



Figure 1. The goddess Amba Mata in the form of Durgamahisamardini peers out from behind bars, sculpture ca. 1965–1991. Marble, tenth-century stone frame. Photo by author, Winter 1998.

The theft of the goddess Amba Mata

Ontological location and Georges Bataille's bas matérialisme

DEBORAH L. STEIN

In the West, we are not used to thinking of a piece of stone as a person, let alone as someone who holds legal rights in a modern nation-state. But in India—where gods often take figural or material form—recent rulings hold that a deity embodied in a statue does have legal rights. A bronze emanation of the powerful dancing

This article examines the theft of an icon, the worship of absence, and an eight-day installation ritual held to consecrate a twenty-first-century icon in the sanctum of a tenth-century temple. This research stems from a larger book project called *The Hegemony of Heritage: Ritual and the Record in Stone*.

Peter Connor and Benjamin Buchloh gave me the foundation for the philosophical side of this article with a Georges Bataille seminar in the French department and coursework in twentieth-century art at Barnard. Joanna Williams encouraged anthropological approaches to Indian art in my early years at Berkeley and the late Alan Dundes provided unlimited support for and encouragement of this project. Michael Meister opened the doors to new theoretical avenues for Indian art with his ethnohistorical work on Sacciya Mata at Osian and generously contributed his time to cochair my dissertation committee. Whitney Davis also cochaired and encouraged me to read Alfred Gell in response to my ideas about the temple as a catalyst. Pika Ghosh has provided much helpful feedback and unceasing encouragement towards the publication of this article. Patricia Berger and Ara Merjian generously read earlier versions of this work. The two anonymous readers at *RES* provided intelligent, insightful feedback and helped me to reach out to a larger audience. I am also grateful to Natasha Kurchanova and Francesco Pellizzi for their editorial expertise, professionalism, and encouragement.

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I would also like to thank the faculty in the Art History and Asian Studies departments at the University of Michigan for inviting me to give an earlier version of this paper as a lecture in 2006 and for their stimulating discussion, which pushed me to examine in depth the ontological questions raised by my fieldwork. At Yale, David Joselit reminded me of the political implications of form, formlessness, and antiform as I began to sort out the relationship between twenty-first-century praxis at the Ambika Temple in Jagat, Rajasthan, and the philosophical underpinnings of materiality in modern and postmodern art historical discourse. Mary-Ann Milford provided opportunities to share this research during my years of teaching at Mills College. A life-

deity, Shiva Nataraja, recently sued a British art dealer for the right to return home to Southern India.¹ Indian icons serve as *kosa*, or shells in which divinity resides.² These ontological beings traditionally take figural form in expensive and permanent materials, such as caste bronze or carved stone. Deities do not require elaborate works of art, however. A photocopy of a Hindu god or goddess from a local library book or a picture on a calendar could provide excellent icons for a domestic shrine in India or the Diaspora.³ A person traveling in India could happen upon a roadside shrine—often a cluster of vermilion-covered stones at the base of a sacred tree.⁴ These formless icons rely on materiality and

long mentor and long-time friend, Rachel Fell McDermott, introduced the study of Hindu goddesses to me as a college sophomore. This project could not have been realized without the support and understanding of my husband and two young sons. All errors, of course, remain mine alone.

1. R. Davis, "Loss and Recovery of Ritual Self Among Hindu Images," in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1992):43–61; R. Davis, *The Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); G.-D. Sontheimer, "Religious Endowments in India: The Juristic Personality of Hindu Deities," ed. O. Spies, *Zeitschrift Fur Vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft: Einschließlich Der Ethnologischen Rechtsforschung* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1965), pp. 45–100.

2. This idea of the body as a disposable shell for the soul is found in the *Devi Mahatmya* (verses 5:40–5:41) where *kosa* or bodily sheath is used to refer to Parvati, when Ambika issues forth from her and is known as Kausiki before she turns black and is known as Kali. T. Coburn, "The Structural Interplay of Tantra, Vedanta, and Bhakti: Nondualist Commentary on the Goddess," eds. K. A. Harper and R. Brown, *Roots of Tantra* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), pp. 79 and 86. The tenth-century Ambika temple in Jagat has no texts traceable to its exact time and location. In this article, I will use three main categories of Indian primary texts in relation to the Ambika temple in Jagat: 1) the *Devi Mahatmya*, an earlier text from around the seventh century, which is the primary source for goddess iconography in India, 2) the *Agni Purana* and *Kalika Purana*, contemporaneous North Indian religious texts; they focus on the god Shiva and the goddess Kali, respectively; and 3) the *Mayamata*, which is another early medieval text from South India, which deals with ritual and renovation of temples and icons.

3. K. Jain "Mass Mediation, Imagined Publics, and the Triangulated Gaze," in *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 290–301.

4. P. Mookerjee, *Pathway Icons: The Wayside Art of India* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987).

location rather than figural representation to express their ontological status—the icons do not *depict* deities, they are *manifestations* of deities.

Aniconism and representation

The Western art historical interest in figural representation and fascination with aniconism lies in a complex Judeo-Christian history of icon worship and iconoclasm. Even during the Roman Empire, syncretic forms of high religion favored by nobles and folk beliefs held by those ruled by Romans in their vast territories competed to define the potency or impotency of corporeal form, figuration, and the usefulness of icons. In the Roman Empire, the urban/rural divide revealed how the wealthy power of figural form in the cities met with iconoclastic “heretical” responses in the countryside.⁵ Already at the first Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, the question of whether Christ was a man or a god led to debate about figural images and their role in the humanization or deification of God’s son. By 604, St. Gregory famously argued that images are not icons at all, only illustrations, except for “the most illiterate of peasants.”⁶ In the eighth century, at the dawn of the medieval period in India, the second Council of Nicea was held. Once again, the relationship between god, his son Christ, and figural representation arose. This time, a geographical spit occurred, with Eastern clergy taking a more iconoclastic stance due to Jewish and Muslim influences on the Eastern edges of the Christian world. Again and again, during the crusades, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, the figuration and disfiguration of god and man in Christianity gave rise to some of the most beautiful art and also to some of the most horrific wars. And, inevitably, compromises were made in the monotheistic traditions. For example, Islamic manuscripts depict the Prophet Mohammed’s body as figural, while his face is represented as Allah’s name in the calligraphic vocative voice—a visual and textual depiction of the prophet’s face as the sound of God’s name.⁷

5. Hugh Trevor-Roper argues that “[a]lmost all medieval heresies were the heresies of dissident social groups protesting against a society in which they felt themselves to be misfits.” H. Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 84.

6. “The Veneration of Images,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. C. Herbermann, E. Pace, C. Pallen, T. Shahan, and Rev. J. Wynne. New Advent website, editor: Kevin Night, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07664a.htm>, accessed 11/18/09.

7. C. Gruber, “Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nur*): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting,” *Muqarnas* 26 (Spring 2009): forthcoming; and also, at CAA February

In Asian art, so far, most of the debates surrounding aniconism center on the Buddha, neither exclusively a man nor really a god at all. The Buddha was the historical figure of Siddhartha Gautama and subsequently became the figurehead of an ideal in a philosophical system that spread from India all the way along the Silk Route into China, Korea, and Japan. Like Christ, the Buddha began with the story of a man in a specific time and place. In the beginning, both were largely represented by their life stories and each developed into complex sets of established iconographies, based on figural form. Whereas early depictions of the Buddha’s life in India often left blank the figure of the Buddha within aniconic narratives, at the winter capital of the Kushan dynasty in Gandhara, Indo-Greco-style art depicted the Buddha and his Boddhisattvas in the same manner as idealized healthy young Greek gods. It was this very figuration in the Kushan era, around the second to third centuries, that allowed this figure who had lived centuries earlier in the axial age (fifth–sixth centuries B.C.) to become known along the Silk Route. The spread of Buddhism across central Asia would not have been possible without the colossal figuration of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the didactic murals of the Kizil caves, and the Pure Land seeds of Tang Dynasty paradises on the walls of the Dunhuang caves. By the time the Buddha arrived in Japan and developed into the eleventh-century Heian Period Amida (Skr: Amitabha), his body became the sole truth of a single artist. Only Jocho could craft the small columnar body and perfected head of the joined woodblock Amida—a form held dear and directly copied for ultimate authenticity for two or three hundred years.⁸

Art historians of both Asia and the West inherit this dueling obsession, specifically with figural representation and the prohibition of that figuration from the long European history of debates about Christ’s figuration in the early church, and later, from the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the Protestant Reformation, respectively. One could even argue that the art historical interest in aniconic representations of the Buddha in early Indian art derives from monotheistic Judeo-Christian questions about the visual depiction of Christ as man or divinity. But the debate surrounding aniconism at early Indian

2006, *Seeing Around the World: Comparative Visualities in Asia, Africa, Mesoamerica, and Islamic Worlds* panel cochaired by Deborah Stein with Tamara Sears, 94th Annual Meeting of the College Art Association, Boston, Mass.

