithila art is about women, goddesses, brides, and grooms.

When seen in its original context, the women's art turns family compounds into art galleries: the central courtyard created by four small buildings placed in a rectangle is a favored location for glorious polychromes portraying the goddesses armed and astride tigers or for self-images of the women themselves at work on women's tasks, carrying waterpots or winnowing grain. An inner gallery in the eastern house is the abode of the family shrine whose central deity is kula devī, the lineage goddess, always a form of Kali. Here the art is restrained and abstract, for Brahmans worship the formless goddess who is represented by a three-petaled lotus pattern on the wall behind an empty plate where only her footprints may be visible. Like the women of the household, kula devī is in purdah; a small red cloth covers her sign. The second major deity in the kula devī shrine is the goddess Gauri, who brings husbands to unmarried girls; she is represented by a betel nut in the howdah of a clay elephant. The wall on which kula devī's sign is affixed is framed with ornamental lines and flowers, and the space is filled with handprints of the wives who worship her. Over the course of her life a woman moves through two stages

dominated by two forms of the goddess. As a virgin in her father's house, after about age seven, she worships Gauri in order to bring her a husband like Shiva. She makes daily offerings of sindur to the betel nut on the elephant while praying, "Bringing branches of sandalwood and making garlands of flowers, Gauri comes. Keep the garland for yourself and just bring me a husband."[7] On her wedding day she worships Gauri again, with her groom seated behind her as living proof of Gauri's benevolence. This scene is a popular theme in Mithila art. When she arrives as a new bride at her husband's village and compound, she spends her first four nights chastely sleeping in front of her husband's lineage goddess shrine. She is then initiated into the worship of kula devī by the husband's mother and for the rest of her life kula devī is the principal deity she worships.

By far the most extraordinary art goes in the third major location, the southern house known as the kohbara ghar, which is the room where the bride will meet her groom and consummate the marriage. The words *suhāg ki rāt* are often written on one of the walls. The phrase means the "night of suhāg," or, as we would say, the "wedding night." But *suhāg* suggests far more than just one's first night of marital sex. Suhāg is the auspicious state of the woman with a living husband; she is no longer a virgin but is not yet a widow. It connotes full adult sexuality and all the beauty and glamour of a woman whose arms and ankles jingle with bangles, whose forehead is red with auspicious sindur in the part of her hair, whose body is clothed in richly colorful saris, and whose womb is productive with life. As Raheja and Gold have emphasized in their study of Rajasthani and Rajput women (1994), any radical conceptual split between woman-as-mother and woman-as-wife is bridged by the concept of suhāg, which glories in the rich continuity of a woman's experience of herself as sexual wife, fertile genetrix, and nurturing mother. This is the life stage a young bride enters as she lies with her husband beneath the shimmering images of the kohbara ghar.

The design seen in Figure 1 is called kohbar by Kayastha women. Its Brahman form, called puren, is seen in Figure 2. On paper, all the images that would cover the walls of the kohbara ghar must be fitted onto a two-dimensional rectangle of paper: the circular puren or kohbar, sun, moon, stars, turtles, fish, insects, flowers, bride and groom, bamboo, the elephant with Gauri on its back, and ritual paraphernalia. This complement has all the regularity of syntax in a grammatical sentence. All these objects belong together in the conceptual system of Mithila women as contiguity tropes: the "many kinds of aesthetically effective juxtaposition, collocation, or, more simply, contiguity in time, space, and other dimensions such as social and textual context" (Friedrich 1991:34). Iconic contiguity—images found together in the kohbara ghar or the kula devī shrine—imparts visual messages. In Figure 2, bride and groom stand against a background of flowers and beside a mat where they will sit together to eat a first intimate meal and later lie together in their first sexual embrace—after the elder kinswomen have first embarrassed the bride with some bawdy songs and jokes. Surrounding and almost dominating bride and groom are scenes from nature. Women do provide explanations of these figures: "Just as the gods witness the marriage, the sun and moon and nine planets witness it." Thus, even after the swarm of female relatives have left the bride and groom alone, the private, intimate acts of the young couple are cosmologically witnessed and affirmed.

