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"Acting in": The Effect of Performance on Relations between Christians and Hindus in Odisha, India

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Freedom to Lead International

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Religious practice in the state of Odisha, India, has varied greatly over the past several millennia. Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikas, Vedic Hinduism, folk Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity have interacted in ways that have variously produced respect, syncretism, and, at times, violence.[1] When I first arrived in 2012, Christians in the capital city of Bhubaneswar were still tense from the 2008 Kandhamal riots in the region that had resulted in tens of thousands of Christians fleeing the area as refugees, a situation reported through news outlets worldwide.[2] The Kandhamal riots erupted in response to the murder of Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, head of the nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad organization, and four traveling companions.[3] Local police blamed Maoists for the killings, but Christians were instead accused, and their houses and churches burned by attacking mobs. For many, this conflict brought to mind a 1998 incident in which Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons were burned alive in their vehicle. For local Christians, this remembering was visceral.[4] It was in this violence-inflected Bhubaneswar that Christian leader Abhinav Satpathy chose to host his first Christian Oral Arts Festival in February 2012. The two-day festival showcased the use of Oriya[5] performance traditions for the purposes of public Christian evangelism and congregational worship, performances and practices that I have termed "acting in."

As emcee for this festival in risk-laden Bhubaneswar, Satpathy proclaimed to the audience:

> When the people see the stories of the Bible presented through the music and drama and dance of their own culture, how can they say that the gospel comes from the West? [The audience cheers.] How can they say that Christianity is from the West? Christianity is from Odisha! The gospel is from Odisha! [More cheers.]

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[1] For an overview of religious practice in Odisha, see Burjor Avari, *India: The Ancient Past: A History of the Sub-continent from c. 7000 BC to AD 1200* (London: Routledge, 2007). See also the introduction to Anncharlott Eschmann, Hermann Kulke, and Gaya Charan Tripathi, eds., *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa* (Delhi: South Asia Interdisciplinary Regional Research Programme of Heidelberg University, 1978), vi–xviii. See also H. V. Stietencron, "The Advent of Visnuism in Orissa: An Outline of Its History According to Archaeological and Epigraphical Sources from the Gupta Period up to 1135 AD," in the same volume, pp. 1–30.

[2] Chris Morris, "Fear and Fundamentalism in India," BBC, Oct. 16, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7672228.stm (accessed Mar. 26, 2017).

[3] "Kandhamal Riots Could Have Been Prevented," IANS Bhubaneswar, Feb. 23, 2013, http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-kandhamal-riots-could-have-been-prevented-1803609 (accessed Mar. 26, 2017).

[4] "Thousands Mourn Missionary's Death," BBC, Jan. 25, 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/261391.stm (accessed Mar. 26, 2017).

[5] The term *Oriya* is commonly used to refer both to the local language in Odisha and to Odisha's cultural practices.

After hearing Satpathy's bold assertion, I resolved to answer an ever-expanding list of questions: What did Satpathy intend by such an enigmatic statement? He seemed fully aware of the paradoxical nature of his claim for Oriya origins for the Christian gospel. He also seemed keenly aware of the volatile political environment in which he issued this declaration. So what claim was he really making? Satpathy's ideological construct began to emerge later in the festival when he asserted, "We are 100 percent Oriya and 100 percent believers in Jesus Christ." Satpathy seemed to contend that the processes and tropes through which authenticity was determined for both Oriya society and evangelical Christianity were fully met through the performance practices portrayed at the Oral Arts Festival. What knowledge could an investigation of these processes produce about the conventions by which performances and performers are deemed to be Oriya? Or, conversely, in Satpathy's terms, western? How do local understandings of religious practice—Hindu, Christian, or otherwise—contribute to these Christian performances and to Satpathy's declarations? And what can be learned about the local aesthetic practices of music and drama that appear to be the basis for such a claim?