8. S. Morse, “Jocho’s Amida at the Byodo-in and Cultural Legitimization in Late Heian Japan,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 23 (Spring 1993):96–113.

Buddhist sites, such as Sanchi, Barhut, and Amaravati, reveals more than the relative unimportance of the representation of the Buddha's physical body for the first six hundred years after Siddhartha Gautama lived.⁹ Surrounded by elaborate inscribed circumambulatory paths and gateways full of narrative imagery, *stupas* house relics of the Buddha's physical body, impenetrably buried under mounds of earth. Whether narrative scenes on *stupas* represent contemporary pageantry and ritual reenactments or mythological references to the glory of a great philosophical leader, pictures of the Buddha's life—ripe with regal parasols, favorite horses, and the indexical traces of his footprints—suggest that the figural depiction of the Buddha's person originally was unnecessary for the invocation of the Buddha's powerful life story, ideas, and even his presence. For over two thousand years in India, numinous figures have needed no figuration to signal their theophany; and yet India is known for some of the most spectacular, complex, and even perplexing figural representations of divinities.

A Hindu context leaves us with the weighty question of the passage from the mimetic, or at least the visually veristic, into something in which imitation does not enter into play. Found at the heart of Shaiva Siddhanta philosophy are two Sanskrit terms, *saguna* and *nirguna*, or "with form" and "without form." Devangana Desai suggests that early medieval Hindu temple programs, such as that of the Khandariya Mahadeva temple in Khajuraho, used complex temple iconography to guide the circumambulator from the formal towards the formless as a part of temple ritual.¹⁰ This article examines current temple practices in Jagat and the archaeological evidence of the tenth-century temple dedicated to Amba Mata to reveal the historical coexistence of form and

formless locations of divinity and the modern need to choose figural form over material manifestations of the goddess.¹¹

Corporeal theft and the shifting ontological locations of divinity

In that vein, the theft of a white marble sculpture from the tenth-century Ambika temple in the village of Jagat in southern Rajasthan provides an excellent case study for the ontological relationship of divinity in relation to materiality and form. It was not just any sculpture taken in the brazen raid in the year 2000, but the goddess Amba Mata (also known as Ambika)—the main icon in the inner sanctum of the ancient temple—stolen from behind locked gates in the middle of the night (fig. 1).¹² Articles from the early 1960s show the sanctum empty, as does the photograph of the icon frame shown in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture* upon publication in 1998.¹³ The stolen statue probably dates

11. Though the vast world history of materialism is beyond the scope of this article, materialism in Jagat lends itself to a fairly narrow definition. By materialism, I mean the idea that the divinity lies in the material of the stone itself, and/or in the physical trace of a divinity's indexical touch. The divinity could manifest in a sculpture or water or any other matter, figural or not, but the importance is the physical contact to the stone icon frame. In Jagat, worship patterns reveal a greater interest in the permeation of the stone frame with divinity rather than the form of a sculptural icon—the materiality, or matter, of the icon is more important than figuration.

12. "Jagat me mahisha mardini ki praachiin pratima chorii, gauv band raha," *Rajasthan Patrika* (Udaipur, March 9, 2000).

13. R. C. Agrawala and Soudara Rajan both published articles on the Ambika temple in Jagat in the early 1960s when the sanctum was empty. S. Rajan, "The Devi Cult at Jagat, Rajasthan," *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal* 1 (1963):130–140; and R. C. Agrawala, "Khajuraho of Rajasthan," *Arts Asiatiques* (1964):43–65. A photograph in "The Guhilas of Medapata" also shows the sanctum as empty. See also *Beginnings of a Medieval Idiom, Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture II*, part 3, ed. M. A. Dhaky and M. Meister (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1998), pl. 403. Dhaky believes the original icon to have been Sarvamangala-Ksemankari, the beautiful and benevolent goddess featured on plate 404. Though she is missing all of her limbs, the pedestal with two lions underneath supports this idea since Ksemankari's iconography requires the goddess to stand above two lions positioned tail to tail. This sculpture is no longer in situ. A second sculpture cast aside next to this one in the main sanctum, of the skeletal goddess Chamunda, was still on site as of February 2009 and may provide a second possibility for the original icon. Both Ksemankari and Chamunda would indicate tantric overtones for the tenth-century dedication of the Ambika temple. Dhaky's Ksemankari theory fits with the image of this goddess depicted above the temple entrance, whereas my idea about Chamunda fits iconographically with the exterior—either possibly indicates tenth-century tantric goddess worship worthy of further exploration. See also M. A. Dhaky, "Ksemankari: The Cult

9. S. Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism," *Art Journal* 49, no. 4 (Winter 1990):401–408; V. Dehejia, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems," *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991):45–66; S. Huntington, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992):111–156. Bernard Faure agrees with Huntington's location of Foucher's Orientalist preference for figuration over aniconism within a Western perspective. Faure also agrees with Dehejia's response to Huntington that emblems are multivalent; however, Faure ultimately sides with Mus, who argues that the nonfigural Vedic fire is "more strongly expressive of man, and, more specifically of his immortality" than any figural image. Furthermore, Faure reexamines Freedberg's idea of verisimilitude as somehow inherently attached to the mimetic. In a clever conclusion, Faure challenges the reader by asking why, then, is the Eucharist not a "gingerbread man"? See B. Faure, "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1998):18–19.

10. D. Desai, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho* (Mumbai: Project for Indian Cultural Studies Publication IV, 1996).

to 1965 or 1966, given that a photograph of 1966 shows the statue in situ.¹⁴ The thieves mistook a modern icon for an ancient work of art and left behind a story about the power of figuration and its absence in modern modes of worship in Jagat.

Whereas the figural sculptural body was missing, the original tenth-century frame for the icon remained intact in situ (fig. 2). For two years after the theft, the flat stone surface where the stolen statue had stood was dressed in a skirt and veil, given a trident, and worshipped as Amba Mata. In May 2002, a new icon was installed into the ancient sanctum at the archaeological site. The worship of an icon, followed by worship of the material of the stone where a figural representation once stood, and the subsequent foci of goddess worship upon the installation of a new icon, all demonstrate the power of materiality and location over figuration in the ontological production of divinity in Jagat.

The theft, worship of absence, and subsequent installation of an icon at Jagat suggests that figural form is a visual prerogative of the elite and remains relatively unimportant for the ontological existence of divinity at the turn of the twenty-first century. The early medieval tantric history gleaned visually from the iconographic program reveals that a nondualist breakdown of the dichotomy between figural form and matter may have been at the heart of esoteric practice. The very circumambulation of the temple may well have served to deconstruct the dual categories of life and death, Eros and Thanatos, the mimetic illusions of figural form and the material truths of stone.

Like a spider or a worm: Base materialism and the irrelevant icon

One of the most powerful theoretical models of how raw materials can trump figural representation comes from the work of Georges Bataille as well as from interpretations of his work.¹⁵ As a Catholic turned



Figure 2. The worship of Absence between 2000 and 2002. Stone, cloth, foil, and copper pot. Photo by the author, May 2002. The photograph was taken in the main niche of the Ambika Temple.

