The Blurring of East and West: Sufi Esoteric Symbolism in the Lyrical Tradition of Lālan Shah and the Baūls of Bengal

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Dedicated to Ratna Didi
and the late Dr. Carol Salomon
Even in the distant reaches of the Islamic world, one can expect to find the mystic passion of Sufism permeating the cultural fabric of varying landscapes and times. This is especially evident in the riverine culture of East Bengal, now officially known as the nation-state of Bangladesh. However, what is perhaps unexpected is the way in which these symbols have been merged with Hindu and Buddhist esoteric symbolism to create a syncretistic folk tradition highly unique to Bengal. Individuals who practice this centuries-old devotional or bhakti tradition are “Baül”\textsuperscript{1} and can be from any exoteric religious background. (Salomon 1995: 186). Though they are also present in West Bengal, the Baül of Bangladesh are distinguished by their greater reverence for the songs of the famous folk poet Lālan Shah (d. 1890), better known as Lālan Fakir, whose continued significance in Bengal cannot be underrated. Indeed, arguably “no folk poet has made a greater contribution to modern Bengali literature” (Salomon 1991: 277).

The musical tradition of the Baül, proclaimed in 2005 by UNESCO as part of an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, is notable in that it combines musical expression with spiritual striving (Bangla: sādhana) in a humanistic context. The lyrics of many of these Baül songs contain themes or symbols that relate to this striving, and can include everything from esoteric mystical numerologies to Tantra-derived sexual symbolism. This is especially the case in the orally transmitted songs of Lālan Shah, early versions of which were fortunately committed to writing and found in the notebooks of the celebrated Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (Salomon 1991: 277).

In this essay I will first demonstrate that much of the symbolism found in Lālan Shah’s lyrics has precedent in earlier Sufi mystical writings and poetry, particularly those of Mansur al-Ḥallāj and Farīdudīn ʿAṭṭār. By tracing the historical arc even further backward, however, the palpable influence of Greek Neoplatonic philosophers such as Plotinus quite easily emerges into view. What we discover, then, is that with the wider Sufi conversion of East Bengal we have a highly significant case of Greek-influenced emanation-based philosophy merging with the already pre-existent monism of Advaita Vedānta, specifically as expounded by Adi Shankara (788-820 CE) and later in the popular Tantra literature native to Bengal. The resultant blend is a cross-continental set of cosmogonic symbols pervading the songs of the Lālan corpus, each transmitted orally through the vehicle of music and enlivening the cultural atmosphere of modern Bengal. Furthermore, for thousands of Baül today these symbols are not merely abstract terms but are treated as mystic realities to be explored by means of ardent ritual practice.

To give this point clarity, I will analyze some of the key Sufi symbolism found in two popular Lālan songs that to my knowledge have never before been critically translated into English\textsuperscript{2}: “Bol re sei moner mānus konjanā” and “Āmi ki tai jānile sādhana siddhi hay” (the full translations can be found at the end of this essay).\textsuperscript{3}

**STRIVING TO DISCOVER “I”**

The first translated Lālan song we will analyze begins with the following chorus: “If I know ‘I’ then my striving [sādhana] becomes attainment [siddhi] / The word ‘I’ has heavy significance / ‘I’ is no longer within me.” The pronoun “I” is purposely interspersed throughout the song rather than the Bangla equivalent pronoun for the English “myself,” creating several interplays on words and phrases. This use is strikingly similar to ʿAṭṭār’s 12\textsuperscript{th} century Persian poem *The Conference of the Birds* in which the
Mysticism is certainly not new, even within Sufism. We know that the term *sādhana* comes from the root *sādh*, which means to exert, to strive to attain a particular result or *siddhi* and that among Hindu and Buddhist yogis the word implies “a spiritual effort to achieve a moral and spiritual aim” (1959: 448). This is used in precisely the same sense within the Baūl *sampradāy* or syncretistic tradition, with the additional usage of describing sexual rituals designed “to unite the dual polar principles of the Supreme and to reintegrate them into the Supreme in order to regain the original state of cosmic unity” (Salomon 1991: 272). This specific definition is carried over from the much older Tantric Buddhist (Shahajiy) and Tantric Hindu (both Vaishnava Sahajiya and Shaiva-Shakta) roots of the Baūl tradition (1991: 271), which is notable because these traditions exoterically are quite different from orthodox Islam and even many Sufi lineages. Thus Lālān’s employment of *sādhana* (rather than the more Sufi-specific Arabic term *tariqa*, for instance) appears on one level simply designed to appeal to his local Bengali audience, but on another level to imply an esoteric meaning that would only be fully appreciated by initiated Baūls. Indeed, Lālān’s lyrics are purposefully “intended to veil their ritual significance from the uninitiated who would find these esoteric practices objectionable” and contain “code words or phrases that are the building blocks of the esoteric songs” (Salomon 1995: 195).