Why bamboo? "Bamboo grows fast and frequent; just like that we want the marriage to grow." The woman artist who painted Figure 1 explains the presence of bamboo in terms of increase and specifically in relation to the male members of the patrilineage. As bamboo grows in clumps—a number of tall stems emerging from a single source—so should the lineage multiply. Indeed, bamboo is an omnipresent plant in Mithila, distributed in discrete clumps very much like the extended families of male kinsmen. The analogy is also linguistic. The association with lineages is based on the phonetic similarity of *bans* (bamboo) and *bans* (genealogy).[8]

Mostly, however, we wonder about the puren or kohbar itself. This is the figure that has so tantalized everyone since Archer. It is clearly the dominant form in Figures 1 and 2. *Puren*

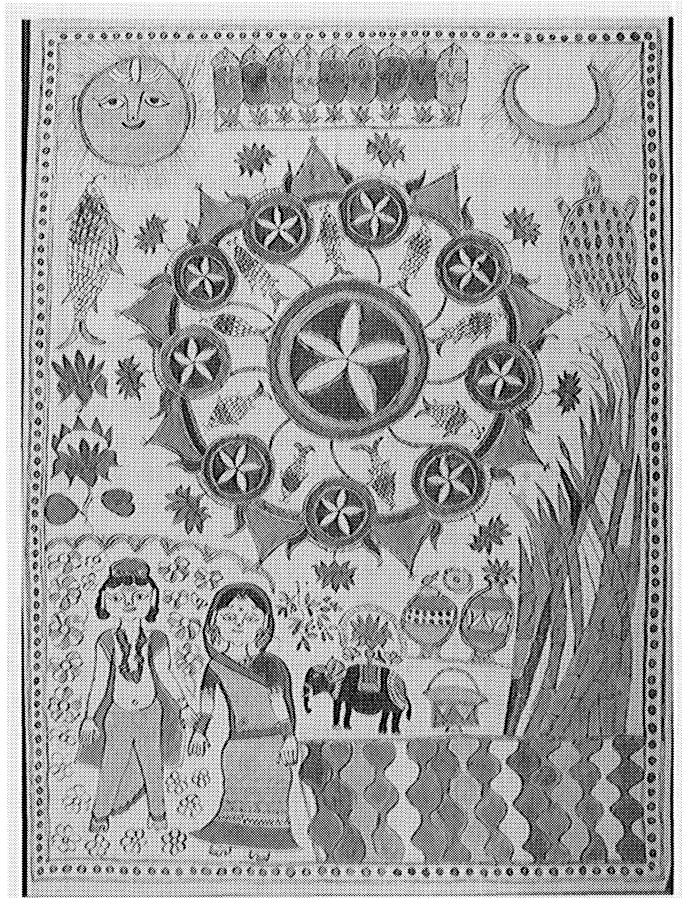

Figure 2. *Puren* in the Brahman style, on paper, though more typical of wall art that would appear in the *kohbara ghar* than of professionalized paper art. Artist unknown.

literally means "lotus leaf." But the puren is not depicted solo, for in all the art it is associated with other life forms found in, around, and beneath the dark waters of Mithila's numerous humid ponds, the single most prominent geological feature of the region. These ponds shine under full moons as the many creatures who inhabit them sing lustily throughout unquiet nights. In the heat of May and June moisture lifts from their surfaces, clogs the air with a humidity that is almost painful to breathe, and covers everyone's skin with greasy layers of perspiration. To bathe in these ponds or wash large brass trays and pots one must wade into thick oozy mud and stake a territory against the encroaching water lilies with which most Mithila ponds are thickly covered from edge to edge. What lives beneath this covering one can only guess, though some of its inhabitants appear on the walls of the kohbara ghar: fish, turtles, and watersnakes. But why give such prominence to all these pond-life themes in the wedding chamber?

