

‘Borrowing’ Religious Identifications: A Study of Religious Practices among the Hijras of India

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Abstract

This paper explores the religious practices of the hijras of India.¹ The ‘hijras’ are individuals of varied physical being and/or sexual practices and identifications, including (individually or in combination) transsexual, transgender, transvestite, homosexual, and asexual individuals, as well as hermaphrodites or intersexed individuals, and eunuchs. Generally hijras tend to identify with normative female gender roles in Indian society, although they present themselves as categorically distinct from women, and theoretically as a sex/gender distinct from male and female.

The dominant focus of academic research concerning hijras has been their sex and/or gender status, as distinct from the Westernized two-sex model of sex and gender. However, hijras – aside from occupying a position outside the normative sex/gender binary of male/female – also occupy a marginal position almost everywhere in Indian society, literally and figuratively. Hijras exist on the margins of literary texts, religious practices, and social spaces, and it is equally important to consider hijras in relation to the other forms of marginalization that they experience in order to come to a fuller understanding of hijra identity.

The focus of this paper is hijras’ socio-religious roles and practices. Hijras are often considered as identifiably Hindu or Muslim in academic writing, in order to draw upon a specific religious tradition to explain their identity and practices. Instead, this paper will consider the adoption and amalgamation of identifiably Hindu and Muslim rituals and ideas apparent in hijras’ religious practices, in order to argue that variation and individuality are significant factors when considering the religious identifications made by certain hijras, based on individual beliefs, backgrounds, and spatial, geographical, and life-historical contexts.

¹ All non-English terms throughout this article follow the spellings used by Gayatri Reddy (2005), with exceptions noted where relevant. All diacritics have been excluded. All transliterated terms are italicised. The term ‘hijra’ appears unitalicized throughout.

The third sex of India: Acknowledging difference

This section will provide some background information on the hijras, to ground the more detailed study into religious practices that follows. Historically and contemporaneously, hijras have and do serve a notable religious, social, and gendered function within Indian society, and it is therefore important to explore this occurrence here.

Recent scholarship has tended to focus on hijras within the debate of ‘sexual difference’ and binary categorization, arguing that hijras are an archetypal example of a ‘third’ sex or gender. Comparison is then produced between hijras and other ‘third sex’ groups around the world, such as the two-spirit of North America or the *kathoe*y of Thailand,² alongside other various ‘third’ genders. These alternative gender roles are studied in contrast to the Anglo-European binary-gender system, often suggesting a ‘Western intolerance’ for sexual ambiguity and gender variation (cf. Herdt 1994; Nanda 1999).³ Such alternative genders are portrayed as plural and liberating, leading to a ‘skewed representation of the cultural value placed on alternative gender identities’, as an intellectual move towards ‘plurality’ has become entangled with an ‘anthropological interest in the exotic over the familiar’ (Hall 1995: 27, 28).

This type of analysis is demonstrable in Serena Nanda’s ethnography, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (2nd ed. 1999). Although Nanda dedicates a large portion of the book to hijras’ personal narratives and the suffering they face, Hall writes that Nanda occasionally gives a ‘false impression of the status allotted to these ambiguously sexed figures’ (1995: 30), through a celebration of their ritual status, suggesting they enjoy a position of privilege and honour in society, instead of acknowledging their difficult lived reality. Nanda’s revised second edition emphasizes hijras as a ‘third sex’, arguing that

in my view, the hijras are an *institutionalized third gender role* that has its roots in ancient India, and that has been strengthened by the historical role of the eunuchs in the Mughal Courts...I believe [Zwilling and Sweet’s] meticulous analysis of ancient Jain and Hindu texts supports the view that they hijras are a *separate sex/gender*, which is, however, *marginal rather than equal* to male and

² The spelling of this third gender term follows Gilbert Herdt (1994).

³ Hall (1995) argues that this sort of third-sex writing is a product of feminist rethinkings of gender in the 1970s and 1980s. Challenges to the binary notion of gender strongly influenced anthropological literature, which sought to demonstrate how notions of gender are constructed psychologically, socially, and discursively in Western culture. In other non-Western cultures, gender and sexuality could be shown as constructed in different ways (26); this led to the study of ‘third sex’ groups, in order to challenge Western notions of binary gender. In order to be considered valid alternative categories, anthropologists had to prove that ‘these existences were both culturally recognised and socially integrated’ (*ibid.*: 27).

female.⁴ In comparison with other (non-Western) cultures, particularly, the hijras stand out as a well-defined, culturally and socially acknowledged, organizationally set apart, ritually specialized, historically continuous, sex/gender variation. (1999: 144; my emphasis)

This sort of ‘third sex analysis’ is also demonstrated in Gilbert Herdt’s *Third Sex, Third Gender* (1994), focusing on the diversity of alternative gender roles. Despite the caveat that ‘the emphasis on the *third* category is merely a heuristic device that stands in for the possibility of multiple categories’, many chapters emphasize ‘thirdness’ as the solution to the sexual dimorphism question (Reddy 2005: 32).