In the second verse of the song we find reference to Mansur al-Ḥallāj (858-945 CE), the famous Sufi mystic “whose name became, in the course of time, a symbol for both suffering love and unitive experience, but also for a lover’s greatest sin: to divulge the secret of his love” (Schimmel 1975: 64). Lālān makes explicit reference to this “sin” in the song, namely Ḥallāj’s statement for which he was allegedly executed: *anāʾ-l-Ḥaqq, “I am the (Absolute) Truth*” which traditionally is reserved for God alone. The phrase, which appears in Ḥallāj’s *Kitāb at-tawāsīn*, “led later mystics into deep speculations about the two different ‘I’s,’ that of Pharaoh and that of the loving mystic; the solution is given [...] that the ‘I’ of the Egyptian ruler was an expression of infidelity but that of Ḥallāj expressed divine grace” (1975: 66).

Lālān’s use of Ḥallāj is highly creative here, as it not only links his motif of the word “I” with the chorus (“If I know ‘I’ my striving becomes attainment”) but also with the proceeding verse in which we find connections between “I” and the two words (derived from Persian) “fire” and “divine fire.” Beyond the simple connection with the Ḥallāj’s metaphor of the moth being burned away in its attraction to the candle-flame (cf. Schimmel 1975: 145), it is also plausible that the curious riddle of “The Master’s command” in Lālān’s song is in fact linked to the two different “I’s” of the *Kitāb at-tawāsīn*. The “open distinction” between the two fires would then also be applied to the two “I’s”—a difference that is only revealed when the mystic is communing with the *murshid* or Guide.

Finally, as we shall further see in the next song, Baūls have been known to use letter symbolism (particularly the Perso-Arabic *alif* and *mim*) in their songs. Such use of letter mysticism is certainly not new, even within Sufism. We know that Ḥallāj also
“uses cabalistic word plays and relies on the secret meaning of the letters of the alphabet; alchemical expressions are also found at times” (Schimmel 1975: 70). That being the case, an additional meaning can potentially be derived from the first line of the song: “I is no longer in me.” The word for “in me” is “āmā-te” which makes the phrase translate literally to “I is no longer in āmā” or cabalistically “I am no longer in the mother (alif-mim-alif).” This admittedly obscure interpretation is given additional weight because in the syncretistic tradition the “esoteric identity and importance of the Perso-Arabic letter, mīn, and its Bengali equivalent, ma, were stressed. The letter, when added to Ahad, made Ahmad and Muhammad as well” (Roy 1983: 124). Of course, in Lālan’s songs subjective ambiguity always remains in such speculation.

RETURNING TOWARD THE STATION OF NOTHINGNESS

The fiery martyrdom of Ḥallāj is linked to the other song we will analyze, which as will be shown can quite literally be interpreted on an elemental level as much more “watery” and fluidic. This song begins with the riddle, “Oh do tell, which person is this Man of the Heart [maner mānuṣ]? / ‘Ma’ worships him as a husband / The Father [māola, Ar. mawlana] calls her ‘Ma.’” The “Man of the Heart” here describes “the Supreme in man,” also known as “Golden Man (sonar mānuṣ), Uncatchable Moon (adhar cād), Unknown Bird (acin pākhi), Allah, Krishna, and Lord (sāi), as well as sahaj mānuṣ and adhar mānuṣ” which both refer to a unique conception of the Supreme in female semen as described below (Salomon 1991: 279). In The Conference of the Birds, we find an interesting parallel to this idea in the mythical flying Simorgh:

“If you would glimpse the beauty we revere / Look in your heart—it’s image will appear [...] Search for this king within your heart, His soul / Reveals itself in atoms of the Whole. / The multitude of forms that masquerade / Throughout the world spring from the Simorgh’s shade” (Attar 1984: 54).