When I asked the women artists why the lotus leaf was such a common representation in their art they replied, "Just as the seed of the lotus falls into the pond and produces many offspring, so must the bride and groom produce many children."[9] The various images borrowed from the Mithila landscape convey metaphoric meaning. These visual metaphors map from a source domain to a target domain (Lakoff 1987; Quinn 1991:57). If the source domain in the puren paintings under discussion is Mithila ponds with all their aquatic life, what is the target domain and, when that is discovered, what does it tell us? Most source domains are concrete,

evidential, commonsense domains—such as nature or the body—mapped onto more abstract or difficult domains in such a way that the obscure nature of the latter is informed by the former. The domain of nature in Mithila art is about the characteristics of women, especially—judging from the women's own statements—the fertility of women. Metaphorically, it seems, the pond is the source of auspicious feminine fertility.

A woman's connection to the ponds of Mithila is strongest at ritual occasions associated with marriage and fertility. Five, seven, or nine months after marriage (that is, about the time when, ideally, she will have become pregnant), the young bride carries the old Gauri betel nut she formerly worshipped in her parent's kula devī shrine to the edge of the pond in a clay pot balanced on her head. In a little pouch made from a fold of her sari hanging over her womb she carries seven types of grain ("seed"), turmeric (for protection), betel nut (representing the goddess of virgins who brings suhāg), and a rupee (for prosperity). Wading into the pond, she allows all these materials to float off while other women call Gauri near by singing songs of the goddess. She then emerges and dresses in an *old* sari to avoid inauspicious premature enactment of the final life-cycle immersion in the pond at widowhood. At that point all symbols of suhāg—vermilion, comb, mirror, and bangles—will be abandoned in the pond. Thus in ritual she performs what she proclaims in art: her auspicious association with the natural fertility of pond life.

Another clue to the meaning of these visual symbols comes from the Maithili word for placenta, *narpuren*—literally, "the lotus leaf of the navel." The placenta, rooted in a dark, moist source, is connected to an infant by a cord attached to its belly. At birth, infant and placenta emerge. After the umbilical cord is cut the placenta is disposed of by being buried in the courtyard in the case of boys, who must stay in the household their whole lives, and just outside the door in the case of girls, who must leave their father's houses and go to their husband's houses. When I asked the women about the long pointed object that pierces the ring of lotuses in purens in the style of Figure 1, they said, "That is the stem which roots the lotus leaf to the bottom of the pond." Men naturally never see either the placenta or the cord attached to the navel of the infant. To women it resembles the lotus leaf and the long stem attached to the bottom of the pond is a metaphorical umbilical cord. In Mithila art that cord (which pierces the circular yoni in the Archer/Vequaud interpretation) is often, as in Figure 1, shown personified with a face; it is not the male phallus, however, but the infant to be born of the marital union depicted there. Anyone who has spent time by a lotus pond will recognize the form (undoubtedly phallic to the Western eye) of a new lotus bud rising from the bed and breaking the surface to open as a pink or yellow blossom in the sun.

The whole drawing of puren, then, is a metaphor of the women's own fertility; the fertile, hidden depth of the pond, so productive of life forms, is like the woman's mysterious fertility that produces new life for the husband's lineage. This is a metaphor the men seem never to have understood. The symbolism *is* about fertility, but it is fertility in the idiom of women: their own fertility, their own physiological processes. The classic male metaphor for fertility, field and seed, apparently has a feminine version: seed and pond. In their own set of iconic tropes, women artists of Mithila are "writing the body" (Cixous 1979:41).

Having discovered that the art of the kohbara ghar is reflexive and that women construct metaphors for imaging their own nature, we can expand on this discourse by turning to the kula devī shrine in the eastern house. Figure 3 is an artist's conception of an event that occurs there. The bride has been carried to her husband's village by palanquin (depicted in the lower-left corner of Figure 1) and is taken by her husband to meet his kula devī. The bride spends her first three nights sleeping chastely near the kula devī shrine, getting to know this goddess to whose worship the rest of her life will be devoted. Two features stand out in this artist's interpretation. The first is kula devī's representation in the form of puren, as if Devi too were metaphorically associated with the ponds of Mithila. The second point worthy of note is the posture of the bride,

who appears to float into the space in a manner impossible for ordinary mortals like her husband, whose feet are functioning appropriately for a human. Is the bride portrayed as a goddess, the goddess as a lotus-in-pond? If so, the circle of associations closes: bride = pond = goddess = bride.