This emphasis on thirdness establishes hijras as an alternative sex/gender, and although it highlights the variation of sexual difference cross-culturally, such analysis is not without criticism. The first critique is that such analysis ignores the lived experience of the so-called ‘third sexes’. Cohen argues that authors who use this type of analysis ignore the violence done to members of this category (1995, in Gannon 2009: 99). By labelling hijras as ‘liberated’ individuals within the sex/gender binary, scholars ignore the prejudice and marginalization experienced by hijras and other ‘alternative’ sexes. Moreover, scholars fail to recognize hijras’ experiences within the rigidly enforced binary gender system that exists in India, and hijras’ own conceptualizations and constructions of femininity and masculinity in response to this system. Nanda describes the hijras as ‘neither man nor woman’ based on several hijras’ self-designation, but Hall states this is only part of the picture (1995: 31). Examining her own fieldwork in Banaras in 1993, she notes that hijras seem to view themselves as ‘deficiently’ masculine and ‘incompletely’ feminine’. This construction of hijra identity is in response to a rigidly enforced gender system, in which hijras make individual identifications, as more ‘feminine’ or more ‘masculine’ through self-pronouns, appearance, and behaviour.⁵ By designating hijras as a ‘third sex’, hijras’ own presentations of self through speech, behaviour, and gender performance in relation to established and binary gender norms and systems are ignored, and the nuances of hijras’ lives disregarded.

Secondly, the ‘third sex’ label is said to homogenize those who occupy this subject position. Cohen notes that many individuals called ‘third’ are in fact very different and experience gender differently (1995, in Gannon 2009: 98-9). This recognition of variation is explicit in

⁴ Nanda notes that this conclusion – that hijras are a separate sex/gender – is not the conclusion given by Zwilling and Sweet themselves. Rather, their work on Jain literature, which focuses on grammatical gender and its reference to multiple sexual identities in antiquity, suggests and concludes that the third gender in India is ‘ambiguous’. However, Nanda believes that their analysis lends support to her own conclusion of the possibility of a separate sex/gender (1999: 144). For Zwilling and Sweet’s argument, see 1996: 362.

⁵ As Hall eloquently notes: ‘[I]nstead of occupying a position outside the male-female binary, hijras have created an existence within it, one that is constrained by rigidly entrenched cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity’ (1995: 13).

Gayatri Reddy’s excellent ethnography, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (2005). Reddy stresses the importance of ‘variations of thirdness’, which differ according to the ‘temporal, spatial, and life-historical positioning’ of the actors involved (45). She suggests a spectrum of identities within ‘thirdness’, with differentiations made between individuals as to how they become ‘third’, how they construct their identities, and how they enact them. As a further critique, Reddy maintains that variations of thirdness are embodied in other axes of difference, and thus require analysis that extends further than ‘third sex’ analyses, which only reify the study of sexuality as a monolithic field. She argues that these types of analyses – although admirable in illustrating the cultural contexts of third-sex differentiation – have ignored the intersections of sexuality with other modes of difference, by effectively separating the ‘domain of sexuality from that of political economy and the analysis of other axes of identity’, thus ‘limiting its usefulness as an articulation of the complexity of everyday life’ (*ibid.*: 32).

These two critiques of third sex analysis are of importance to this study. By focusing on lived experience, variation, and contextual specificity, it is possible to come to a fuller understanding of the hijra subject, for example, in relation to their religious identifications and practices. As noted above, a major critique of third sex analysis is the denial of difference among those classified as hijras. Variation inevitably exists, due to sexual preference, performance, and physical bodies. Such differentiation is evidenced not only in contemporary academic and ethnographic studies, but also within ancient, medieval, and colonial sources.⁶ Individuals of varying gender and alternative sexualities are mentioned throughout these writings, alluding to the existence of ‘hijras’ throughout India’s past (although we should be wary of homogenizing modern hijra identity with these gender variant individuals). This has led to a measure of reverence in India for hijras based on historical and mythological legitimization, such as which does not exist among countries that maintain the two-sex model of gender and sexuality. This legitimization is manifest in a broad range of ideas, many of which are utilized by contemporary hijras in order to gain respect. These ideas include the existence of gender variant individuals with significant roles in ‘mythology’, such as Amba/Shikhandin and Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*; the practice of creative asceticism in Hinduism, which theoretically raises the ‘religious’ status of hijras as akin to *sannyasis* [renunciates]; and the role of eunuchs at the Islamic courts. These ideas are frequently utilized in order to legitimate hijra identity, as hijras construct a lineage for themselves based on both Hindu and Muslim, historical and religious traditions.

⁶ For further reading, see Goldman 1993, Doniger 1999, and Pattanaik 2002 on the theme of alternative sexualities in ancient Hindu texts; see Reddy 2005 in regard to writings under Islamic rule in India; and Preston 1987, Reddy 2005, and Gannon 2009 for discussion of colonial writings.

Yet the discourses of past power and prestige drawn upon by hijras are somewhat diminished by the lived experience of many hijras in India today, and the social marginalization that they experience on a daily basis. Hijras form their own communities, separated from their natal families, and are often disparaged for their non-normative gender status and practices. Hijras find it difficult to obtain work, housing, security, and social support. Such disregard directly affects their status in society, which is further degraded by the means of survival practiced by hijras today, including begging, extortion, and/or prostitution.

Evidently hijras draw upon discourses of historical legitimization and power to alleviate the suffering they face, which includes making religious identifications which appear paradoxical or problematic, such as depicting non-biogenetic lineage from both the 'hijras' of ancient India and the eunuchs of medieval India. Moreover, the variety of identifications made can be explained by the individuality of the hijra involved. Religious identifications significantly allude to a specific spatial and temporal context and the particular life-historicity of an individual hijra. Hijras are able to appropriate and employ a variety of religious symbols and practices from a position of liminality, free from the restraints of 'ordinary' behaviour, which allows for heterodox religious practices. Religion provides a framework for hijras to assert self-consciousness and affirm self-identity (cf. Zene 2000: 70). Furthermore, these heterodox practices highlight the importance of hijras' own personal interpretations in performing religious practices (*ibid.*: 73), in order to deliberately assert and legitimate their identity through both Hindu and Muslim identifications. These types of syncretic practices may be seen as creating new interpretations of religious identity, and of what it means to practice 'religion'.