Clearly this is linked with at least one of the reasons Ḥallāj and many other Sufis were condemned, for “Orthodox Muslims accused not only the Christians, but also Ḥallāj and the representatives of love mysticism, of accepting the concept of ḥulūl” which is “the incarnation of the divine in man” (Schimmel 1975: 144).

What is more intriguing here, however, is the immediate echo of Neoplatonic monism. Like Lālan, the “essential desire” of Ḥallāj’s God often turns into a more or less magnetic force that has caused emanation and draws everything back to its source” (Schimmel 138). This has clear parallels in the second verse of our Lālan song as well: “Who is Primary [ādya], Who is Worthy / in whose love one compelled will be / Who imparts the supreme reality [param tatvā] / That in scripture has no abode.” This idea of the macrocosmic or supreme reality as a magnetic, compelling force certainly does in fact resound with Neoplatonic themes. Porphyry even records the last words of his teacher Plotinus as, “Strive to bring back the god in yourselves to the God in the All” (Moore 2002), stressing its fundamental importance to the later Alexandrian school. It also harmonizes, however, with ancient Vedic conceptions that can be traced all the way back to the Rigved, particularly the idea that the “absolute is non-dual (advaita)” and that “nothing exists outside it” (Roy 1983: 116). This absolute in its interplay with the
universe makes manifest a quality of illusionary duality that is designed to draw the mystic (or in the Hindu context sādhu) towards a conscious recognition of his or her actual non-dual nature, a transformation completed in yoga, “when the difference between worshipper and worshipped ceases in that unitary consciousness which is ecstasy or samādhi, or transcendent perfect experience” (Woodroffe 1959: 452).

How then is this unification with the source—or among Baüls, this fundamental aim of sādhanā—effected? For this we need look no further than the rest of Lālan’s song. The second verse states: “When the two become as one / Absent blooms take the form of fruit / And these, after coalescing / Create the personal heart.” This verse thus explicitly outlines the philosophical underpinnings for not only the Baül’s sexual sādhanā but also the characterization of divine striving more generally as an act of pure love. Indeed, in Sufism “the last stations on the mystical path are love and gnosis, maḥabba and maʿrifā” (Schimmel 1975: 130). Contrasting these stations with ecstatic or expanded states of consciousness are important, as each station or maqām “is a lasting stage, which man reaches, to a certain extent, by his own striving. It belongs to the category of acts, whereas the states are gifts of grace” (1975: 99). This love, when allowed to penetrate the universe, thus unlocks an ecstatic identification with the active or dynamic principle of existence. To characterize this progressive identification, Muslim Baüls “describe the body both in terms of the Hindu tantric cakras or centers (mūlādhār, svādhiṣṭān, maṇipūr, anāhata, biśuddhā, ājñā, sahasrā) and Sufi mokāms (Ar. maqām) or stations (nāsūt [Ar. nāsūr], mālkūt [Ar. malakūt], jābrūt [Ar. jābarūr], lāhūt [Ar. lāhūt] and lā mokām” (Salomon 1991: 297), the stations often corresponding directly with a given cakra and vice-versa. It is by means of striving upward or inward through these cakras and/or mokāms that different levels of attainment are believed to be reached along the mystic’s path or sādhanā.

The highest attainment is found in lā mokām (Ar. lā maqām), literally “no place,” which is the “transcendent space where all dualities are reintegrated into the supreme” (Salomon 1995: 192). The final verse of our Lālan song beautifully flows, “In the Station of Nothingness [lā mokām] there is this Light [nūrī]: The First Mother, the Jeweler [jahārī] of Forms / Lālan says: “I submit humbly to my unraveled destiny.” It is here that the ultimate spiritual annihilation or fanā occurs, which is both “the goal of the mystic” and, as ‘Āṭṭār tell us, constitutes “the seventh and last vale on the Path leading to God, after the traveler has traversed the valleys of search, love, gnosis, independence, tauḥīd [oneness], and bewilderment (Schimmel 1975: 123). Additionally, it is explicitly linked to the sahasrār or “crown” cakra as mentioned above, and in Baūl symbolism is often conceptualized as the sky or an attic (Salomon 1995: 195).

This incidentally also has incredibly striking correspondences to the Jewish Kabbalah, as in the poem Kethā Malkhut “Royal Crown” by the 11th century Andalucian mystic Solomon ibn Gabriol we find that he “speaks of the fission of the Nothing from which God calls forth Being” (Scholem 1962: 343). The highest sefirah (or divine emanation-principle) Kether or “crown” is similarly here conceived as the transition from Being to Nothingness and vice-versa, and is called by “masters of the science” both the “unknown primordial ether [and] ‘the source of probity,’ because it has the form of a crown which rests upon the head” (1962: 341).