A male Srotriya informant—one of those who insisted on the tantric nature of Mithila art—frowned in disapproval when I showed him this painting because it provided an image for kula devī, who "should always remain formless, because we [Brahmans] worship the formless goddess." Nevertheless this idiosyncratic production by a canonically naive village artist reveals a crucial link between kula devī and the fertile life of the ponds. It also invites renewed reflection on Figure 1: Who are the faces staring out from the leaves and blossoms of kohbar? Not "the bride's sex" but divine shakti looks out. As Thangavelu has observed of the scroll painting of Telangana region, "the frontal face with its wide staring eyes is indeed the site where divine power is localized and manifest" (1995:17).

We do not have far to look for verification of this hypothesis. There is plentiful further evidence of the association of Mithila ponds with feminine powers, both human and divine. There is a Shiva temple at Saurath Village built around a Shiva lingam that was found in a field and began to bleed when a farmer's hoe struck its tip. It had a partner 14 miles away. The priest of the Shiva temple had a dream in which Shiva told him that his Gauri was in a certain pond. He went and dug at the site and found a black carved image of Gauri. Most of the ponds of Mithila have myths associated with the digging of the pond. In these stories a stone, generally vaguely triangular and representing the goddess, is found. Kula devī is fertility; the ponds are fertility; women are fertility. The circle closes when we consider the handprints covering the background wall of every kula devī shrine: they are much like those of the *sativrata,* the woman about to commit sati, who leaves her handprint behind. Who is kula devī? These handprints say: I, the wife-worshipper, am kula devī.

Indeed, wives are the sole hope for the continuity of male patrilineages and the visual symbols we have been examining portray the women artists' views of these social structural facts (i.e., women as essential for continuity of patrilineages). The theory of gender enunciated by males

Figure 3. Groom introduces bride to his lineage goddess (kula devī). Artist unknown.

and genealogists treats men and women as different kinds of beings; Maithil Brahman genealogists conceptualize kinship in their drawings of genealogical trees as containing 63 loops representing men and not a single representation of women (Brown 1983). Women are thus iconically denied existence. In the genealogical records no woman appears except as the *kanya* (virgin daughter) of given man of a specified lineage. Male identity is forever fixed by *gotra, mula,* and *gram* (clan, lineage, and sublineage), but women are transformative and transforming; their substance alters when they marry and they bring the substance of their fathers to mix with that of their husband and so alter the offspring they produce for their husband's lineage. The rise and fall in rank of subsequent generations comes about through the auspicious or inauspicious mixing that takes place within the bodies of women. The art therefore portrays women as kula devī, who supplies the wonderful fertility and continuity of the patrilineage and, in a kind of visual irony, reconstructs the all-powerful and socially dominant patrilineages (bans) as a literal stand of bamboo (bāns)—a bit of nature rooted in earth beside the splendid and dominant ponds of Mithila.

male and female meanings

A thing may indeed mean whatever any reader of signs brings to it; but it would not be correct to say that a sign is intrinsically empty, for the original maker invested it with its first meaning. When meanings are thick—richly overlaid by layers of interpretation by differently positioned persons with varying agendas and hermeneutic keys—then such a sign or sign-system is a locus of great cultural power and surely worth additional meditation by scholars. Yet the power dimensions of investing meaning must be taken into consideration, for "power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not at the same time presuppose and constitute power relations" (Foucault 1977:27). The reading of signs is also political. The construction of knowledge about the women's art by elite men of their own culture and by foreign scholars who speak only with such men is a patriarchal collaboration that scholars should try to avoid (Mascia-Lees et al. 1989). The unraveling of this semiotic mystery shows how readily scholarship enters into this form of collaboration.