The next part of this paper will explore the explicitly 'Hindu' practices performed by hijras, followed by those seen as 'Muslim'. These sections will attempt to indicate the variety of religious practices and rituals adopted by the hijras, as well as attempting a tentative explanation of such identifications in terms of the spatial, temporal, and life-historical contexts of those involved.

Hindu rituals

This section considers three significant ‘Hindu’ aspects of hijras’ religious identifications: worship of Bahuchara Mata, the patron-goddess of the hijra community; the practice of asceticism and renunciation within Hindu philosophy and the adoption of this ‘ideal’ by hijras; and ritual practices which are similar to traditionally Hindu women’s ritual practices. These aspects are primarily considered as influenced and derived from ‘Hindu’ social and ‘religious’ practices and ideas, and form an important religious and/or ritual framework in which hijras construct and give meaning to their identities.

The first consideration is the worship of the Hindu pantheon, specifically Bahuchara Mata.⁷ Stories of sexual variation in ancient Hindu texts give hijras a measure of mythological and historical legitimization; this Hindu textual affirmation inevitably influences their religious practices. The most important goddess for the hijras is the Mother Goddess, specifically in the form of Bahuchara Mata. It is in her name that hijras perform their ritual function by giving blessings of fertility or prosperity to a newborn child or married couple, and in her temple in Gujarat they act as servants of the Mother goddess;⁸ it is through emasculation (discussed below) that hijras believe themselves to become the vehicle of the goddess’ power (Nanda 1999: 24-5).

There are several myths that concern the hijras as impotent men who must undergo emasculation in deference to the goddess. In one version, a prince is forced to marry the Mata by his parents. On the very first night, the prince leaves her and only returns at dawn; this went on for several months. Finally the goddess followed him one night and found him acting like the hijras. When she questioned him, he fell at her feet, saying that he had no desire for a wife and children, but was in truth neither a man nor a woman. In anger, the goddess declared that he had spoiled her life, and in turn would have his life spoiled since

⁷ Preston notes that the deities worshipped by the hijras are always Saivite, revering Siva as the Supreme Being. He makes this statement in reference to hijras being either Muslim or Hindu, although he notes that the hijras possessed a measure of ‘religious and communal syncretism’, resulting in even ‘Muslim’ hijras worshipping these deities (1987: 376). Shah also makes a distinction between Muslim and Hindu hijras, but notes that due to hijras’ intimate association with the cult of the Mata as her devotees and servants, Muslim hijras also worship the mother-goddess (1961: 63). More recently, Reddy, while undertaking her fieldwork among the specific communities of hijras of Hyderabad, who self-identified as Muslim, noted their incorporation of ‘explicitly Hindu practices’, the most marked being the worship of Bedhraj Mata, an incarnation of Devi (goddess) or Mata (mother), whom ‘all hijras throughout the country worship’. Reddy explains the name ‘Bedhraj Mata’ as deriving from the location of the temple dedicated to the Mata at Bedhrajpur in Gujarat (2005: 108; cf. n.18).

⁸ As one of the most important goddesses in Gujarat, Bahuchara is worshipped by a large part of the population, but is particularly associated with male transvestism and transgenderism (and thus particularly to the hijras). The origin of her worship is as follows: Bahuchara was a young maiden passing through the forest in Gujarat. When her party was attacked by thieves, fearing for her modesty, Bahuchara cut off her breast and offered it to the thieves in place of her virtue. The act secured her deification, and the ‘practice of self-mutilation and sexual abstinence by her devotees [is] to secure her favour’ (Nanda 1999: 25).

he – and others like him – would require the *nirvan* operation in order to be reborn. After cutting off his genitals, she stated that other hijras who undergo this *nirvan* operation should call her at that time (Nanda 1999: 25-6). This story directly indicates that emasculation is obligatory for such men, and also indicates that the goddess must be invoked as her devotees surrender completely to her (*ibid.*: 33).⁹

The practice of emasculation as a religious ‘duty’ is directly linked to discourses of ascetic practice and renunciation in Hindu philosophy.¹⁰ Hijras invoke one image of themselves as *sannyasis*, presenting *ideal* hijras as asexual renunciates.¹¹ Renunciation, both material and sexual, possesses important moral force in India, especially in regard to ‘semen anxiety’, or the notion that the loss of semen implies a loss of vital life energy and masculine strength (Reddy 2003: 175).¹² Divine creative powers stem from asceticism, or the practice and accumulation of *tapas*. Patrick Olivelle notes that this term derives from the Sanskrit root, *tap*, translated by him as ‘ascetic heat’. *Tapas* refers to the process of generating heat (asceticism) and to the product of this process, namely ‘magical heat’, which has a creative and sacred quality. Asceticism thus produces this sacred heat or energy (1993: 3). This immense generativity is demonstrated in one version of a Hindu creation myth. Siva is asked to create the world, and so retreats into the water for a thousand years to generate his power. However, in his absence, Brahma creates the world and when Siva returns, he