Gnostic, Bataille had a great interest in mysticism, the erotic, the abject, and the scathing potency of the banal and the quotidian. Although the term *informe* or “formless” was already part of the French lexicon, Bataille defined it in the dictionary portion of the journal *Documents* in 1929.¹⁶ He was excited about “formless” not as a mere adjective, but as a term that could declassify (this concept has been of great value to all the deconstructionists who followed, such as Derrida, and to postmodernism as a movement after 1968). Crushed like

and offended many, including André Breton, who thought of him as apolitical, and Jean-Paul Sartre—who even went so far as to recommend psychiatric care at the end of one notorious critique of Bataille. See P. Connor, *Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 10 and 38–39.

16. G. Bataille, “Informe,” *Documents* I, no. VII (1929). 382: “*INFORME.—Un dictionnaire commencerait à partir du moment où il ne donnerait plus le sens mais les besognes des mots. Ainsi informe n’est pas seulement un adjectif ayant tel sens mais un terme servant déclasser, exigeant généralement que chaque chose ait sa forme. Ce qu’il désigne n’a ses droits dans aucun sens et se fait écraser partout comme une araignée ou un ver de terre. Il faudrait en effet, pour que les homes académiques soient contents, que l’univers prenne forme. La philosophie entière n’a pas d’autre but: il s’agit de donner une redingote à ce qui est, une redingote mathématique. Par contre affirmer que l’univers ne ressemble à rien et n’est qu’informe revient à dire que l’univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat.*”

Image of the Ambika Temple, Jagat,” *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal* VI (1968): 117–120.

14. The statue was probably installed in 1965 or 1966, given that a photograph of the stolen statue, undressed, exists on the AIIS (American Institute of Indian Studies) photo archive website and was taken in December 1966. Accession no 5387, negative no. 29.78, http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis/aiis_search.html?depth=Get+Details&id=5387, accessed 11/25/09. Vandana Sinha, director, AIIS Center for Art and Archaeology, personal communication, November 26, 2009.

15. As a thinker on the fringes of the Surrealist movement—and as many might argue, a thinker who surpassed the Surrealists altogether—Bataille’s radical ideas sought to undo academic discourse

a spider or a worm, formless, who opposed a universe where things take form, Bataille postulated instead a universe more like “a spider” or “a spittle.” In art historical terms, the empty study of iconography, figural representation, or even the elite material of marble alone must give way to what Bataille terms “direct interpretation” of “brut phenomena” in his discussion of materialism.¹⁷ Part of Bataille’s critique of the dominant Western understanding of materialism is that it relies on idealism but ignores the psychological and social. The physical is falsely isolated from the abstract.

This cogent recognition of the false separation of the physical and the abstract came from a person heavily invested in spirituality, with a modernist multicultural gaze to diverse phenomena published in *Documents*, such as the totem poles from British Columbia presented at the Trocadero in 1929 and the goddess Kali as interpreted (very problematically!) by Katherine Mayo, just to name two examples. Bataille’s own writings delved into sacrifice and torture to the point of intense meditation on an image of the Chinese torture known as *cent-morceaux*, or cutting of the human body to one hundred bits. His twentieth-century-French-period eye led him to hold a fascination for the ethnographic, the “primitive,” and the spiritual; and yet his very absorption of this wide range of phenomena opened his mind enough to break free of the chains of the Enlightenment in order to question the rhetoric of reason itself.¹⁸

Bataille’s discussion of materialism, also found in the dictionary portion of *Documents*, associates this topic with a hierarchic order of things that is inherently

17. G. Bataille, “Informe,” *Documents* I, no. III (1929): 170. “MATÉRIALISME—[. . .] Il est temps, lorsque le mot matérialisme est employé, de designer l’interprétation directe, excluant tout idéalisme, des phénomènes bruts et non un système fondé sur des éléments fragmentaires d’une analyse idéologique élaboré sous le signe des rapports religieux.”

18. Especially within the context of South Asian art history, I find Bataille’s relationship to Eastern philosophy and ethnography in general intensely problematic. However, in the spirit of Hume, I believe we should contextualize his experience within a specific time and place rather than throw out his ideas altogether. It is no accident that his exposure to ideas outside France helped pave the way for deconstruction and postmodernism. Often we imagine that twentieth-century theory should only pertain to modern art in Europe and North America, but, in fact, the ability of Bataille’s work to undo what preceded it reveals not a mere ethnographic exploitation of Asia but rather its intellectual debt to this part of the world. This article intentionally comes full circle to investigate the implication of Bataille’s work for assumptions we may hold as art historians about iconology, figuration, materiality, ontology, monetary value, and aesthetic hierarchy in Indian art.

idealist. He argues that even though materialists seek to eliminate any hint of the spiritual, they still cling to form as the top of a hierarchy. They put “dead matter” at the top without realizing their obsession with the ideal. He likens the materialist’s obsession with “dead matter” to that of a docile student. In Indian terms, this is akin to regarding an icon as a *kosa*, or shell, with no ontological essence for all intensive purposes. Materialists would obsess about the location of the stolen figural statue of Amba Mata—an ontological corpse—and ignore the residual divinity in the material of the stone itself.

In his article “Le bas matérialisme et la gnose” Bataille proposes an alternative to form and the hierarchy of things with the idea of base materialism. The very first article in the first issue of the second volume of *Documents* began the year 1930 with a follow-up to some of his initial dictionary definitions of 1929—the distinction between material and form is likened to the difference between the prison guard and the walls of the prison. Bataille argues that this “metaphysical scaffolding” holds no more interest than “different architectural styles.”¹⁹ He also maintains that base materialism refuses reduction to the “grand ontological machines” of “ideal human aspiration.” Already in antiquity, Gnostic reactions to figuration radically contradicted the academy. Figuration, Bataille explains, renders invisible the base material, which frees intelligence from the constraints of idealism.²⁰ Half of the article is comprised of illustrations of ancient Gnostic seals, which Bataille does not describe in the text. More recent interpretations of the power of base materialism have focused on twentieth-century work, including the French painter Jean Fautrier (1898–1964).

Fautrier’s work illustrates the liminal border where figuration gives way to materials, when paint becomes more important than form, and when stone becomes more important than sculpture, style, and iconography. Fautrier’s series entitled *Hostages* [*Otages*], best reflects

19. This is an obvious reason for the field of art history to have wished to apply Bataille’s ideas to artists such as Jean Fautrier, rather than contend with the vicious reach of his critique of form. In my view, the Indian understanding of the raw material of stone matter as the shell for divinity resonates with the *bas matérialisme* of Bataille, since he argues for matter over form and reveals the politics of formal representation as part of a top-down hierarchy. In Jagat, the dualism of material versus ideal is overcome in the freedom to locate ontological divinity materially, within the material matter regardless of figural form. Bataille’s *bas matérialisme* helps to explain the ontological fate of Amba Mata, independent of form or formlessness.

20. G. Bataille, “Le Bas matérialisme et la gnose,” *Documents* II, no. 1 (1930):6.

the turning point from a hierarchy of forms towards base materialism.²¹ The intense emotional subject of war hostages meets the slathering of paint on burlap, like the fat of butter or cream cheese on the uneasy textured surface of whole wheat bread. There is no gesso, no white, no smoothness, no preparation for the task, no brushwork, and only a paucity of figural representation. And yet, the thick frosting on the grotesque surface seduces visually, almost to the point of eliciting guilt in the viewer as he enjoys the beauty of someone else's pain and suffering. The uncomfortable viscous buildup of excess forms a shadow to the wartime deprivation in Fautrier's paintings, such as *The Gunned Down* [*Le fusillé*] of 1943.²²

The formless and base materialism are inherently political, beyond the confines of left and right, in that these ideas undo the hierarchy of objects and form itself. It was political for the Gnostics in the shadows of the nascent church of antiquity. It was political for Fautrier in the context of two world wars during the first half of the twentieth century. And, the formless and base materialism are political in twenty-first-century Rajasthan, as competing styles of praxis determine the visual present and future of the archaeologically protected tenth-century Ambika temple in Jagat.