This paper initiates the discussion of "acting in" as a tactic employed by marginalized Maranatha Ministries (MM) Christians in modern Odisha.[6] Through this tactic, certain kinds of performances by MM Christians[7] enable certain kinds of relationships with local villagers and with various governing bodies. "Acting in" performances draw on local performance genres and conventions specifically chosen to effect a sense of resonance between the audience's familiarity and experience with dramatic performances of Hindu epic narratives, and "acting in" presentations of biblical narratives such as the one described below. This historical resonance enables relationships between MM Christian performers and their Hindu village neighbors, relationships that are characterized by my interlocutors as "natural" and "accepted." In the Odisha of this study, failure to achieve natural or accepted status invites the risk of Christians and their stories being labeled "foreign" or "western," categories identified by my interlocutors as inviting anti-Christian violence such as that experienced in the Kandhamal riots mentioned earlier. Success, on the other hand, means the fulfillment of Satpathy's assertion that "we are 100 percent Oriya and 100 percent believers in Jesus Christ." "Acting in" enables MM Christians to practice a Christian piety and peacefully coexist with their Hindu neighbors amid the uncertain political terrain that comprises the Odisha of this study.

"Acting In"

I am proposing the term *acting in* to refer to the tactics by which individuals and groups perform their way out of an identity that is contrary to social norms and subject to persecution, and into

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[6] Throughout this paper I employ the terms *tactic* and *strategy* after Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix. De Certeau distinguishes between the terms through differentiations of power and place, with strategy being an action that assumes a circumscribed exteriority of place and space, and tactic an action by one who is subsumed within another's space. Thus, strategies are actions by those with the privilege of power and place, whereas tactics are opportunistic actions by those with neither power nor place.

[7] I spell out "Maranatha Ministries" when it is used as a proper noun and use "MM" as an adjective.

an identity that is local and accepted and discourages attention from potentially harassing groups. Conceptually, my use of "acting in" is grounded in Judith Butler's use of "acting out" in her well-known essay on performance and performativity. In "Critically Queer," Butler proposes a tactical implementation of the term *queer* as applied to the performance of gendered drag. She uses *acting out* to indicate this "hyperbolic display of gendered drag that shatters an epistemic blindness to an increasingly graphic and public homosexuality."[8] Butler grounds "acting out" in psychoanalytic terms related to gender melancholia. "Acting in," as I propose it here, references an attempt not to shatter an epistemic blindness, but rather to create one. In the evangelistic street performances discussed below, the representation of an authenticated "oral tradition" enables Oriya Christian villagers to become not only accepted by but also undifferentiated from their Oriya Hindu neighbors—a process described by my interlocutor Santanu as *"becoming real."* Through this performative identification, Oriya Christians enter village life as understood and natural, and achieve a degree of invisibility to various means of governance. Paradoxically, this "acting in" tactic through which the MM Christians become functionally invisible to government surveillance is predicated on the state's own practice of defining and encouraging local identity by means of authenticated cultural performances or "oral traditions" for the state's purposes of tourism and cultural affirmation.[9]

The performance discussed below took place openly in the village streets of Bagharpalli, Odisha.[10] Here, biblical stories are performed as highly stylized epic narratives using what Chitta Ranjan Mallia, Odisha's secretary of culture, calls the "oral traditions" of Oriya dance, drama, and song.[11] Through these street performances, both the performances and the performers themselves—in Santanu's words—"become real" in the village.

The Village of Bagharpalli

Santanu, dressed in clean, pressed denim pants and a patterned, long-sleeved, button-down shirt, leads us along a well-worn path into the village. The musicians follow along, clothed in long-sleeved white *kurta* (shirts) and dark slacks. Lithe, energetic children, some barefoot and some wearing flip-flops, appear suddenly at our sides with shouts, giggles, and lots of questions, and

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[8] Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," in *Literary Theories* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 578.

[9] Kelly Askew's work in Tanzania recognizes a similar state role in the promotion of what she calls "cultural production" as a tourist destination. Askew's identification of state efforts to both encourage and control cultural production for nationalist purposes helped me to recognize and evaluate similar processes in Odisha. My project, however, focuses less on the power and action of the state and more on the agential tactics of Oriya MM Christians and their acting in performances, activities that enable particular kinds of relationships to the state, the village, and the West. Kelly M. Askew, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[10] The names of my interlocutors, Christian organizations, individual Christians, and the villages themselves have been changed in order to reduce any risk that such exposure could bring now or in the future.