⁹ Hijras maintain that they will only undergo the operation if the goddess is ‘ready’ to help them: Nanda notes that the *dai ma* [‘midwife’] asks the prospective *nirvan* to look at the Mata’s picture for a sign that the operation will succeed (when the Mata appears to be smiling and laughing). This is followed by the breaking of a coconut in half – if it breaks unevenly, the operation is postponed. ‘Given the irreversible and life-changing nature of the operation, it seems reasonable to interpret the *puja* as a way of attempting to resolve the ambivalence that the anticipation of the operation generates’ (1999: 27). Reddy also records being told by Madhavi, a hijra, that ‘you have to get the Mata’s blessings before you come *nirvan* and before the *dawat* [celebration] on the fortieth day after *nirvan*’. ‘Otherwise what happens?’ Reddy asked. ‘Otherwise you will die’, Madhavi replied in all seriousness. It is imperative to ask for the goddess’ blessings, especially if she did not ‘call you’ for the operation, as it is believed most earlier hijras were, signifying her desire for them to undergo the operation (Reddy 2005: 108). These themes of the revenge of and reverence to the goddess fit in with more general ideas surrounding ‘mother-goddess worship’. Ganesh (1990) notes that the mother-goddess expresses ideas of power, autonomy, and primacy, indicating a world-view in which the creative power of femininity is central; ‘the goddess mediates between life and death and contains in herself the possibility of regeneration’ (WS-58). Current literature on the mother-goddess is dominated by the theme of the benign versus destructive goddess, presenting her ‘ambivalence’ as axiomatic (*ibid.*: WS-60). Reverence and submission of the mother-goddess is illustrated in the myths connecting the Mata and hijras, as well as throughout Hindu mythology which demonstrates a range of the Mata’s ‘aggressive’ acts. The theme of female goddess as aggressor is demonstrated not only in myths associated with hijras, but in many examples, such as that of Arjuna and Urvashi (see Goldman 1993; Doniger 1999; Pattanaik 2002; Pelissero 2002).

¹⁰ These terms ‘asceticism’ and ‘renunciation’ might invoke marginally different meanings, but there is some overlap within the hijras’ adoption of such discourses and as such both will be discussed in this section in tandem, and as contingent ideas.

¹¹ ‘Real hijras are those whose bodies [sexual organs] have no strength and who should have no mental or physical desire for men whatsoever. We are like *sannyasis*. This is what is important’ (Amir Nayak in Reddy 2005: 79; cf. Reddy 2003: 175).

¹² The practice of renunciation is the last of the four Hindu life stages, where each stage of life has appropriate behaviours, including sexual behaviour. The student should be chaste; the householder should engage in sexual relations as a married person to procreate; the third stage sees the forest dweller preparing for the renunciation of sex in the final stage of the *sannyasi* (Nanda 1999: 126). For more literature on the topic of renunciation, cf. Kakar 1989, Srivastava 2004.

breaks off his *lingam*, declaring it to be of no more use, and throws it on the ground. His castrated phallus became the embodiment of creative *tapas*; as Doniger states, '[the *lingam*] becomes a source of universal fertility as soon as it has ceased to be a source of individual fertility' (1973: 135, in Nanda 1999: 30). This notion of creative generativity explains the hijras' ritual role of blessing married couples and newborn infants, since the practice of asceticism and its creative power is strongly associated with fertility and productivity. In performing this ascetic role, hijras link themselves to Siva and other ascetic individuals, as well as to the Mata.¹³

Theoretically, hijras go further than practicing sexual asceticism to 'ensuring' full corporeal asceticism. Although this is the *ideal referent* for hijras,¹⁴ the practice of ensuring the Mata's blessings indicates that not all hijras have had the *nirvan* operation and that in many cases, the operation cannot or will not be performed for many years, if ever.¹⁵ The *nirvan* operation, as discussed in the myth above, directly links hijras to their mythological creation by the Mata and their devotion to her, as well as to Siva in his role as creative ascetic through chastity. The *nirvan* operation consists of a penectomy and orchiectomy where both penis and testicles are removed (Reddy 2005: 94).¹⁶ This emasculation is the source of the ritual powers of the hijras; as Nanda puts it: 'it is the source of their uniqueness and the most authentic way of identifying oneself as a hijra and of being so identified by the larger society' (1999: 24). Yet such a definition fails to consider the variations within the hijra group (which consists of emasculated individuals; non-emasculated but circumcized individuals; non-emasculated and non-circumcized individuals; impotent men; and naturally born hermaphrodites) and firmly fixes the hijras as a corporeal reality, and not as a conceptual

¹³ Hijras explicitly use these discourses of creative asceticism and generativity to legitimize their lives and practices, by – at least outwardly – advocating chastity and emphasizing their affinity with mythological asexual figures, such as Arjuna as eunuch-transvestite and Siva Ardhanarisvara. See Reddy 2005: 89.

¹⁴ I am using the term 'ideal referent' to indicate an ideal to which hijras aspire, as well as to signify the assumption that many expect of the hijras. Obviously there is some disparity between this ideal and the actual bodily status or physical practices of many hijras, although the correlations with 'authenticity' and the *nirvan* operation are clear, and many hijras experience pressure to undergo it in order to gain a measure of recognition as a 'real hijra' in the outside world, paradoxically gaining hijras a measure of respect at the same moment that the 'categorical identification with this label stigmatizes them in the eyes of the mainstream public' (Reddy 2005: 57, 95-6).

¹⁵ Nanda notes that of the ten hijras she met who had the emasculation operation (presumably, she met a number who did not have it), all but one had done so only after many years (five to fifteen) in the hijra community. She also cites Ranade's study (1983), which states that four-fifths of the 76 castrated hijras interviewed were castrated *before* the age of fifteen. There is clearly a discrepancy in these accounts, perhaps in part explained by the age of the hijras interviewed or location, or even the veracity of hijras' accounts of their own *nirvan*. Generally, there is speculation regarding the actual number of hijras who have undergone the emasculation operation in relation to the number of hijras overall: figures tend to be greatly exaggerated or underestimated. Mr Bhola, President of All India Kalyan Sabha (a hijras' welfare association) told *The Tribune* (13th October 1986) that 98% of hijras are castrated, and 2% are hermaphrodites (in Shrivastav, V. K. (n.d.) *Hijro ki alag duniya, dhan kamane ka kutsit dhanda*, source unknown; in Hall, 1995). In contrast, Mr Bhola later stated in 2008 that 'I know that most of the eunuchs are fake [i.e. not castrated]. But neither the government nor the police are doing anything. Due to this the number of fake eunuchs is increasing' (Niazi 2008); however this statement was made in response to the apparent 'rise' in 'fake' hijras in Madhya Pradesh.