In twenty-first-century rural India, an examination of the display of art in situ raises many of the same questions about materiality and form first raised by modernism in the context of gallery display. When the treatment of stone where an icon once stood is visually equated with the icon, the role of a stone icon's touch, or imprint, on the raw material of stone itself must be questioned. Clearly, the Hegelian idealism of formalist *haut matérialisme* is not at play, and yet, the persistent ontological presence precludes the glorified death of material. This death of material both defines *bas matérialisme*, and, ironically, places this anti-ideal materialism at the top of a new hierarchy. Bataille sought to exclude all forms of idealism from formalist modes of materialism. He used base materialism as a new anti-ideal, rooted in raw material devoid of any ontological ideal or figural form. He coined the term "formless" to describe material in opposition to the iconographic and the representational. Yves Alain-Bois and Rosalind Krauss argue that formlessness is the most concrete mode of *bas matérialisme* and serves the dual function of suppressing

and liberating from the compulsion to be or from any "ontological prison."²³ Their interpretation places the burden on formlessness of complete liberation—a utopian beyond (*au-de-la*). In this capacity, the formless not only serves as an alternative to the idealism of figural perfection celebrated through iconography, but also provides an avenue for political engagement through visual means. But is it possible to imagine formlessness as an avenue for political engagement without falling into the trap of the tired old beyond? The visual, religious, and political praxis in Jagat suggests that both formlessness and figural form can provide powerful modes of political engagement on both a local and a global level. Like Fautrier's painting, images, locations, and experiences of the goddess in Jagat gracefully straddle figural and material manifestations.

Formless, figural, arboreal, and flesh bodies of the goddess in Jagat

As a nexus of several different interrelated sites of goddess worship, ritual in the village of Jagat reveals how figural and nonfigural icons can provide potent shells for divinity. The fluidity of numinous presence reflects a "formless" and material approach to divinity, where physical materials—such as stone, cloth, butter, bread dough, the wood of a living tree, and even living human flesh—substitute for figural depiction. This "formless" divinity does not deny or celebrate form, but erases the hierarchic importance of form found in iconography or financially valuable sculpture. As it does for art, formlessness also liberates divinity from any "ontological prison" and permits flexible shifts in and out of ontological locations. Often, the indexical trace of a deity rivals any previous or future figural representation.

Goddess worship is concentrated in three primary locations in Jagat. The most ancient location is the Ambika temple from the mid-tenth century (fig. 3). The temple exterior reveals a particular tenth-century iconographic program comprised of three images of the goddess Ambika killing the buffalo demon. This iconographic repetition of the moment of slaying the buffalo references animal sacrifice as the

21. G. Caumont, *Fautrier: Territoires du Peindre* (Paris: ADAGP, 1998), figs. 37 and 38.

22. Jean Fautrier 1898–1964, ed. C. Carter and K. Butler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), fig. 17.

23. Y.-A. Bois and R. Krauss, *Informe: mode d'emploi* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996), pp. 50–51. "Le bas matérialisme (dont l'informe est la manifestation la plus concrète) a pour besogne de déclasser, c'est-à-dire à la fois de rabaisser et de libérer de toute prison ontologique, de tout «devoir être». En premier lieu, il s'agit de déclasser la matière, de l'extirper des griffes philosophiques du matérialisme classique."



Figure 3. Ambika Temple, Jagat, A.D. 961, Quartzite. Photo by the author.

circumambulatory root unfolds. First, the zoomorphic buffalo is pierced by the goddess's trident as her lion sinks his teeth into the buffalo's flank. Then, on the back wall—a location known to correspond to the inner sanctum's icon—the goddess slays the buffalo again. This time, a human figure spouts from the animal's severed neck, like blood from a real animal sacrifice. This potent location on the back wall displays the perfected liminal moment between living and dead when the body still moves, shaking, as blood jets forth from the severed neck. During a real sacrifice, the animal's ears flip back and forth as the eyes seem still to make contact, fearful and questioning, even after the head is separated from the body in the initial moments of death. In the last depiction of the goddess killing the buffalo, we see the goddess's triumph against the demon's human form, which has spurted fully from the severed neck. There, the buffalo is nowhere to be found—only when his illusory animal body is lost is his true demon form revealed.

These exterior icons logically correspond to the original interior icon—a tenth-century stone depiction of the goddess killing the buffalo demon. Cast aside in the sanctum, somehow unworthy of museum or worship, this icon may well provide the most tangible material and figural evidence for early medieval tantric goddess worship recorded in texts such as the *Kalika*

Purana (fig. 4).²⁴ In contrast to the nubile, voluptuous sensuality of the three exterior figures of the female buffalo slayer, this interior icon resembles Ambika's epithet—the emaciated ferocious goddess Chamunda from the famous *Devi Mahatmya* story of the goddess Amba's defeat of demons in cosmic battle.²⁵ Her legs are as thin as the trident she wields. One can almost imagine the arousing circumambulation of the temple with the repeated depiction of the goddess's young voluptuous flesh. All the while, the ephemeral reality of the living body unfolds in the sacrifice of the buffalo's body. On the third side, the revelation of his demonic essence in death would directly precede the viewing of the main icon in circumambulatory order. And so a flash of death replaces the curves of youth. The emaciated, bony body of Chamunda, Ambika's ferocious other, shocks

24. Chamunda is referenced, for example, in section 64:108 of *Kalika Purana* on the five-fold goddess Kamakhya. K. R. Van Kooij, *The Worship of the Goddess According to the Kalika Purana* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), p. 140. Perhaps this is a too-close reading of the text, but 64 is a number associated both with yogini shrines and vastupurusha and 108 is a lucky number associated with meditational rosary beads that, in my view, may reference the vocative tantric goddess Ksemankari.

25. The *Devi Mahatmya* is the story of a fight between the gods and the demons, in which demons could only be defeated by a



Figure 4. Original icon of Amba Mata, tenth century. Photo by the author.

female, so all the gods lent their weapons to Durga (also known as Ambika, or Amba Mata) and she destroyed the demons. During the battle, Kali was born from Durga's brow and lapped up all the blood from the battlefield with her long tongue. The climax of the story comes when Durga slays the buffalo demon named Mahisha. In this guise, the goddess is known as Durga Mahisha-mardini, or Durga the Buffalo Slayer. This iconographical representation is found in the main *bhadras*, or wall projections, of the Ambika temple in Jagat. For the *Devi Mahatmya* story, see T. Coburn, *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991). Linguistically speaking, in the story one recites different related names for the same goddess. Visually speaking, some of those names evoke different images. Ambika is nubile and voluptuous, while Chamunda is emaciated. Ambika reproduces herself from her own head, and Kali pops out onto the battlefield. Then Kali kills two demons, Cha and Munda, and becomes Chamunda, another name (or epithet) for Ambika, from whom she sprang forth as a replication.

the viewer out of his or her sensual pleasure. Instead of partaking in the sensual body of the goddess and her multisensory sacrifice, we find ourselves delighting in a living female corpse. This ploy to liken liminal moments of animal sacrifice to the fleeting illusory pleasures of human desire in a visual language clearly echoes early medieval tantric texts.²⁶

In addition to tantric overtones and the most intact early medieval iconographic temple program dedicated to the goddess in North India, the Ambika temple site also includes an archaeological compound with an intact tenth-century southern wall; an eleventh-century free-standing pavilion (*subhamandapa*) approximately fifty feet in front of the Ambika temple; the foundations of a few shrines next to the main temple; and the refurbished Chamunda shrine (fig. 5) dedicated to the goddess (fig. 6).²⁷ Was this statue, made of black schist, originally placed in this shrine on the edge of the temple complex? Was the goddess part of a set? How would this icon have been housed originally and how would this structure have been integrated with the circumambulation of the main temple? How does she differ from the emaciated icon cast aside in the sanctum or the standing depiction of Chamunda on the south wall? Though the Ambika temple is fairly well preserved, the site as a whole leaves many questions unanswered, including the role, if any, of the *sapta matrikas*, or seven mothers. The emaciated Chamunda usually does not kill the buffalo demon, contrary to the depiction of her in the inner sanctum (fig. 4). In the *Devi Mahatmya*, in other texts, as well as in sculptures, this goddess is usually represented as part of a set of mothers or yoginis.