[11] Chitta Ranjan Mallia, Secretary, Odisha Sangeet Natak Akademi, personal interview with the author in the secretary's Bhubaneswar office, Feb. 19, 2014.

then disappear just as quickly. We duck repeatedly to avoid the overhanging tile roofs. A small, wide-eyed boy carrying a goat nearly half his size quietly follows.

We enter an opening in the street where preparations are in process. A young woman is covering a *charpai* (a wooden frame with a woven platform for sitting or sleeping) with a large royal-blue cloth in anticipation of our arrival. Several children scatter, leaving one quiet, inquisitive five-year-old girl dressed in green alone on a white tarp. I surmise that the children have already announced our arrival in the village more effectively than a mobile phone call could have. The woman, dressed in a shimmering sari of gold and navy, disappears into a home and re-emerges with a brass pitcher; bowing, she pours water across the path at our feet. "This is our culture," Santanu translates proudly. Kneeling before us, the woman places her hands flat on the ground and elegantly genuflects until her forehead touches the back of her hands. She rises with a warm and welcoming smile and returns to her preparations. "So, in the other village they do it differently, yeah? The culture is different," Santanu declares. He is calling to mind our village welcome in another region only two days earlier, in which water had been poured directly onto our shoes and sandals and then wiped clean. The young Bagharpalli woman who poured the water is Kanti Senapatti; she is the sole Christian living in the village and one of only four Christians in this area. She and her Hindu husband welcome local pastor Abhinash (not to be confused with Abhinav Satpathy) into their home each week for Christian worship and Bible stories; today they are the hosts for this *keertan* performance.[12] Santanu directs me to sit on the cloth-covered frame.

Santanu's focus on the nuanced differences among local cultural practices echoes the detailed attention given to local practices by church leader and Christian Oral Arts Festival host Abhinav Satpathy. Satpathy explains that prior to the 2008 riots, expressions of Christian faith and worship by MM Christians were heavily inflected by foreign practices. He claims that in the present era, the practices deemed "foreign," of the "West," or influenced by "western culture" emerge as flashpoints for eruptions of violence against Oriya Christians in relation to local villagers and to ambiguous and unofficial means of governance, such as various Hindutva groups.[13] On this basis, MM leaders have adopted a stance that declares foreign culture rather than religious difference to be the key point of contention, thereby leveraging an ideological space that gives them the freedom to practice and share a Christianity that has been purged of foreign cultural practices.[14] I should note that this stance by Maranatha Ministries seems to be at

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[12] *Keertan* is a devotional music genre found throughout much of South Asia. The spelling most commonly found in other scholarship is *kirtan*; the spelling I employ here, *keertan*, is that claimed emphatically by my interlocutors. Previous Indic scholars who have discussed *kirtan* include Edward O. Henry, Scott L. Marcus, Gordon Thompson, Karunamoy Gosami, Ashok Ranade, and Stephen Slawek.

[13] Hindutva is a nationalist reform movement in India. Hindutva groups include, but are not limited to, Rashtirya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

[14] My use of the term *stance* follows Harris Berger. He proposes a phenomenological approach to analyzing expressive culture that takes into account the complex intersubjectivities and historicized cultural practices of performer/audience relationships. See Harris Berger, *Stance: Ideas about Emotion,*

odds with a statist discourse demonstrated in my interview with Secretary of Culture Mallia, who carefully negated any suggestion that western culture might exert a problematic or corrupting influence in Odisha.[15] Satpathy, on the other hand, gave the following example in support of his own argument for the corrupting influence of foreign or western culture:

> Sometimes a woman becomes a Christian and stops applying vermilion on her forehead or wearing bangles on her wrists and ankles because the missionaries told her these were a sign that she was still Hindu. But for the local people, the absence of vermilion or bangles is actually a sign that she is a widow. This is very confusing locally and is seen as an offense to the local culture. We don't approve everything in culture—every culture has some things that are in conflict with Christianity, but there are many things that bridge the gap.[16]

MM Christians attempt to bridge this gap by "acting in" to the local culture, replacing Christian practices deemed to be of foreign influence and replacing them with local practices. This includes the abandonment of British-colonial-style church buildings along with their accompanying organs, pianos, and rows of pews; replacing them are worship meetings in mud homes or thatch-and-bamboo rooms with worshippers sitting cross-legged on the floor playing local *dholak*, *khanjani*, and *ginni* instruments. Gone are imported hymnals, song tunes, and lecture-style sermons; replacing them are Oriya melodies and song forms and the telling of Bible stories. Gone also are business suits and neckties; replacing them are the local colors and varieties of *kurta* and *dhoti* (pants). "Acting in" refers to this adoption of local cultural practices by MM Christians as a means of avoiding foreign associations and the potentially detrimental visibility they bring.