¹⁶ See Nanda (1999) for a thorough account of the significance and ritual of this operation (ch.3).

and psychological possibility. However the referent of the hijra who has undergone the *nirvan* operation, and the operation’s symbolic potential as evoking discourses of creative asceticism, is important for hijra identity more generally, particularly within Hindu ritual practices and ideologies.

These discussions outline a ‘conceptual’ framework for hijras’ ‘Hindu’ practices, but this next part focuses on more daily practices, including rituals associated with the *nirvan* operation such as the treatment of hijras as post-natal ‘mothers’ or ‘brides’; the practices of mourning ‘widows’; and the religious performances undertaken by the hijras. In many of these examples, we find hijras performing apparently ‘feminine’ roles, further indicating the contingent axes of gender and religion.

The *nirvan* operation symbolizes the transformation that the hijras undergo in order to become hijras. It is important to note that the *nirvan* operation should not be read as akin to a transsexual operation in the West – as ‘male’ to ‘female’ in the case of the hijra – but rather for many, the operation is about the transformation into a hijra, and not simply a ‘woman’ (Nanda 1999: 118).¹⁷ However, the roles performed during the *nirvan* operation mimic female roles. The operation itself takes place at three or four in the morning: an auspicious time for ceremonies, such as marriages. The operation is traditionally performed by a skilled hijra, known as a *dai ma*, literally translated as ‘midwife’.¹⁸ Once the emasculation has occurred, the blood is left to drain and is not stopped; one *dai ma*, Meera, told Nanda that this blood is considered ‘male’, and must be drained off (*ibid.*: 28). A forty-day recovery period follows, similar to that of a woman after childbirth, with similar dietary and ritual practices.¹⁹ After this period, the *nirvan* is dressed as a bride for her *dawat*, with her hair parting, hands, and feet decorated with *mehndi* [red dye], as those of a bride (*ibid.*: 29). After performing *puja* to the Mata at a water source, the ritual is complete and the *nirvan* is reborn as a hijra (*ibid.*: 29).

¹⁷ As noted in the critique of third sex analysis above, Hall notes that hijras feel they are not just not men or women, but rather in their narratives indicate that they see themselves as ‘deficiently’ masculine and ‘incompletely’ feminine (1995: 31). To read the *nirvan* operation as creating pure ‘women’ therefore is inconsistent with hijras’ own assertions.

¹⁸ Nanda describes how one *dai ma* hijra she knew well, told her a dream in which the Mata gave her the call to perform the operation. Meera had no medical training, but believed she operated with the power of the Mata so that the result was not in her hands (1999: 27). Although hijras tend to have the operation performed by a *dai ma* – or rather prefer this due to the higher level of ritual associated with the *dai ma* than a medical professional – it is evident that some doctors in the larger cities also perform this procedure (*ibid.*: 28). Being a *dai ma* is a source of great wealth and prestige, although the risks are very high; emasculation remains a criminal offense, described as a ‘grievous’ hurt by the Indian Penal Code, Section 320; see Nanda 1999: 120. Also see Preston for further accounts of the *nirvan* operation, which explores the variation in colonial accounts of the operation, often represented by hijras as self-performed (1987: 375).

¹⁹ Nanda notes that pure sugar and wheat bread are important elements in the diet of women who have given birth, as ‘another illustration of the symbolic identification of childbirth with emasculation as rebirth’. She also documents the recovery process, including bathing and purifying rituals (1999: 28-9).

Another ‘female’ role performed by *celas* [disciples of a hijra *guru*] is demonstrated at the time of a *guru*’s death, where they behave as Hindu widows at the death of a husband. ‘Mimicking’ Hindu widows, they break all their bangles, remove their jewellery, and don a simple, white sari for the period of mourning. Reddy notes that they are permitted to wear coloured clothes only after they have acquired another *guru* (2005: 109, 162; cf. Zia 1997: 279-81). There is evidently symbolic meaning behind such actions as hijras enact one aspect of their gender by imitating the rituals usually performed by Hindu women.

A further ‘female’ performance is demonstrated by hijras’ participation at Hindu festivals, often acting a woman’s traditional part.²⁰ Reddy describes the participation of several hijras in one such Hindu festival in Hyderabad – notably among the ‘Muslim’ hijras (2005: 109-10).²¹ Reddy attended the *bonalu panduga* festival in 1997 – one of the most important and popular festivals in Hyderabad – and noted the presence of several hijras. Women were primarily involved in this festival; they carried elaborate pots to the goddess Mahakali’s temple [an incarnation of Devi], where they were ceremoniously broken. She wrote that as ‘Musalmans’, hijras are ‘officially forbidden to participate’, and a ‘stiff fine is imposed for this transgression if senior hijras get to know of it’.²²

It is evident that monetary fines and identification as a ‘Musalman’ did not deter self-identified ‘Muslim’ hijras in Hyderabad from attending this popular ‘Hindu’ festival every year. Furthermore, what is significant about Reddy’s account is the presence of a few *badhai* hijras [ritual workers], but almost all the *kandra* hijras [‘sex-workers’].²³ As Reddy records, for the *kandra* hijras, this was ‘the one annual festival for which they spent the largest amount of money and celebrated with the most pomp and enthusiasm’, following the procession with a big feast (*ibid.*: 110). Evidently a particular hijra or group’s ‘ritual’ role – based on type of work and thus social status within the hijra community more generally – can have an impact

²⁰ Cf. Shah mentions hijras going on ‘begging tours’ during important festivals such as Diwali, Holi, and Navaratri (1961: 1327).