The role of text and image in medieval goddess tantra at Jagat is much too vast a topic for this article, but let us take note of a few key points regarding the goddess and her early medieval figural form. The original early medieval icon—unused aesthetically, historically, and ritually today—probably stood unclothed to reveal her figural form. Only her skeleton could shatter the bonds of *maya*, illusory attachments in this world. We do not know for sure, but we might speculate that Chamunda accepted blood sacrifice as offerings, in parallel to the

26. Liz Wilson examines the female body as a tool for nondualist deconstruction of the pleasures of life and the ultimate reality of death. See L. Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

27. For a site plan of the Ambika temple, see "The Guhilas of Medapata," in *Beginnings of a Medieval Idiom, Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture II*, ed. M. A. Dhaky and M. Meister (New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1998), part 3.



Figure 5. Chamunda shrine, twentieth-century renovation with early medieval elements. Stone, whitewash, poured concrete. Ambika temple complex, Jagat. Photo by the author.

mythic iconography of the buffalo slaughter depicted on the temple exterior. The illusory nature of the figural body may indeed have been at the heart of tantric practice in tenth-century Jagat. We will never know. We can surmise that the emaciated form was important as seen in the second schist icon (fig. 6), housed today in the shrine. Even the repetition of this standing skeletal Chamunda on the south side of the Ambika temple leaves evidence of the figural body's importance on the tenth-century stone exterior.

And yet, historically, in Jagat some representations of female divinity were abstract and geometric. A stone ceiling of the pillared hall at the entrance to the archaeological compound displayed a six-pointed star.²⁸ Found in the eleventh-century freestanding pavilion called a *subhamandapa*, the abstract geometric design called a *yantra* was made of two triangles, which can be understood as male (upward pointing) and female (downward pointing) elements, a non-figural symbol of the goddess.

Early medieval fragments carefully line the walls of a second shrine for Amba Mata's sister, Mallar Mata.

28. Between my visits to Jagat in 2002 and 2008, the cracked ceiling panel with the six-pointed star had been replaced with a modern lotus marble panel made by the same artist who made the replacement Amba Mata icon in 2002.

A pseudo-museum of sorts, these fragments slip from figural to formless as foil, ghee, and vermilion obscure all traces of their tenth-century origins. Devoted to divination and goat sacrifice, Mallar Mata's Bhopa is more about praxis and performance than medieval iconography. At the end of a steep uphill climb to the south on direct axis with the archaeological complex, Mallar Mata's body looks just like Chamunda's shiny polished black body, albeit in a more voluptuous youthful form.²⁹ Covered in new clothing, Mallar Mata's iconography is completely obscured (fig. 7). If anyone, she has profited from Amba Mata's new body, as pilgrims have spoiled her with a wealth of saris that leave only her face visible. The vestigial tantric echoes of sacrificial iconography and texts reign in the prevalence of goat sacrifice at this once-remote location. Seven years after the installation of the new Amba Mata icon below, the path to her sister's shrine had been paved like a fancy suburban sidewalk. One no longer crawls up a mountain, acquiring the spiritual heat of asceticism

29. Bhopal Ratan Lal Ji, *Jagat Amba Mata ki Katha*, cassette recording, 1999. Sold at the Jagat bus stand, this tape links the Mallar Mata and Amba Mata goddesses as sisters in a network with other local goddesses, such as Jawar Mata. The sung narrative includes the four most ancient inscriptions within the Ambika temple that tell the story of Amba Mata in the format of a *katha*, or traditional oral folktale.



Figure 6. The goddess Chamunda, ca. mid-tenth century. Stone, cloth, foil paper, and vermillion. Chamunda shrine, Jagat. Photo by the author.

(*tapas*), to arrive at her shrine. The improved path and rich garments may reflect an interest toward the new Amba Mata icon below, but may be a sign of a rapid increase in wealth and urbanization of this region, which makes the goddess's new clothing and diet, rich in fresh goat meat, appear no more remarkable than the new Vodafone tower at the entrance to the village. Though most modern praxis obscures figural form, the figural vestige of medieval tantric worship may remain intact in the intense practice of animal sacrifice at the Mallar Mata shrine.

The third location of the goddess worship in Jagat replaces figural form with an arboreal body. It lies in a courtyard, just a few houses down the road from the



Figure 7. The Goddess Mallar Mata, ca. mid-tenth century. Stone, cloth, and flowers. Mallar Mata shrine, Jagat. Photo by the author, 2002.

Ambika temple complex. There, a sacred tree is the focus of the annual rite of Dasha Mata Puja, or the prayers to Mother Ten (fig. 8).³⁰ The North-Indian *Agni Purana* text gives evidence for the antiquity of nonfigural representations of divinity and resonates with current rituals, such as Dasha Mata Puja, at Jagat. At the turn of the twenty-first century, often the deity is not represented at all but inhabits a material body, such as a tree trunk or the stone of the frame where the stolen goddess once stood. In a tantalizing link between material and figural form in the *Agni Purana*, the chapter on tree worship directly follows three chapters on the reconsecration of damaged icons:

Now I shall speak about the consecration of trees, which imparts enjoyment in this world and salvation in the next. Water [. . .] should be poured on the heads of trees from

30. See A. Grozdins Gold, "From Demon Aunt to Gorgeous Bride: Women Portray Female Power in a North Indian Festival Cycle," in *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India*, ed. J. Leslie and M. McGee (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 203–230.

whose boughs garlands should be hung down and which should be plastered over with rice paste and covered over with pieces of cloth [70:1–3].

Brahmins are then to make offerings with water pitchers on ceremonial platforms to bathe the tree and invoke the earth goddess “out of the hearts of trees by uttering *Abhisheka mantras*,” followed by four days of feasting accompanied by *mangala mantras*—*mangala* suggests garlanding, in tandem with current treatment of arboreal bodies in Jagat. The chapter even concludes with a promise: “The consecration of trees and gardens imparts the highest merit to the consecrator and absolves him of all sins and demerits.”

Rites have changed as have the practitioners, but many elements draw upon centuries-old ideas regarding materiality, form, formlessness, and the ontological location of divinity. During Dasha Mata Puja, Rajput women worship the tree in the obscure darkness of the early morning far from men (fig. 8). The stories of Dasha Mata are oral folklore and describe how the goddess navigates situations as a woman does in her husband’s home. Current ritual performances in Jagat suggest strong links between temple ritual and tree worship. The mediation of these two spaces evokes not only gendered responses to and productions of ritual, but also illuminates the importance of form or formlessness for different populations.

In twenty-first-century Jagat, the process of using a modern sculpture to reconsecrate an ancient shrine was mainly political; local women had no trouble moving from the worship of a figural icon to the worship of the material of the stone itself. This transition was easier for women who were used to celebrating Dasha Mata Puja, the ceremony during which I observed trees worshipped to ensure the safety of women’s husbands in Jagat in 2002. Like the goddess’s sculptural icon, the trees are anointed with vermillion and given the bread-dough ornaments akin to the metal ornaments of a married woman (fig. 9). Although objects of devotion were always imbued with agency, they did not always take figural form.