A Crowd Assembles

No fewer than eight children are now assembled on the white tarp. The tarp is a pragmatic assemblage of woven industrial bags sewn together, the red "ACC Cement" logo repeating across a white background. The energetic children quickly become the focus of attention for the musicians, who have been noodling on the red *dholak* (double-headed drum), *dara* (tambourines), and *khanjani* (stick tambourines). The musicians transition into a song, inviting the children and others to join in, lining out the words between phrases.

My inquiries during our van ride to Bagharpalli revealed a confident knowledge among these musicians of why the *dholak*, *dara*, *khanjani*, and *ginni* (small cymbals) were considered acceptable for today's performance and what, if any, substitutions were possible. The enthusiastic Gyan answered most of my questions. Not wanting to rely on only one perspective, I turned and began a similar inquiry with Abhinash, but he just smiled and rolled his eyes dismissively. "This is Abhinash's culture," the others were quick to explain, "he grew up among these villages." The gestural response by Abhinash and the verbal explanation by the others represents a different kind of authenticity claim for today's *keertan* performance—a claim rooted in the indigeneity of

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Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

[15] Chitta Ranjan Mallia, personal interview with the author, Feb. 19, 2014.

[16] Abhinav Satpathy, personal interview with the author in Nagpur, Maharashta, India, Feb. 10, 2013.

the performer rather than an indigeneity validated through the abstraction of a list of acceptable instruments and clothing.[17] This instance of a performance being validated through a claim of performer indigeneity is an unusual moment in this study in which biblical stories and the MM Christians themselves are authenticated through "acting in" performances rather than the other way around.

As the children clap along with the music, I become aware that the sound of the instruments and singing is attracting a crowd in the heat of this August workday. Adults appear intermittently, laying down their shouldered loads and heavily laden bicycles. Some peer cautiously around corners of brick or concrete before venturing closer. I notice that the musicians have discreetly changed into their costumes—most have added bone-colored *dhoti* with colorful sashes to complete their clothing for the performance. This costume change brings to mind Abhinash's warning during the car ride to the village. Nodding toward the folded *dhoti,* he had said, "Without this—no *keertan*." Everything, including the *natokiyo beso bhusa* (dress for the drama), now seems to be in order.

The sporadic playing and song was all prelude—a means of drawing a crowd. And it worked. A dozen or so women in colorful saris are sitting on the orange clay of earthen shelves or stoops that front some of the homes. The group of children on the white tarp continues to increase, too active now to be counted. These are joined by younger men taking a break from their labors, most standing or leaning beneath overhanging tile roofs. One white-haired man is seated on a red resin chair − a place of honor. The instruments grow silent. I sense that it is time for the *keertan* performance to begin.[18]

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[17] This turn from a claim for authenticity based on an established organological listing of accepted instruments to one based on the practices of a local individual was reminiscent of my discussion with Secretary of Culture Mallia. The secretary's authenticity claims for state-sponsored performances of oral culture are best summed up by his statement, "Oral tradition is what oral people do." Such a definition allows the practices of contemporary performers to trump authenticity claims based on published historical accounts, including those from within the academy. Chitta Ranjan Mallia, personal interview, Feb. 19, 2014.