Understanding Lālan’s use of the word nūrī, however, is critical here to apprehend this verse’s full transcendental significance: “The word for light is Arabic
The identity of nūr with semen can be traced back to early Muslim sources, which represent the luminous bodily substance of Muhammad as sperm. This bodily substance [...] is often depicted as a cosmic pearl” (Salomon 1991: 282). Its identity with lā mokām is strengthened as the “Supreme in semen resides in the sahasrārcakra at the top of the head, also termed the lā mokām (Ar., maqâm), or between the eyes in the two-petaled lotus, or ājñācakra” (1991: 272). Just as in Neoplatonism the microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm, so is this nūr also found to be present in the Absolute:

"Philosophers like Fārābī and Ibn Sinā laid the basis for the development of the sufic notion of creation by establishing a connection between nur or the divine light and the intellect, the former being communicated to the latter at the first instance by the prime cause, the creator. Around the nuclear concept of nur, sufis developed their elaborate doctrine of nur-i Muhammadiya, or nur-i Muhammadi, believed to have been created before all things” (Roy 1983: 115).

Furthermore, this mystical description is inherently linked to the classical Neoplatonic emanations, as the “sufic model of this triad was but a different version of what the Muslim rationalists, metaphysicians, and theologians had already put in the form of the absolute, the universal intellect, and the universal soul” (1983: 114).

In Bengal, the above triad found additional resonance with the Hindu Tantric counterpart “consisting of the absolute (brahman), the creative spirit (iśvar), and the world spirit (hiranya-garbha)” (1983: 115). In some of Lālan’s other songs there is an explicit link between this Hindu “nūr” or iśvar and lā mokām: “Here the Supreme exists in a state of perfect unity without any qualities or form; here is the atal iśvar, “motionless Lord” (Salomon 1995: 193). Thus all together we have a compelling case of Greek, Islamic, and Vedic-origin monism finding common ground in both the Bengali syncretistic tradition and the Lālan corpus.

One fundamental question remains, however, in our song. If this nūr relates to the “Supreme in semen,” why do the two lines extol its feminine quality as “The First Mother, the Jeweler [zaharī] of Form”—both “Light” and “Jeweler” taking feminine grammatical stems? The solution is that in lā mokām the distinction between masculine and feminine, and more symbolically between semen and menstrual blood, has in the mystic’s fana or annihilation also been eliminated. Salomon also postulates that “Lalan may mean that light is the Supreme in semen, that it is the sakti in menstrual blood, and also that light (the male form of the Supreme) is identical to water (the female aspect of the Supreme); the two are in reality the same substance” (1991: 283).

This argument is strengthened by the esoteric identity of the word for Jeweler [jaharī], which is given a feminine stem and symbolically relates to the person of Fatima: “nūr can also refer to the sakti in menstrual blood and is sometimes termed nūr jaharā or johurā (Ar. zahrā, ‘luminous’; al-zahrā is the surname of Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima)” (Salomon 1991: 283). She also relates to la mokām’s elemental properties:

Fatima is one of the “Pākpanjātan (Pers. pākpanjātan) ‘Five Holy People,’ the pre-existent forms of Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, and Husain” and represent “the four elements earth, air, fire, and water, and Muhammad is Divine Light” which all together “surround the Absolute’s seat in the lā mokām” (Salomon 1991: 284).
By combining the symbols of Fatima or water and Muhammad or divine light, both as physiologically manifested in menstrual blood and semen, we thus have the Baül conception of the Supreme. This is cosmogonically referred to as the “primal substance (bastu), often conceived of as a formless personal deity. This substance was made up of two elements, light (nūr; a symbolic word for semen) and water (nīr, a symbolic word for menstrual blood).” (Salomon 1991: 282). In another Baül song we discover the letter mysticism corresponding to this idea: “The head of the ʿaliph split / and a drop of light fell. / Mother in the form of Eve caught it. / The Lord, our protector, was born / in the form of mim.” (Salomon 1991: 285). This is explicitly linked to the speculations of the Hebrew Kabbalists, who postulated the esoteric identity of the letters “alef, mem, and shin [that] in turn correspond to the three elements deduced in the first chapter in connection with the sefirot—ether, water, fire—and from these all the rest came into being” (Scholem 1962: 30).