²¹ See note seven above: Reddy did her fieldwork in Hyderabad, where the hijra groups she associated with were ‘Muslim’; although not *explicitly* defined as such, they certainly identified as ‘Muslim’ (cf. 2005: ch. 5 ‘We are all Musalmans now’, especially pp. 114-117 for the Hyderabad context).

²² Reddy states that Rani, one of the *badhai* [ritual performance] hijras, had to pay eleven hundred rupees last year she said, because someone had told her *guru* that she was present at the temple during these festivities (2005: 109). This same hijra was present when Reddy attended the festival in 1997.

²³ This distinction in role was made amongst the hijras Reddy interviewed in Hyderabad, and these are the Hyderabad terms used to define the difference in roles. The *badhai* hijras, who performed ritual work of blessings at ceremonies, tended to be confined to established hijra houses in Hyderabad, and the *kandra* hijras, who often performed sex work, tended to form their own independent communities; the most significant for Reddy’s research was the *kandra* hijra community which lived under the water-tank in Secunderabad (although affiliated with the Laskarwallah lineage in Hyderabad). There is some room for movement between the two roles – usually *kandra* hijras become *badhai* hijras – but both roles are not performed in tandem: as Reddy puts it, they are ‘ideologically exclusive domains of practice’ (2005: 81). These distinctions tie up with notions of authenticity and the idea of a ‘true’ hijra identity, where the sexual practices of *kandra* hijras represents inauthentic identity (by disregarding discourses of asceticism).

on the level of their participation in differing ‘religious’ activities, demonstrating the intersections between ritual role, social status, and religious practice. The *kandra* hijras’ role in the festival appears to be differentiated from the *badhai* hijras’ role according to their status and occupation, which are tied up with notions of authenticity; perhaps ‘less authentic’ hijras were allowed the possibility of participating in such festivals without recrimination from or justification to the more hierarchical households. Occupation and notions of authenticity however are only one explanation for this inconsistency of the participation of ‘Muslim’ hijras in Hindu festivals. When questioning why and how individuals incorporate ‘Hindu’ elements into general religious practices – and to varying degrees – Reddy notes an additional factor of region, or geographical context. The *bonalu panduga* is argued to be a popular Hyderabad festival, ‘perhaps *highlighting hijras’ affiliation with place rather than religion in particular contexts*’ (*ibid.*: 110, my emphasis).

Muslim practices²⁴

The next section considers religious practices identified as ‘Muslim’. Although hijras gain legitimacy from a Hindu goddess, they also make certain identifications and enact certain practices seen as explicitly Muslim. The incorporation of these apparently mutually exclusive elements into hijras’ lives should not necessarily be seen as paradoxical or problematic. This next section considers hijra naming practices, daily Muslim rituals, and the importance of shrines and festivals, elements which can be seen as part of the orthopraxy of Islamic doctrine.²⁵

One notable practice is the adoption of Muslim names. Reddy states that upon joining the hijra community, initiates and/or their *gurus* were allowed to choose a new name for the initiate, often Hindu and female. However, they were given male Muslim names in addition to this female name, which she states were ‘the official names entered in the hijra register maintained by the *nayaks*’ [senior leaders of the hijra houses]. Although many hijras

²⁴ Much of the information from this section is taken from Reddy’s ethnography – specifically because of its focus on the (mostly) self-practicing ‘Muslim hijras’ of Hyderabad (2005: 105; cf. footnotes seven and twenty-one above) – in order to explore certain ‘Muslim’ practices utilized by hijras that are not discussed elsewhere (*ibid.*: ch. 5). In addition, examples are used occasionally from Zia’s novel, which also concerns the hijras of Hyderabad (1997). An extract from Reddy 2005: 101: GAYATRI: ‘What does it mean when you say, “I am a Musalman”? How do you know that you are a Musalman?’ MUNIRA: ‘See, once you become a hijra – I am talking about Laskarwallah hijras [one of the two hijra houses in Hyderabad] – then you become a Musalman. [You] say *salam aleikum* when you meet other hijras, wear a green sari for special occasions, do not wear a *bindi*, eat *halal* meat, have the *khatna* [circumcision], you say *namaz*, older people go on the Hajj. It is like that. That is why we say “now we are Musalmans”.’

²⁵ See Smith 1957 for discussion regarding the importance of practice rather than belief in Islam.

preferred their Hindu names, all of the *nayaks* in Hyderabad were addressed by their Muslim names, whatever their prior religious affiliation, perhaps to denote their superior position (2005: 103). This account may be limited by the contextual nature of Hyderabad as a historically important Muslim location, accounting for the self-assertion of the Hyderabadi hijras as Muslims. However other accounts also mention hijras with Muslim names, such as Nanda's account of Salima, a Muslim-born hermaphrodite, who was given this name by her *guru* at her initiation, although in this case this is clearly a female name (1999: 102). Preston also discusses the differences in naming practices in varying colonial documents. In different subdistricts of Pune, it was reported that one group of (both Hindu and Muslim) hijras all had 'rather fanciful, vaguely Hindu names', yet at the same time, another group of hijras from the Indapur district, from varying castes, upon emasculation took 'the names of Musselmanee women, and as such, live and are buried' (1987: 376). In another variation, Shah reports that in central Gujarat, the adoption of a woman's name is commonplace along with the suffix *kumvar* [prince], usually signifying a man's name (1961: 1326). The inconsistency of these practices at least indicates that hijras adopt new names upon their initiations, which are often Muslim. The adoption of both Hindu and Muslim elements in naming practices may indicate the personal identifications being made as hijras construct their identities.