[18] Prior scholarship by Indic musicologists focuses on the adaptations of the devotional genres of *kirtan* and *bhajan* for Christian use. For example, Zoe Sherinian studies *kirttanai* at the nexus of Christian practice, musical style, liberation theology, and class politics in Tamil Nadu; see Zoe Sherinian, "The Indigenization of Tamil Christian Music: Musical Style and Liberation Theology," *World of Music* 47/1 (2005): 125–65. Joseph Palackal's extensive work in his native Kerala includes the study of indigenized Christian *bhajan*, among many other forms; see Joseph J. Palackal, "Oktoechos of the Syrian Orthodox Churches in South India," *Ethnomusicology* 48/2 (2004): 229–50. Christopher Dicran Hale investigates Christian *bhajan* from the emic perspective of a performing artist of Christian *bhajans* and *"kirtan-*like *bhajans"* in the U.S., at times for Hindu audiences; *s*ee Christopher Dicran Hale, "Are Western Christian Bhajans 'Reverse' Mission Music?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Jonathan Dueck and Suzel Ana Reily, Oxford Handbooks Online (accessed Dec. 8, 2016). Chad Bauman presents a performance situation most similar to the Bagharpalli performance in "Singing of Satnam: Blind Simon Patros, *Dalit* Religious Identity and *Satnami*-Christian Music in Chhattisgarh, India," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 19, Article 9, http://dx.doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1364 (accessed Mar. 26, 2017); in this work, Bauman investigates the impact of select Christian *kirtan* and *bhajan* performances in Chhattisgarh. He highlights a local performance of the biblical narrative from Luke 15,

A Performance

The sharp, deliberate quarter notes of the *ginni* plit the stillness of the late-morning air and are joined by the melodic pulse of the *dholak* in eighth-, sixteenth-, and quarter-note divisions. The six male musicians, seated in a circle and dressed according to local custom, begin synchronized, counterclockwise movement in time with the music. An ebullient Abhinash chants a simple vocal line of even quarter- and eighth-note rhythm and minimal melodic range that is echoed by the others (see *Keertan* Song 1: "Bolo anande premanande Prabhu Jishu bolo [Sing the name of the Lord Jesus in gladness and in love to Him]).

Keertan Song 1
tune: "Bagharpali"

Text:
    Sambalpuri – Bolo anande premanande Prabhu Jishu bolo
    English – Recite the name of the Lord Jesus in gladness and in love to Him

more commonly known as story of the prodigal son—the same narrative presented in the Bagharpalli example in this paper.

I am surprised by the overt mention of "the Lord Jesus" in this environment fraught with risk, but as one Indian pastor's wife later said of her conversion to follow Jesus Christ, "My family worshiped 36 gods, what difference was one more going to make?"[19] Her observation gives testimony to years of more peaceable interfaith relations in the region.

Most of the crowd watch quietly—a few children attempt to sing along. After four cycles of the initial song structure, the *ginni* signal a switch to a triple eighth-note pulse. Immediately the ensemble's intensity increases in both volume and rhythmic subdivision. The tempo increases slightly as well. The men's energetic movements accent the duple and triple patterns. The audience's smiles indicate their approval.

A rhythmic flourish signals an abrupt ending. Without delay, a new pattern begins; the melody of this one is in a slow, deliberate triple meter (see *Keertan* Song 2). The circle's motion becomes more fluid; upper-body movement and hand gestures provide visual emphasis to the slow triplet pattern. Only the *dholak* and a single *ginni* are playing now, freeing the other four musicians to emphasize the lilting dance with their arms and hands. Abhinash begins the vocal call of the A-section narrative: "There was a rich man who had two sons and they were beloved to his father." To which the ensemble responds likewise. The opening call and response is repeated twice more before the first presentation of the B section and its continuation of the biblical narrative. The B section is repeated once before a return to the slightly modified A section (here labeled A2). At the *ginni*'s signal, the tempo increases, the dancing musicians resume playing their instruments, the narrative unfolds with greater intensity, the *ginni* create a hemiola pattern (two notes against the singer's three), and the village streets are again dominated by the dynamic energy of *keertan* dance and song.[20]

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[19] Pramila Sah, dinner conversation with the author in Patna, Bihar, July 2013.