LEARNED MADNESS AS THE FINAL STATE

In the song’s conclusion, we find Lālan—perhaps channeling the virtue of meekness that in the Islamic world is so characteristic of the Prophet Muhammad—humbly submitting to his “unraveled destiny,” an attitude that seems to resonate with Schimmel’s speculation of mystical annihilation or fanā as being “certainly a human experience...but man is not the subject of this experience. The subject is rather the metaphysical reality itself” (1975: 143). As the universal soul unfurls in its manifestation, Lālan is at a loss to comprehend it. He can only submit in ecstatic, irrational bewilderment, identifying himself with a “madman” present in the attic of lāmokām (Salomon 1995: 196) that perhaps echoes the insane element in Majnun’s passionate relationship with Laylah in Nizami’s romantic poem.

Both the Lālan songs analyzed seem to therefore correspond with the Neoplatonic idea of learned ignorance or foolishness: “intellect is knowing in a way higher than soul, that is eminently knowing. Because its knowledge is higher than and thus different from the soul’s knowledge, we may call its knowledge “ignorance” (Adamson 2002: 101). It also appears to confirm Lālan’s dogma-shattering belief in the superiority of mārphaṭ (Ar. maʿrīfat; mystical knowledge) to šariāṭ (Ar. sharīʿat; Islamic law)” (Salomon 1991: 279). The Baül’s quest through the stations or cakras seem certainly to be predicated upon striving towards union on irrational terms, ultimately progressing by virtue of the absurd in a way that is reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s existential writings. Eventually the fiery madness of Ḥallāj is quenched by the transcendent void of the luminous Prophet and his ʿakti—a mystery that is purely experiential, and an idea that of course only a “fool” could believe.
NOTES

1 In the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore’s own writings on the subject (specifically “The Philosophy of Our People”) I’ve adopted the use of the diaeresis in the letter “ü” throughout, as I find it more accurately captures the sliding pronunciation of the Bangla word bāul, বাউল.

2 Salomon rightly states that there “is no standard, authoritative edition of Lalān’s songs. Since published editions are full of errors [...] these texts may differ substantially in some places from those in printed collections” (1995: 197).

3 These songs were imparted to me through the established Baūl oral tradition during a year-long Fulbright grant to Bangladesh, and both are at present widely recognized in Baūl and Sufi fākir circles. They have both been published in Volume 1 of the easily obtainable—in Bangladesh, that is—Lālan Sangīt (Hossain 2008: 119, 225.)

4 “AMA” (aleph + mem + aleph) was a highly significant Hebrew construction for the 13th century Spanish Kabbalists as is evident in the Zohar, or Book of the Concealed Mystery (Chapter 258); there the word is linked to the Kabbalistic sefirah binah, an emanation akin to Neoplatonic world soul.

5 During the performance of each song, even the expression of the emotion or bhāb (from Sanskrit bhāva) is often changed from one song to the other to reflect this.

6 In the Prapañcasāra Tantra we learn that manas (from which the Bangla word for mind or heart is derived) refers to the lower mind or sensorium and is one of the fourfold “aspects of the antahkarana or mental organ” which also include buddhi, higher mind or will; ahamkāra, ego or self-consciousness; and chitta, the faculty which contemplates and investigates into the subject-matter of thought (Woodroffe 2002: li).

7 Roy provides further insight into the Bengali-specific nature of māolā and an additional link with letter mysticism in the following song or pada:

“There are only two birds, one black and the other white, flying in this world. None knows about them; petty conflicts abound. The lord was a unity as he created mim. He created the three worlds with the tremor of his power. Everyone calls Kālā as Kālā, only I call him Śyām. Kālā conceals in himself the name of Maulā [God] himself. The sky is black, black is earth and so are air and water. The moon is black, the sun is black and so is Maulā Rabbānī. Badi al-Jamāl says, “Oh, what darkness pervades all. Save us by united mim and āyen [ain]’” (Roy 1983: 197).

8 Compare this to the Sufi conception of “the gradual descent (tanaz-zul) of the absolute from what was in the initial stage a bare potentiality, purely negative and supra-existential (al-amā)” (Roy 1983: 114)—al-amā could also be esoterically applied to the Bengali locative pronoun āmāte (see note 4). This also seems to be related to the negative expression en-sof of the Hebrew Kabbalists, which designates “that hidden reality of the Lord of all the logos, of God who conceals himself in the depths of his own essentiality” (Scholem 1962: 130).