Another set of 'Muslim' practices concern 'daily' customs, such as circumcision, *namaz* [daily prayers], burial customs, and clothing. The hijras who joined the Hyderabadi communities were expected to be circumcised as soon as they formally joined the community, even if they later planned to have the *nirvan* operation. This was compulsory, as a quintessential marker of Muslim (male) identity (Reddy 2005: 103).²⁶ Further, among the hijras Reddy interviewed, it was a common practice of saying *namaz*. Though many hijras did not visit the mosque for this purpose – presumably due to hijras' social marginalization from sites of normal religious practice – many made the effort to say prayers at least on Fridays. All the *nayaks*' houses visited had a poster or scroll with Qur'anic verses, to which hijras turned when they prayed (*ibid.*: 103-4; cf. Zia 1997: 155, 163).

One of the most significant Muslim practices accounted for by Reddy – and a particularly secretive practice in the hijra community (Reddy 2005: 107; cf. Zia 1997: 78-9, 280-1) – are the rituals performed at the death of a hijra. As noted above, the *celas* of a *guru* act in the

²⁶ In and around Hyderabad, it seems that hijras were predominantly seen as Muslim because of the practice of circumcision. A couple of *jogins* [temple worshippers, often ritually 'married' to the Mata goddess] in Hyderabad told Reddy that they differentiated themselves from hijras on account of religious affiliation: 'We are all Hindus, unlike those [hijra] people, who are Muslims'. 'We don't have the *khatna-watna* [circumcision] done, like those people. We are Hindus' (2005: 68-9).

manner of Hindu widows upon the *guru*'s death, yet the rituals performed for the deceased replicate those performed at the death of a Muslim man – whatever the natal-religious status of the hijra – including the washing of the corpse, the ‘viewing’, prayers from the Qur’an, and a burial in the Muslim cemetery (2005: 107).²⁷

However, arguably the most explicit markers of everyday identity are eating and clothing practices.²⁸ Among the hijras observed by Reddy, *halal* meat was imperative, sacrificed by one of the Muslim (by birth) hijras of the group, if not by a Muslim butcher (2005: 106). A more observable practice however, was the adoption of the wearing of the *burqa* [black robe and veil as worn by Muslim women in public] over their saris, especially when going out alone or with men with whom they were involved. However, when hijras went out for other purposes – *badhai* [ritual] work such as attending births and marriages, or non-*badhai* work to obtain money for other purposes, sexual and otherwise – they did not wear the *burqa*, in order to attract *more* attention to themselves, rather than conceal their identity (*ibid.*: 104). In addition, for one lineage in Hyderabad, the Laskarwallah hijras, on certain ‘religious’ occasions hijras were specified the colour of sari to wear: green, the colour associated with Islam (*ibid.*: 104). The hijras Reddy interviewed – like other Muslim women – were ‘not officially’ allowed to wear *bindis* on their foreheads: if any trace was seen by the *nayaks*, they imposed a fine on the hijra responsible (*ibid.*: 105). All these practices can be explained in large part by the historically and regionally specific context of the hijras in Hyderabad; however the exploration of such Muslim practices is important for this study, in arguing for the specific temporal and spatial context and the individuality of the life-historicity of each hijra actor in making specific religious identifications.

A further significant Muslim practice is worship at shrines and participation in Muslim festivals. Many hijras took part in explicitly Muslim events, as one of the only occasions

²⁷ Reddy gives an elaborate account of the Muslim burial customs, as related to her by one of the *nayak*'s *celas* (not the deceased *guru*'s) and a Muslim neighbour, Abbas, who ‘regularly called the faithful to prayer at a local neighbourhood mosque’. She was not allowed to witness the rituals herself due to their secretive nature (cf. Zia 1997: 78-9, who maintains that such rituals, especially the burial itself, were carried out in the middle of the night). The body is washed thoroughly – and the area around it – by a *ghasl*, a hereditary caste/occupational position in the Muslim community. All the ornaments are removed from the body and the *ghasl* is given half of these. The body is then ready for the *mawayat*, or viewing, where mainly hijras come to pay their respects. At the end of the day, prayers from the Qur’an are read; the body is laid on a stretcher and only non-hijra men (normally from the neighbourhood) carry it to the Muslim cemetery. The body is placed in the grave on a north-south axis with the feet facing south and the head turned west in the direction of Mecca. On the third day the *ziyarat* is carried out, where prayers are performed and forgiveness asked for all sins, and hijras visit the cemetery; this is repeated on the tenth, twentieth, and thirtieth day afterwards. On the fortieth day is a big ceremony and feast – the *roti* – one of the only occasions when hijras from across the country gather (cf. Sharma 1989: 121); they are fed and housed at the expense of the deceased’s house. As Abbas told Reddy, ‘it is like for any Muslim man in our *mohalla* [neighbourhood]. The same things are done, except hijras invite their people for the *roti*’ (2005: 107-8).