[20] This repetitive, cyclic form, increasing in both intensity and tempo, resembles scholarly accounts given for *kirtan* in other regions. Stephen Slawek describes the *nam-kirtan* of the Banares region in nearly identical fashion, noting that the initial melody was commonly sung four times followed by the second line of melody, also sung four times, after which "the whole procedure would start over once again, but at an increased tempo." See Steven Slawek, "Popular Kirtan in Baneres: Some 'Great' Aspects of a Little Tradition," *Ethnomusicology* 32/ 2 (1988): 80. Anna Schultz's description of the musical elements of *Marathi kirtan* begins similarly, with repetitive call and response, increasing tempo, and rhythmic density before the highly politicized *Marathi kirtan* transitions ingeniously into another genre of praise song. See Anna Schultz, "The Collision of Genres and the Collusion of Participants: Marathi 'Rastriya Kirtan' and the Communication of Hindu Nationalism," *Ethnomusicology* 52/1 (2008): 31–51.

Keertan Song 2

Slow ♩ = 48
Fast ♩ = 80

A   Keertandholia call

Ginni slow tempo
Ginni fast tempo

Thi - le ja-ne dha - ni lo-ko he thi - le ja-ne dha - ni lo-ka ra du e ti pu - a_____ ba-pan-

7   *Ensemble response*

ka__ a-ti pri-ya   Thi - le ja-ne dha - ni lo-ko he Thi - le ja-ne dha - ni lo-ka ra du-e-ti pu -

14   1, 2, 3.   B   Keertandholia call

a_____ ba-pan- ka__ a-ti__ pri - ya

Di - ne sa-ne pu - a - a shi_____ ka-hi-la ba-pan-ku a - si
Ka - hi - le ba - pa bu-jha - yi_____ ki - chi se bu - jhi-la na - hi
A - na-tu-pa ka - ri se - se_____ phe - ri-la pi - tan-ko pa - se

21   *Ensemble response*   1.   2. A 2 Keertandholia call

Di - ne sa-na pu - a - a shi_____ ka-hi-la ba- pan-ku a - si
Ka-hi-le ba - pa bu-jha - yi_____ ka-chi se bu - jhi-la na - hi
A - na-tu-pa ka - ri se - se_____ phe - ri-la pi - tan-ko pa - se

Sam-pa-ti-ra bha ga di-ya, he sam-pa - ti - ra
Sam-pa - ti - ra bha ga ne - i sam-pa - ti - ra
Khy - a - ma ka - ri a - par-dha khy - a - ma ka-ri

28   *Ensemble response*

bha - ga di - ya, he ji - bi bi - de - sha_____ ban-du ma - nan-ka sa - ha   Sam-pa-ti-ra
bha ga ne - i bi - de-sho-go - la_____ a - pa - ba - ya ka - pi - la   Sam-pa - ti - ra
a - par-dha di - ya sa - ra na_____ pa-de-ka - li ja - na   Khy-a - ma ka-

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bha - ga di - ya, he sam-pa - ti - ra bha - ga di-ya he ji - bi bi - de - sha_____ ban-du - man-nan-ka sa - ha
bha ga ne - i sam-pa - ti - ra bha ga ne - i bi - de-sho - go - la_____ a-pa - ba - ya ka - pi - la
ri a - par-dha khy - a - ma ka - ri a - par-dha di - ya sa - ra na_____ pa-de-ka - li ja - na

Song order:

Slow – A A A B B A2
Fast – A A B B B A2 A2 B B A B B A2 A2 A2 A2

Keertan **Song 2:**

Sambalpuri text:	English Translation
Thile jane dhani loko he	There was a rich man who had
Thile jane dhani loka ra dueti pua	two sons
bapanka ati priya	and they were beloved to his father.
Dine sane pua ashi	The younger son came and he asked
kahile bapanku asi	the father for his share of the wealth
Sampatira bhaga diya, he	He wanted to go to a far away country
sampatira bhaga diya, he	with his friends.
jibi bidesha bandhu mananka saha	
Kahile bapa bujhayi	The father tried to make him
kichi se bujhila nahi	understand but he did not
kahile bapa bujhayi	listen to him.
kichi se bujhila nahi	Then he took his share and he went
Sampatira bhaga nei	away and wasted all his money.
sampatira bhaga nei	
bidesho gola apa baya kapila	
Anutapa kari sese	At last he repented and he came to his
pherila pitanko pase	father again.
Khyama kari apardha	He asked for forgiveness and asked for
khyama kari apardha	shelter in his father's house.
diya sarana padekali jana	