These three locations reveal the importance of permanence versus impermanence of materials, antiquity, and figural form and their influence on the perceived power of goddesses in Jagat. As a catalyst for social activity³¹ and as an “object agent,”³² the Ambika

31. Although this study may resonate with an ethnographic note, I did not conduct interviews with the goal of documenting the religious experiences of the inhabitants of Jagat, nor did I take a strictly ethnohistorical approach by which current forms of worship could shed



Figure 8. Dasha Mata Puja, 2002, Jagat. Ceremony involving bread dough, string, vermillion, terra-cotta lamps, and sacred tree. Photo by the author.

temple causes events to happen. The visual field of goddess worship stimulated by the Ambika temple includes adjacent sites of worship, such as the Mallar Mata shrine and the Dasha Mata tree, as well as all permanent and impermanent traces of ritual activity from cloth and vermillion to metal and stone. The relationship between text, ritual, and stone in Jagat raises the art historical problem of the value of form itself.

light on historical ritual uses of the temple. I privileged the architectural object as an agent in its own right.

32. Alfred Gell privileges the power of “things” to act as agents in their own right. “The immediate ‘other’ in a social relationship does not have to be another ‘human being.’ My entire argument depends on this not being the case. Social agency can be exercised relative to ‘things’

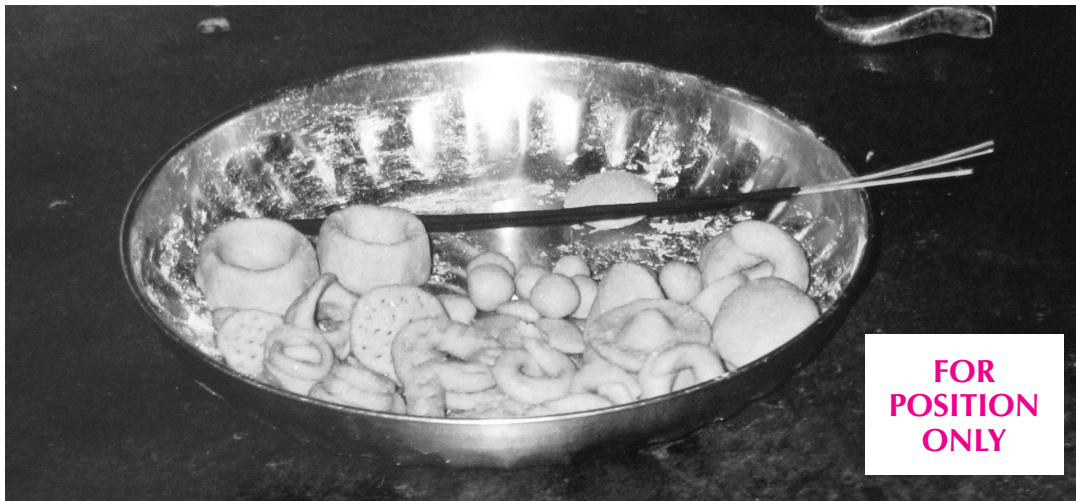


Figure 9. Bread dough ornaments, 2002, private home in Jagat. Photo by the author.

Tainted icons

Textual sources about the replacement of damaged icons (*jrnodhara*) provide historical information about what was supposed to happen to tainted icons.³³ These sources require discarding objects and often contradict what happens on the ground when an icon is damaged or missing. Damaged, destroyed, and missing icons often retain numinous power, such that it becomes difficult or impossible to let these physical bodies go. The theft, worship of absence, installation, and subsequent rites raise art historical questions about the power of the object, the location of that potency, and the reception of all sorts of visual traces of divinity among the diverse populations who use the Ambika temple.

and social agency can be by ‘things’ (and also animals).” See A. Gell, “‘Things’ as Social Agents,” in *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 17–19.

33. For textual and ethnographic accounts of pratishtha installation rites, see M.-Th. de Mallmann, *L’Enseignement du l’Agni Purana* (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1963); M. N. Dutt, *Agnimahapuram* (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2001); B. Dagens, *Mayamata: An Indian Treatise on Housing, Architecture, and Iconography* (New Delhi: Sitram Bhartia Institute of Scientific Research, 1985); S. Parker, “Contemporary Temple Construction in South India: the Srirangam rajagopuram,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 21 (1992):110–123; M. Strickmann, “L’Icône animée,” *Mantras et mandarins: Le bouddhisme tantrique en Chine* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1996), pp. 165–202; S. Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twice Born* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920); *Kasyapa’s Book of Wisdom. A Ritual Handbook of the Vikhanasas*, ed. and trans. T. Goudriaan (The Hague: Mouton, 1965).

The reaction of different groups of temple users in Jagat to the theft of the goddess icon suggests that alternate celebrations of formlessness and form may signal intense modes of political engagement through praxis. Visual responses of different groups of people to the stolen icon reveal the political implications of their actions and reactions to a sacred visual space. Although gender definitely plays an important role in contemporary praxis, other factors—such as social class, education, and access to urban lifestyles—easily eclipse male/female binaries. Beyond these distinctions, the complex world of layered art markets determines the physical and philosophical fate of divinity. From the infamous art trafficking of a local ring of jewel thieves out of Udaipur to the internationally known black market in the state capital of Jaipur to the art galleries and auction houses in New York and London, the sinuous path of a stolen icon most likely leads to Interpol investigation and confinement, hidden from view.³⁴

In contrast to the fate of the sculpture, given the social and legal status of Hindu deities, the theft of the goddess was tantamount to a kidnapping. For her kidnappers, she was a work of art, a valuable piece of antiquity to be bought as an aesthetic object. Amba Mata was transformed from a living goddess into a commodity, a mere piece of stone. But did the deity die? The deity

34. H. Beech, B. Hua, S. Crittle, M. Ganguly, B. Ghosh, and R. Horn, “Asia’s Looted Treasures: Stealing Beauty,” *Time Magazine* (October 27, 2003), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1005983-1,00.html>, accessed 11/18/09.

did not depart with her graven image. She continued to preside without her body from the sacred sanctum and stone frame where she always resided. Worshipped primarily by women, Amba Mata regularly comforted and advised in a familiar intimate way. For those who routinely worshipped her, Amba Mata manifested herself in the material of the stone. She was not a representation. The stolen stone sculpture was not an iconographic portrait of her essence: It was a material body for a divine being. If her essence remained in the formless stone backing of the ancient frame, why did the Rajput elite embark on a capital campaign to replace her stolen body with a marble sculpture made two years after the theft in the capital city of Jaipur? What function did this new stone body serve?

For two years, the flat stone surface—fresh with the invisible trace of the icon's back—was treated as Amba Mata. Bhil and Meena women would come to the temple for *darshan*, or the exchange of gaze with the deity. The most important part of this visual exchange is not to see the goddess but rather to “take” her vision—to be seen by her. How, then, did the goddess bathe devotees in her gaze without any eyes from which to look upon them? Unchanged worship patterns suggest that Amba Mata's ontological presence was not impacted by the theft of the figural icon. When the stone body was still in situ, Amba Mata presided from her *kosa*, or shell. When this stone body was stolen, the ontological essence did not travel to some hidden shed, chased by Interpol and sent—without a passport—on to the international art market. That stolen sculpture of Amba Mata became a corpse—a body without a soul. Meanwhile, Amba Mata, the goddess, stayed right where she was in the stone of the frame that once held her body.