²⁸ These particular clothing practices occur according to Reddy in the Hyderabad context (2005). In contrast, Nanda’s ethnography describes hijras wearing *bindis*, thus contradicting these Hyderabad hijra practices (1999: 17). There is likely to be regional or historical reasons for particular sartorial practices.

when hijras all over the country got together.²⁹ In Hyderabad for example, Reddy states one major public event was the *Pir panduga* (or Muharram), a ten-day mourning ritual which is the annual commemoration of the seventh-century martyrdom of two Muslim saints, Hussain and Hassan (*ibid.*: 106).³⁰

Some hijras underwent religious ‘pilgrimages’ to sites of Muslim significance. Reddy notes that some senior hijras in Hyderabad had gone on the Hajj – the holy pilgrimage to Karbala or Mecca and Medina (*ibid.*: 103) – as well as other hijras frequently visiting various Muslim *dargahs* [mausoleums] across the country. Zia is told by Kamal Baksh, one of the *nayaks* in Hyderabad, that hijras from all over the country visit a Muslim saint’s tomb in Ajmer, to pay homage and to resolve differences between households (1997: 103-4): perhaps these examples can be explained by the historical significance of Islam in Hyderabad and its importance on modern hijras’ lives. Yet the communal participation of hijras from all over India on such occasions also serves an important social and communal function. As Nair notes, regarding an important Hindu festival, the Sagar Mela – and in relation to the discussion above of Hindu festivals – often hijras’ congregations and practices can be read as ‘more an affirmation of community than of faith’ (2000: 116 n.1), where certain religious identifications indicate a hijra’s affiliation with a specific region, highlight a particular practice individual to that hijra, or demonstrate adherence to a practice befitting that hijra’s social status and function.

A syncretism of religious identifications?

Hijras’ religious identities have often been seen as an amalgamation of religious roles, through a borrowing of practices seen as either explicitly ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’; this ‘blurring’ is often explained by the particular yet paradoxical nature of Indian religious traditions as being able to accommodate variant practices, seen as pluralistic or heterodox, without needing to ‘compartmentalize’ potentially conflicting beliefs and practices.³¹ Contemplating the plurality of religious practices described above, and considering the different ways in which hijras may or may not adopt and adapt such practices according to their specific contexts, it is clear that hijras, as a group, have managed to negotiate apparently conflicting traditions and

²⁹ Sharma discusses the occurrences of communal hijra participation, such as the deaths of certain *gurus* and religious occasions: these communal gatherings further serve the purpose of making ‘policy decisions’ regarding hijras, settling territorial and household disputes etc. (1989: 120-1; cf. Zia 1997: 103; Reddy 2005: 108).

³⁰ These were the sons of Ali and grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad. This commemoration also marks the split between Sunnis and Shias in Islam.

³¹ For further reading on the paradoxical nature of Indian religious traditions, see Pattanaik 2002; Reddy 2005: 100-1.

identifications in order to form an idiosyncratic lived identity, not just for the hijra community generally by blending Hindu and Muslim aspects, but also – and importantly – on an individual level.

The 'religious and communal syncretism' among the hijras identified and explored by Preston is, as he argues, common in village India, probably confused by the British – and perhaps nowadays of a modern – 'predisposition to order' (1987: 375-6).³² As Preston puts it, hijras seem to 'have borrowed rather freely' from the cumulative backgrounds of those who joined the community (*ibid.*: 376), presumably also borrowing and adopting particular practices that reflected the need of the specific community based on temporal, spatial, and regional contexts.

Furthermore, the pluralistic forms of religion exhibited among hijra communities and within individuals indicate the necessity of allowing this to be the case. Hijra initiates join communities from different religious, caste, and regional backgrounds, which may be perceived as problematic. Instead, hijra groups incorporate initiates from other communities fairly easily. Thus it is important to recognize the fluidity of the hijra community in incorporating variation, so that both former Muslims and Hindus can join, as well as variant caste identities, including Brahmins and Dalits. Nanda notes that no caste or other ascribed social differences seem to be formally significant in hijra social organization. Although in some communities all the hijras are either Muslim or Hindu, many households today include both Hindu and Muslim hijras, and even Christians hijras (1999: 41). As one hijra declared, 'hijras have no *jati* [caste/class] or *dharm* [religion]' (Reddy 2005: 111; cf. Zia 1997: 104-5). It is evident that while hijras employ a variety of 'Muslim' practices in regard to daily social customs and trace their history to the place of eunuchs in the Mughal courts, they also worship a Hindu goddess, observe and find meaning in Hindu discourses of asceticism, and gain a measure of recognition through association with gender variant individuals in Hindu myths. There does not seem to be a conflict between the various religious identifications that hijras make, at least not by hijras themselves. It is evident that religious practices and identifications provide hijras with a framework within which to assert their self-consciousness, and affirm their own identities, not only as hijras, but also as individuals. Their positionality on the margins of society certainly allows for more fluid and syncretic

³² Obviously the British predisposition to order has had a noticeable effect on 'modern' predispositions to order, among the 'once colonial subjects'. Many laws, codes, institutions, and ideas were subsumed wholesale into the framework of 'modern India', resulting in many colonial ideologies becoming 'modern Indian' ones (cf. Kaviraj 2000). For example, the Penal Code of 1860 was a piece of colonial legislation, mainly borrowed and adapted from British laws, but was adopted *in toto* after independence in 1947. The Penal Code criminalised the practice of homosexuality, stating that 'it was against the order of nature' (Section 377). This section was only revoked on 2nd July, 2009.

religious practices. Moreover, hijras' personal interpretations are crucial to understanding their religious practices, highlighting the potential for agency within religious practices. Nair argues that this amalgamated identity is due to the 'fluid, itinerant, and often highly secretive nature of hijras', which 'disallows any fixed sense of their practiced faith' (2000: 115-6, n.1). This idea is significant in indicating that hijra faith and 'religion' cannot be grasped and defined into simple categorizations of 'Muslim' or 'Hindu'. Hijras construct and legitimate their identities – both Muslim and Hindu aspects – by acknowledging, adopting, and adapting apparently paradoxical religious practices, and in turn, creating new interpretations – on both a communal and individual level – of what it means to have a 'religious' identity.

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