"Acting in" performances by MM Christians, such as the *keertan* performance described here, resonate with the embodied domains of a villager's past experience with other "oral tradition" performances. This resonance is what Dwight Conquergood calls an "embodied epistemology," a way-of-knowing that is described variously by my interlocutors as "accepted," "remembered," and "understood."[21] Satpathy describes this sense of embodied resonance as a person's "blood being drawn toward culture." In the Bagharpalli performance, villagers move impulsively with the music, clapping, nodding, and swaying. They respond spontaneously to the drama, eyes wide, mouths agape, bodies tensed with expectation as they abandon themselves, if only momentarily, to an engaged experience with performance. This embodied resonance creates the conditions for a mode of being that is "100 percent Oriya and 100 percent believers in Jesus Christ." "Acting in" performances bring into play the sedimented layers of life experience in ways that allow much of what is connected to these performances to sound and appear "natural." Michel Foucault describes such embodied ways of knowing as "subjugated knowledges," nontextual means that are often rendered illegitimate within the academy because of their lack of

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[21] Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *Drama Review* 46/2 (Summer 2002): 145–56, at 146.

textuality and the supposed certainty that text provides.[22] Conquergood contends that such embodied epistemologies are "tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert and all the more meaningful because of [their] refusal to be spelled out."[23] It appears that today's *keertan* performance resonates deeply with normative local performances of Hindu epic narratives, such as those from the *Hitopadesa* or the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, to the degree that these biblical stories are "accepted" as if they emanate from a shared past.

The Performance Continues

After yet another vigorous rhythmic climax from the musicians, Abhinash calls out to the crowd: "Bolo Davda Santana Jishunkara jai!" (Hail Jesus, the Son of David!), to which comes the collective response "Jai!" (Hooray!).[24] The opening lyrics of *Keertan* Song 1 and this statement are the only overtly Christian references in a performance that otherwise minimizes the difference between itself and a normative local Hindu *keertan* performance. After two more repetitions of this shouted exchange, Abhinash takes center stage before the attentive villagers. Enthusiastic and mopping his brow, he questions those gathered about the story song just completed. The children answer in a chaotic chorus, and Abhinash affirms their correct answer by immediately singing a phrase of the song. The other musicians join as if on cue. Abhinash addresses his next question to a young, attentive woman seated in a doorway. She answers enthusiastically, but with slight embarrassment at being singled out. Instantly the musicians resume another portion of the song. Villagers discuss among themselves the answers to the questions posed by Abhinash and willingly follow his lead.

Abhinash is teaching the narrative of the song now, skillfully drawing more villagers − particularly adults—into the conversation. His manner is warm as audience members eagerly engage in the verbal exchange—more so than with the song performance itself. It seems to me from Abhinash's bubbly demeanor that all the answers are correct; only later do I discover that incorrect answers were greeted with equal enthusiasm, after which the musicians repeated the appropriate song portion, allowing the listener to adjust his or her answer. The animated and bearded Gyan joins in the fray, role-playing an exaggerated question-and-answer exchange with Abhinash and spontaneously acting out scenes from the song story to the crowd's delight.

Abhinash's function here is that of *keertandholia,* the "leader of the *keertan.*" His is the respected role of telling engaging stories and expertly leading songs that both teach the audience and inspire them to greater religious devotion.[25] These relational interactions, led by Abhinash,

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[22] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge,* ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 81–84.

[23] Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 146.

[24] At the time I was not aware that this call and response invoked the name of Jesus.

[25] Abhinash's role here is similar to that of the *kirtankar* of Gordon Thompson's study in Gujarat. The *kirtankar* is "generally a highly-literate man" who tells stories and Hindu epics and expertly leads from one song genre to the next—all in praise of Hindu deities, but without strict adherence to any particular tradition or temple. The *kirtankar* of the Marathi *rastriya kirtan* works the crowd into a frenzied state using contagious rhythmic grooves and familiar devotional songs, segueing seamlessly between songs of religious devotion and songs of Hindu nationalism so as to translate Hindu religious passion into Hindu

engender audience participation and engagement and have been steadily increasing in both directness and intensity since our arrival: first in our ritual welcome, then in the playful interaction with the children, and finally in the responsorial song now being explained in entertaining fashion. This dialogue works to structure and even control the ways that today's performance and these performers take root in the village. The presence of a *keertandholia* is another example of the naturalizing processes of "acting in" performances that serve to authenticate both the biblical stories and the performers themselves.