Although modern motives of the lucrative international art market caused the icon to be transformed into a corpse, India has a long and contested history of iconoclasm and theft with the added boon of many texts about how to deal with damaged icons. Despite the lack of any single key manuscript, early medieval Indian texts do provide a “period eye” with regard to the replacement of damaged icons. Whether damaged from old age, wear and tear, natural disaster, accidental or intentional moves, or theft, a broken icon becomes *jrna*, roughly translated as damaged and unsuitable for worship. The *Agni Purana* and the *Mayamata* represent just two of many early medieval texts that delineate appropriate methods for *jrnodhara*, the disposal and replacement of damaged icons:

A stone image which has become broken or disfigured, should be cast aside, a new one possessing all the attributes

and bearing all characteristic marks of its predecessor, should be installed in its place.³⁵

The southern text of the *Mayamata* dedicates chapter 35 to renovation, which often means quite literally to make anew.³⁶ Any damaged sacred icon should be entirely replaced with a new icon identical to the old. These sources indicated how to deal with the stolen sculpture if returned to the temple, but gave no indication of how to deal with damaged icons or the empty spaces of missing icons in situ. Although texts suggest such icons and spaces would lose their numinous power in a state of *jrna*, one can imagine that many remained in worship. A damaged icon of a goddess is just as difficult to discard as the sick and dying body of a loved one. Damaged or missing figural forms do not make it any easier for devotees to let a soul go along with a body.³⁷

No texts, however, with the exception of inscriptions, can be linked directly to the tenth-century Ambika temple in Jagat by date or location. What happened after the theft in Jagat is beyond textual explanation—not for temporal reasons—but probably in a long tradition of attachment to damaged material forms of deities. Of course, it took time to raise money for traditional *pratishta* installation rites at the Ambika temple, but during that period the temple could have closed, leaving devotees to wait, or a temporary icon could have been installed, or Chamunda (fig. 6) could have held sway in the archaeological complex. Since Amba's ontological location remained in the indexical trace of where her stone body once touched the icon's stone frame, a nontextual explanation appears in the annual rites of Dasha Mata Puja, the festival of Mother Ten.

Animist responses to materiality also occur in textual descriptions of installation rites for replacement images:

[. . .] homa oblations should be offered to the [souls] of the mountains, rivers and oceans and three oblations, each of a sacrificial spoonful of clarified butter should be offered into the fire accompanied by the *gayatri mantra* of “*om bhū, om bhuvah, om swaha*” [*Agni Purana* 67:13].

35. *Agni Purana*: 67:1–2; Dutt (see note 33), p. 167.

36. Dagens (see note 33).

37. These bonds of *maya*, the illusionary attachments to life in a singular incarnation, make growing old difficult in India today. Whether stone or flesh, human soul or ontological divinity, it is hard to let go of it. According to Sarah Lamb's informant, Gursaday Mukherjee, “Death is a transformation of the body, an abandoning of the body. The family is transformed. But the soul does not change.” See S. Lamb, *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and the Body in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 148.

This verse privileges formless material over form when raw elements of nature are worshipped in the same manner as icons with incantations and offerings. Figural form remains irrelevant for the honor of fire sacrifice. If a mountain or ocean is worshipped with oblations and mantras, then it is easy to see how the material of water or stone itself could house a deity independent of form. Form serves only to execute the exact measurements required to make an idol. How do we reconcile the precision required to make a deity's body with the animist impulse to find life in stone itself, regardless of form?

Kindling the fire of form

Two years after the theft, textual prescription finally eclipsed ritual praxis in Jagat. *Pratishtha* is the term for the installation of a new deity—a required ritual when an icon becomes old and damaged and theoretically no longer worthy of worship. In May 2002, an eight-day fire sacrifice consecrated a twenty-first-century white marble icon into the sanctum of the tenth-century Ambika temple. Even the process of the installation ceremony emphasized materiality over form, despite the ultimate goal of figural permanence. Following Gujarati manuals, a group of Brahmin priests from a neighboring village led the entire community of Jagat—along with the home minister of Rajasthan, the erstwhile “prince” of Jagat, other prominent members of the community, and me—in a ritual to move the goddess out of the stone frame, into sacred pots of water, into a temporary pavilion built exclusively for this purpose, into the elaborately consecrated new stone sculpture, and finally back into the sanctum to rest with her back against the freshly painted ancient stone frame from which her old body had been stolen.

Unlike everyday worship of Amba Mata, where a small group of Adivasi³⁸ women—often Meena or Bhil—would receive *darshan* before praying to her sisters Chamunda and Mallar Mata for a boon, the installation ceremony was paid for, performed, and watched primarily by men. Before, during, and after the theft of the old icon, the worship of Amba Mata was a first step before the Chamunda shrine, where the

goddess would temporarily use the Goswamy priest's body to listen to the troubles of her devotees and to respond with advice given through the explanation of a few grains cast into the expectant hand of the supplicant. This simple rite of reciprocity and compassion held within the archaeological compound was similar to well-attended Sunday services held at the Mallar Mata shrine. Like the Chamunda Mata icon in the Ambika Temple complex below, Mallar Mata's corporeal form was a large icon made of polished black schist, dating to the early medieval period and covered in foil, fabric, vermilion, and clarified butter (fig. 7). In both cases, the ontological being of the goddess moved seamlessly between a voluptuous stone female body rendered around the tenth century and the shaking male bodies of the two non-Brahmin priests whose voices Mallar Mata and Chamunda could command when a powerful stone gaze was no longer enough. In borrowed human bodies, these two sister goddesses could comfort devotees and use their moving limbs to perform divination, so that their supplicants could find their keys, deal with an angry husband, or give birth to a boy.

In contrast, during the installation rites held in the ancient archaeological compound down the mountain, the fluidity of ontological matter between material bodies was harnessed by an entirely new set of actors. The ceremony took place in a temporary building, consecrated especially for this purpose. Just as women bind the trunk of a tree and their own necks with knotted string necklaces during Dasha Mata Puja, the hereditary mayoral figurehead (Thakur) of Jagat and his wife bound each of the wooden posts with string as a Brahmin priest led them in prayers (fig. 10). Inside the structure, a large sacred fire pit was erected. A fire was kindled to burn throughout the ceremony and preceded the new statues into the temple on the last day of the rite (fig. 11). Each day a new couple from the royal house of Jagat sat by the fire to recite sacred incantations (*mantras*), to perform sacred gestures (*mudras*), and to pour clarified butter on the fire (fig. 12). Tied to one another and led by a priest, the noble couple fulfilled a basic duty, first established in any Hindu wedding that marks a couple as guardians of the hearth in an official household. The history of this rite dates back thousands of years to a time before gods took figural form at all, a time when Vedic texts described fire oblations to worship Agni and Rudra (precorporeal antecedents to Shiva). The goddess's essence was not in the fire, however. Amba Mata was now in water jars, to be poured into copper and brass vessels and placed on raised platforms covered in cloth with multicolored *mandala* diagrams made of various grains and legumes

38. *Adivasi* means “first people,” an alternative to what we call “tribal.” The Meenas and the Bhils are the two majority groups of Adivasi, who predominate in the Chhapan region around Jagat. David Roche has focused on ethnomusicology and Adivasi practice in this area; see his “The Dhak, Devi Amba's Hourglass Drum in Tribal Southern Rajasthan, India,” *Asian Music* XXXII, no. 1 (Fall 2000–Winter 2001):59–99.



Figure 10. Thakur and his wife led by priests bind posts, 2002. Temporary pavilion, Jagat. Photo by the author.

(fig. 13).³⁹ Each day the new icon was bathed in different substances—legumes, wheat, water, and flowers. The ceremony moved the essence of Amba Mata from one material to another in a methodic, quasiscientific manner that both resonated with ancient rites and paralleled current practices at the Mallar Mata shrine and the Dasha Mata tree.

A diagram of the event (fig. 14) shows the proximity of ritual participants in order of importance, from the priests and sacrificing couple in the temporary pavilion to a large group of women to the side of the Ambika temple under a tented roof farthest from political and ritual activity. The very people who were most likely to use the site—women who had a great attachment to the



Figure 11. Sacrificial fire, 2002. Clarified butter, coconuts, cow dung, and stone. Ambika Temple, Jagat. Photo by the author.

39. A Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) political rally, apparently in honor of the home minister of Rajasthan, took place during the ritual and links the figural and iconographic *haute matérialisme* of contemporary goddess worship with the conservative politics of a party attempting to represent the Hindu majority community at a time just after the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament and contemporaneous to the enactment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 2002 (POTA), which was subsequently repealed two years later. Despite our art historical and anthropological fascination with objects and rituals, most of the crowd including the entire village of Jagat and surrounding areas spent much of those eight days focused elsewhere. For a comparative example of the importance of water vessels for housing divinity in Tibet, see Strickmann (note 33), pp. 207–208.