I have proposed that tantric discourse tends toward hegemonic domination of all fields having to do with the goddess, shakti, women, and potency, and that tantric discourse has been largely a male discourse. But one might ask whether the meaning system contained in Mithila art is a subset of tantra or an alternative worldview capable of standing on its own as an alternative conceptual system if only the women had the social power to make it do so. I argue for the latter view. I will put forth three arguments to sustain this view: (1) that the iconic tropes of Mithila art are not the iconic tropes of tantra; (2) that ascetic power and fertility are in a dialectical tension, and the two symbol systems (tantra and Mithila art plus accompanying rituals) have radically different aims; and (3) that each system is based on separate gender fantasies or root metaphors and separate formulations of male and female nature.

tantric and women's art tropes There is no space here to display the icons associated with tantric discourse, but they are well known in the West (e.g., Rawson 1978). Their dominant images are highly geometric: vertical cylindrical forms represent Shiva and male potency; the inverted triangle represents shakti; an inverted and noninverted triangle overlaid on one another represent the union of male and female and the divine union of Shiva and Shakti. The Shri Yantra is perhaps the preeminent tantric icon. These forms appear nowhere in the women's art.

asceticism versus fertility The goals of the two traditions of ritual and art are not the same or even complementary: rather, they are in opposition. Without making essentialist assumptions

about the nature of women, we can recognize a culturally constructed world in which most rural women's own self-interest—as well as the interest assigned to them by a patriarchal society—lies in fertility, motherhood, and wifehood. These are the avenues along which the vast majority of Mithila women are expected to find life maximally fulfilling. Almost the only alternative is widowhood, at whatever age it occurs. Most of the women who work as salaried painters at the Madhubani center run by Gauri Mishra are widows. One of the most famous of the artists of Mithila was Jagdamba Devi, who was honored nationwide; widowed as a virgin-bride before ever going to her husband's house, she spent her entire life in her father's village. Yet she filled her paintings with the same themes of all Mithila art—brides being carried to their husband's houses, brides performing Gauri puja, and images of the goddesses.

When women's principal concern is with suhāg and fertility, they are hardly likely to be sympathetic to a male cult whose epiphany is copulation with retention of semen. There is little reason for women to be pleased with the ascetic preoccupations of male culture: "The purpose of the *pañcamakāra* practice is certainly not conception, but the very opposite—immersion into the Brahman-essence, which is the consummation of a process of involution, not of procreation" (Bharati 1975:253). It is possible that the wedding art is implicitly intended to *counter* the tantric tendencies of ascetically minded men. The opposition of male and female is apparent in several ways in the female portions of the wedding rites. For instance, the very first experience of the groom as he arrives at the bride's house is to have his nose pinched with a mango leaf by a woman of the bride's household. The men say that this is to test his ascetic control of breathing, but the women say that it is so that the bride will be able to lead him by the nose. Later there are further ceremonies intended to ensure the bride's magical control of her husband, such as when an old woman waves magical charms over the groom's head while reciting the non-Sanskritic sloka, "Take your yoga and give us wealth." Wives of renowned Maithil Brahmans have had to put up with ascetic husbands giving away all the family wealth and plunging them into poverty; thus Sarvasvadata Raghunatha—"Donor of All"—gave away all his worldly possessions three separate times and began accumulating gifts from teaching all over again, wearing only banana leaves.

Although one Brahman informant suggested to me that one's wife is one's tantric partner, the more widespread view is that the partner is another woman, *not* one's wife. Sahajiya texts distinguish between one's own woman *(svakīyā)* and another man's wife *(parakīyā)*; with the latter one can find liberation (Dimock 1989). If tantric discourse is in the air in Mithila, it seems prudent for kinswomen of the bride to protect her from the following provocative distractions of her groom:

> When desire arises for the *rasa* . . . one should meditate in his mind on the *nayika* lovely and desirable. By his meditation upon that container of rasa, she will suddenly appear, and he will gain sight of her. These are the signs of the *nayika:* she is of greatest beauty and has a husband at home; her qualities are equal to her beauty, most wonderful. By *bhāva* she will come, suddenly, and be joined with him. Her beauty will pass through his eyes and into his heart. [Dimock 1989:235–236]

gender fantasies Finally, tantra and the nuptial art are founded on radically different root metaphors. Though Mithila men and women share the same environment and to a certain extent the same culture, they do not share the same bodies. Their respective bodily experiences are projected outward into cultural productions as source domains by which they attempt to grasp crucial but inchoate aspects of human existence.