My interviews with the Bagharpalli villagers after the performance indicate that by their own accounts, the bodily engagement of the audience that I witnessed during the presentation of the *keertan* songs and accompanying drama is comparable to their viewing experience of dramatized presentations of Hindu narratives during festivals. As one audience member states, "When it is acted in the drama, it becomes real."[26] This embodied resonance enables such Christian performances to be "accepted," as if Hindu and Christian devotional practices shared a local historical past. This phenomenological process creates the conditions by which the beliefs of MM Christians might conceivably emerge in subsequent village dialogue as local, a development that could also enable the distinctiveness of MM Christianity to gradually gain clarity while its origins appear culturally undifferentiated from the local traditions of religious practice.

Visibility

In addition to the cultural work outlined above, my analysis also considers the political work accomplished through this public "acting in" performance. "Acting in" performances on village streets do not simply enable a new relationship to Hindu villagers; they also enable a new relationship to various apparatuses of state and local governance. The tactic of "acting in" extends beyond the performances themselves to include a jettisoning of all MM Christian practices perceived as foreign or western. This careful avoidance of foreign practices and the adoption of local performance practices enable a relationship with governing bodies such as the state, in which Oriya MM Christians are no longer identifiable or even visible as an entity separate from that of their Oriya Hindu village neighbors. The end result is that MM Christians appear undifferentiated from Hindu village society and thus both become natural to local villagers and achieve a functional invisibility to various means of surveillance and governance— be they official village, district, or state agencies, or unofficial entities such as various Hindutva groups. These modes of governance could find it expedient to treat Christians as a separate category from that of their Hindu neighbors. As such, "acting in" manifests itself as a decidedly political act.

The lack of co-presence between Maranatha Ministries and official state agencies precludes direct dialogue, and even more so between Maranatha Ministries and unofficial modes of

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nationalist fervor. In each of these contexts, the *kitankar* is a respected individual expected to entertain, teach, and possibly, as in the *rastriya kirtan*, challenge cultural assumptions by cleverly connecting accepted devotional practices with new ideas. Gordon Thompson, "Gujarat," in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 5: *South Asia*, ed. Allison Arnold (New York: Garland, 2000).

[26] Audience interviews after Bagharpalli *keertan* performance in July 2013.

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governance. In the uneven political environment that marks present-day Odisha, both the dialogue and the players themselves become foggy, spectral entities, often speaking past each other through various forms of published media—a condition that works against meaningful dialogue and stable relations. The "acting in" tactic of Maranatha Ministries takes advantage of these nebulous political relationships and lack of dialogic co-presence in ways that enable MM Christians to limit their visibility to such governing bodies. The resultant dialogue is indirect and complex and emanates from a variety of voices, some specific and singular—such as those of my interlocutors or the state secretary of culture; others more nebulous and ephemeral—such as local, regional, national, or international news agencies and human rights watchdog organizations that monitor government action and inaction.

Maranatha Ministries' declaration that foreign culture rather than religious difference is the key point of contention leverages the ideological space and agency needed for MM Christians to practice and share a Christian piety in a predominantly Hindu and politically tenuous Odisha. This is accomplished in part by its avoidance of both foreign practices and an antigovernment critique—a critique that would make MM Christians visible to what one local pastor called "the government that sees."[27] Such public criticism of government would amount to "acting out," as it were. "Acting in" performances, on the other hand, become a tactic by MM Christians that enables peaceable relations between themselves, local villagers, and agents of the state. Through "acting in" performances, MM Christians claim for themselves a status in which they are "100 percent Oriya and 100 percent believers in Jesus Christ."

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[27] Pradeep Kumar, one of my interlocutors and translators, made this declaration in discussions with Abhinash, myself, and Santanu in his hotel room after a *keertan* performance in the village of Kandhamal, Feb. 23, 2014.