Figure 12. Couple led by priest perform recitation of mantras (incantations) with accompanying mudras (hand gestures), 2002. Temporary pavilion, Ambika temple complex, Jagat. Photo by the author.



Figure 13. Amba Mata in pots of water, 2002. Terra-cotta, leaves, coconuts, string, holy water, and brass vessels, Ambika temple complex, Jagat. Photo by the author.

ontological person of Amba Mata—chatted casually, removed spatially and emotionally from the Brahmanical fire sacrifice taking place with Sanskrit *mantras*. Although the noblewomen who did participate in the installation

rites also celebrated women's holidays such as Dasha Mata Puja at the tree and Sitalasaptami at the tenth-century Ambika temple twice a year, they never would go for routine divination from the goddess in the male body

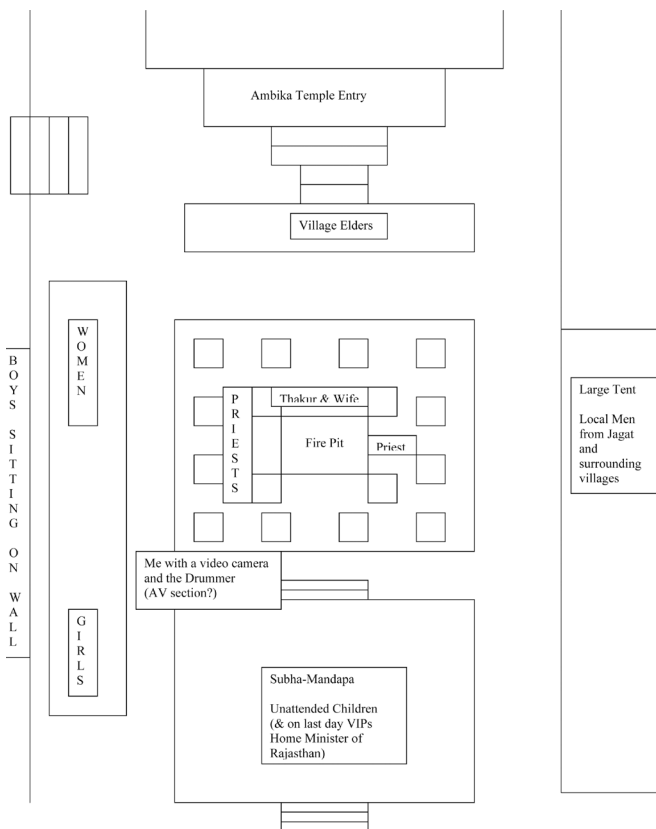


Figure 14. Field diagram of social space of installation ceremony, 2002, Jagat. Drawing by the author.

of a *bhopa*, or priest, nor would the noblewomen frequent the hilltop shrine of Mallar Mata. In a similar vein to the infrequent use by the noblewomen of Jagat, the noblemen—who sponsored, organized, and controlled the installation of the new sculpture—rarely visited the temple before the theft, during the sculpture’s absence, and even after the new icon had been safely installed.

The social, political, and financial elite who needed a marble body the most were not the ones who worshipped Amba Mata with any regularity. Despite some overlap among Rajput noblewomen, most people in Jagat either prayed to Amba Mata fairly regularly in one way or another and did not need a figural body to do so, or hardly ever prayed to Amba Mata and desperately needed a figural body to replace the stolen object. Each response produced a different form of political praxis that nonetheless shared certain common ideas.

The uninterrupted continuation of worship at the Ambika temple—despite the theft of the image, the

absence of the icon for two years, and the substitution of a twenty-first-century marble sculpture from Jaipur—suggests the importance of this site’s association with the powerful female energy known as *shakti*. Remnants of earlier forms of goddess worship suggest how ritual and iconography change over time, nevertheless leaving layers of residual numinous power. Housed in the Udaipur Archaeological Museum, a Gupta-period figurine of the goddess Aindri with a child on her ample hip reveals the presence of the cult of the seven mothers at the site approximately five centuries earlier. The remains of small ruined temples and unexcavated portions of the compound even allow for speculation about continued worship of mothers in the tenth century. Could the black schist icons of Chamunda (fig. 6) and Mallar Mata (fig. 7) actually be two of an original set of seven mothers? Current evidence leaves that question unanswered but does suggest that the numinous power of a deity does not require form, and that antiquity itself lends authenticity and religious importance to Amba Mata.

In the wake of theft, the worship of Amba Mata in the form of figural absence was not empty at all—it was the worship of presence. From an art historical perspective, the focus of worship was not intentionally aniconic; rather, the icon moved from a state of iconography to a state of formlessness. Formlessness emphasizes the spiritualized materiality of an object, not its afigural aspect—more specifically, the “lowly” materiality, if we choose to translate *bas matérialisme* as such. In an odd maneuver typical of the French philosopher’s uneasy relationship with Catholicism and spirituality, Bataille spends pages on topics like scatology and even titles a chapter “The Solar Anus” [*L’anus solaire*]. Bataille uses a material deemed the most unsacred in the West, feces, to exemplify how sanctity could be found in the most base materials, while the most elevated materials and forms, such as stone iconography, could remain hollow. Twenty-first-century India is obviously not twentieth-century France. However, Bataille’s unusual and radical ideas could find an ordinary context in India, where all secretions from cows are considered sacred enough for worship. The idea that the sacred inhabits material over form indicates an egalitarian deconstruction of hierarchy. Patronage, wealth, and elite forms of transmitted knowledge can be exchanged, guarded, and controlled in an expensive piece of sculpture in ways unguarded by cheap, readily available materials and formlessness that emphasizes ontological location over elaborate figural display. And so, Amba Mata’s devotees—the Bhils, Meenas, and different groups of women who depended



Figure 15. Amba Mata in her new body takes a bath, 2002. Water, marble, cloth, and string. Temporary pavilion, Jagat. Photo by the author.

on her for solace and advice—located her materially, not figurally. Likewise, Amba Mata’s patrons, largely male, in positions of historical or current political power such as an erstwhile “prince” or the home minister of Rajasthan, needed a figural icon—an expensive, beautiful, perfectly white marble statue from the state capital to pristinely adorn and cover the trace of theft (fig. 15).

The large network of people who spent two years collecting donations to install a new figural icon cannot be reduced to patrons in search of glory and status. Although in Bataille’s terms they may have engaged in a rite of a disdained *haute matérialisme*, they bravely confronted the international art market in the context of twenty-first-century Indian and global politics by replacing the stolen icon with a statue of high religious worth but little monetary value as a work of art. The theft of the icon could be equated with a corporeal honor crime against Amba Mata, despite her ontological integrity.⁴⁰ In this context, the violation of Amba Mata’s figural body—a dishonor to the most sacred female member of the community—required erasure or repair.

40. In rural Rajasthan, traditional gender roles largely prevail and men generally protect women and women’s honor, while women usually expect this treatment. A holiday commonly known as *Rakhi* is dedicated to brothers, whose sisters tie a special cord around their wrists to thank them for their protection.

The replacement statue reestablishes Amba Mata’s honor through a regeneration of her body. Those in power rallied the whole community to raise funds and validated the rite through the ancient traditions of Vedic fire oblation and *prastishta* initiation ceremonies, led by priests and sponsored by royalty, to properly transfer the ontological essence of Amba Mata into her new unblemished body.

Her new body confronts the world art market through the mediation of value. A virgin statue restores her honor and thus is priceless (fig. 15). At the same time, many centuries will pass before this twenty-first-century statue becomes worthy of a museum. As a trace of ritual and political praxis, the new icon questions the relative values of high art and religious objects. The new body also ensures that the ontological value of the stolen statue is reduced to nothing. In the same way that Bataille realizes that the sacred can reside in excrement and that figural iconography in fancy materials can mask the mundane, the figural and material triumphs of Amba Mata in Jagat leave a permanent physical trace of a powerful deity—a survivor—to displace and reveal the empty corpse of stone given so much monetary value by the international art market.