In tantra the root metaphor is the sex act, and its metaphoric source is the body. By a genius of theorizing, canonical writing, and ritual practice over many centuries, this root metaphor has produced an entire metaphysic, cosmogony, mythology, and ritual practice. This "mystical physiology" (Padoux 1987) of tantra is rooted in a male experience of the body: As the semen rises through the lotuses, all consciousness of time and space are wiped away. The semen reaches the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain, where Radha and Krishna reside, and there is

only eternity and pure bliss (from the *Sahaja-tattva,* quoted in Dimock 1989:234). The kundalini energy that lies dormant at the base of the spine like a sleeping serpent, waiting to be awakened and roused to transforming union with a deity, is a male construction of "cosmized" body. Offering one's seed into the female yoni-as-altar is yet another version of male/subject/sacrificer to female/object/altar. Tantra contains a theory of female nature: the female is derivative of shakti, the great creative force of the universe, a hot force, a dangerous force, the madly dancing Kali of the cremation ground in one famous trope. But this is a male fantasy produced by male imaginings about male experience of the female Other. These views have triumphed in Hindu culture; they have multiplied down the centuries, taken a thousand forms in a culture where male discourse dominates.[10]

But in Mithila art we hear another, visually provocative view. It whispers rather than shouts. Perhaps we are this way, it muses in tropes easily misconstrued or taken as sheerest ornamentation. Perhaps female nature is cool, like the pond. Perhaps it is deep, mysterious, fecund, filled with dark primordial matter, potential life drifting directionlessly, awaiting the call to life. This alternative trope of female nature does not take its root metaphor from the body or from the sex act, but from nature. It does not project the sex act into the universe as the source of all life but offers another hypothesis, the asexual reproductivity of plant life in dark and hidden places that requires only the random dropping of a seed from an unspecified source to begin a new life. Is there here an ambivalence not only about tantra but about human sexuality itself?[11] We would have to go further in examining the complex calendrical rituals of women to discover whether this surprising suggestion might be true. One might want to begin with the myths and rites of Nag Panchami, a holiday on the fifth day of Shravan in the rainy season in which all women but especially young brides are preoccupied with the dangerous snakes that slip into the household at night and insert their venomous white poison into sleepers in the dark.

conclusion

We have seen that the meaning of the women's art has been contested at several levels: scholars have disagreed, as scholars will and perhaps should, about how best to understand this cultural tradition. The reasons for this disagreement are rooted in the problematic nature of the external, hegemonic domination of what a Western discourse field might call neocolonialist discourse—the imposition of outsider theories on the women's art. But there has been an internal contestation of meanings as well, one not explicated until now (by an outsider), in which at least some Brahman men have chosen to interpret the art as tantric, while tantra does not appear to be any part of the meanings recognized by the women. Are these simply multiple versions of local reality, or is there a privileged standpoint? Does the text mean everything anyone says it means, or is there a preeminent reading?

"The notion that all texts are undecidable cannot be useful for feminists," writes Linda Alcoff (1994). If by privileged standpoint we mean an outsider's totalizing master-narrative, then surely we must agree. But I argue here that while there may indeed be multiple versions of local reality (for the men are certainly entitled to interpret the art in a mode that is meaningful for their experience as men in the local society), there is also a privileged standpoint. The standpoint in question is that of the women themselves—the culture makers, the worshippers of kula devī and Gauri—who bear in their bodies and in their rituals responsibilities as socially significant as the Vedic rites of Brahman men. For these women, who are incarnations of the goddess, are all that stand between the patrilineage and death. In their efficacious rituals they generate life and continuity; and, in their art, they iconically reflect on their experience of nature and of their own fertile powers through the lovely and mysterious forms that they paint on the inner walls where they marry, worship, and pass their days.

notes

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1. Archer goes on to provide some exegetical commentary that might be (mis)taken for a text collected from village informants had it not been for the quaint 17th-century spelling and rhyme. Again, the imagery is sexual, but the medium is poetic, not iconographic:

> Now barre the doors, the Bridegroom puts
> The eager Boyes to gather Nuts.
> And now, both love and Time
> To their full height doe clime;
> O! give them active heat
> And moisture, both compleat;
> Fit Organs for encrease,
> To keep, and to release
> That which may the honourd Stem
> Circle with a Diadem.

On the next page the textual evidence for his interpretation turns out to be the 17th-century metaphysical English poet Robert Herrick. We might call this ecumenical ethnography.

2. In his later writings Archer draws explicit comparisons between English poetry and the folk arts of India. In describing his discovery of Pahari painting he writes:

> It was as if I had stumbled on a collection of Elizabethan lyrics and was discovering for the first time the mainstream of English love-poetry. The language may not be modern . . . but it expressed with matchless elegance the tender nuances of romantic passion. Manuks Pahari pictures were the exact equivalents in Indian painting of this English love-poetry. [Miller 1985:xiii]

In his introduction to Vidyapati's love poetry, Archer again draws an analogy between Sanskrit love poetry and Shakespeare's sonnets and Restoration love poetry (1963). But representational painting and love poetry are not designs painted in the wedding chambers of rural Brahmans and Kayasthas.

3. In the Shrividya's annual puja in Madras honoring 16 women, all Shrividya initiates who were worshiped as fecund married women with children and thus incarnations of the goddess, Brooks writes that "if the dual norm setting off brahmanical and Tantric disciplines was present in this event, it manifested itself as a distinction between private thoughts and behaviors and public statements and actions" (1993:431).

4. Brooks reflected on this situation in South India when he analyzed tantra in terms of "otherness within":

> There is, however, another more complex Tantrism living within the high-caste community in south India. This sort of Tantrism is neither an exotic otherness too remote to be of interest [such as Bhagawan Shri Rajneesh and various "sex doctors"] nor is it, properly speaking, a proximate otherness. Rather, this often-denied Tantrism represents the other-living-among-us or the other-who-is-in-part-we. This situation suggests a notion of otherness within, one in which two or more conflicting interests are located in the same individual or group. [1993:409]

5. A good deal has been written about this conceptual split in idealized cultural roles for males, most notably in O'Flaherty's *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva* (1973).

6. It is worth noting that *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Eliade 1987) has no separate entry for *shakti,* but subsumes it under *kundalini* and *tantrism.*

7. Literally, "bring suhāg," the auspicious state of a woman who has a living husband.

8. The analogy is also an ancient one and part of Vedic culture as well. In *Yajñavalkya Smrti,* the Dharmashastra that takes precedence over Manu in Mithila, among the rites to be performed in preparation for childbirth is the "bamboo puja." As the bamboo is worshipped, the worshipper should chant, "O auspicious one! Giver of all auspicious things! O the ever beloved of Govinda! O vamsa [bamboo]! Increase my vamsa [lineage]! Salutation to thee, O Ever-merry!"

9. Archer apparently was told the same thing in the 1940s, for he wrote that "the ring of lotuses . . . symbolize[s] fertility . . . because of the speed with which they proliferate" (1949:26). Unfortunately he drew the further conclusion that they were diagrams of the sexual organs.

10. Appropriately, efforts to reclaim women's agency in history and culture is opening all androcentric claims to scrutiny. Miranda Shaw's recent study (1994) of the role of women in tantric Buddhism in medieval India portrays a situation in which women were full and equal participants in tantric circles, a situation made possible partly because of the social marginality and loose organization of the tantric movement itself. Also in India there are many known instances of women adepts and female authors of texts, such as Jahnava-devī in Vrindavana and Hemalata-devī (Dimock 1989:102).

11. Raheja and Gold (1994) eloquently argue that in the villages where they worked women bridge the culturally constructed (by men) chasm between (dangerous or bad) women as sexual beings and (good) women as mothers and nurturers in lusty songs and poetry that celebrate sexuality, fantasize adultery, and ridicule the controlling structures of patriarchal society. In Mithila art, by contrast, a nonsexualized form of

reproduction is metaphorically posited. We should not be surprised by such perspectives as varieties of subaltern studies listen to and record multiple visions and tropes on human experience.

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