9 A connection is also found in the appropriation of the corresponding letters in ritual praxis: “This cosmogony and cosmology, based on language-mysticism, betray their relationship with astrological ideas. From them, direct paths lead to the magical conception of the creative and miraculous power of letters and words” (Scholem 1962: 31).

10 Just as the shari‘at or religious law in Sufism is only the first step, so in the sahājiya cult (as is the case in the Baūl tradition that developed out of it) the adherence to scriptural formalities in the “Vaidhi [Vedic] mode is simply the first step towards spiritual advancement” (Bose 1930: 4).
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If I know "I" then my striving¹ becomes attainment². The word "I" has heavy significance
"I" is no longer within me.³

The eternal city, in the bazaar
They shout, "I, I!"
Unable to recognize my own "I"
I read scripture⁴ like a madman.

After all, this Mansur Hallaj Fakir⁵
Had said, "I am the Truth."
A stamp he receives according to the Master's⁶ law,
But its essence does he obtain in the cup⁷?
Lessen the fire, lessen the divine fire⁸
The Master’s command for the Fate of the two "I’s"⁹
Lalan says, "This open distinction
Is present where the Guide¹⁰ dwells."

1. Bangla sādhānā, which refers to striving in general, but among Bāuls directly implies a spiritual context or path
2. Bng. siddhi, often used in a yogic context to refer to abilities or esoteric powers obtained by means of ritual practice
3. The use of the Bengali pronoun āmi (first person singular, nominative case) is consciously employed throughout the song, creating several plays on words and phrases. I have thus kept to the original pattern rather than substituting "self," but the essential meaning is virtually the same.
4. lit. the Vedas, often used in Lalan songs as an epithet for religious scripture in general
5. Mansur al-Hallaj (859-922) is a famous Persian Sufi who was allegedly executed for declaring, "I am the Truth." (Ar. Ānā al-Haqq) which is one of the traditional 99 names reserved for Allah, or God
6. Bng. Sai, derived from Sanskrit svāmi—"master, lord;" among Bāuls nearly always used as a title for one's inner divinity.
7. Bng. ārā, a common container, pot or vessel
8. Persian ezni and eznillah—"fire" and "fire of God"
9. In Hallaj’s work Kitāb at-tawāsīn there is a contrast made between two different models of 'I' that claim to be the Truth—that of Pharaoh/Ilblis/Satan and that of the loving mystic; "the 'I' of the Egyptian ruler was an expression of infidelity but that of Hallaj expressed divine grace" (Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam, 66).
10. Bng. murīd—"murshid" from the Arabic word for "guide" (along the Sufi path)—in Lalon’s songs usually synonymous with "Guru;" also often includes the metaphorical sense of one’s inner guide or supreme spirit.

[English translation by Keith E. Cantú, with assistance from Bidhan Fakir, Umayon Sadhu, Prof. Nandini Abedin, Dr. Terri DeYoung and the research of the late Dr. Carol Salomon]
বলরে সেই মনের মানুষ কোনজনা
ফকিল লালন শাহ
(Fakir Lālan Shāh)

বলরে সেই মনের মানুষ কোনজনা।
মা করে পতি ভজনা
মাওলা তারে বলে মা॥

Oh do tell, which person is this Man of the Heart?
"Ma" adores him as a husband
The Black Father¹ calls her "Ma."²

কেবা আদ্য কেবা সাদ্য
কার প্রেমেতে হয়ে বাখ্য
কে পাঠালো পরম তত্তু
বেদে নাই যায় ঠিকানা॥

Who is Primary³, Who is Worthy
In whose love one compelled will be
Who imparts the supreme reality⁴
That in scripture⁵ has no abode.

একেতে দুই হলো যখন
ফুল ছারা হয় ফলের গঠন
আবার তারে করে মিলন
সৃষ্টি করবে মনজনা॥

When the two become as one
Absent blooms take the form of fruit
And these, after coalescing
Create the personal heart⁶.
In the Station of Nothingness⁷ there is this Light⁸:
The First Mother⁹, the Jeweler¹⁰ of Forms
Lalan says: "I submit humbly
To my unraveled destiny."

1. Bangla mālā, from Arabic mawlana—patron, protector; an epithet for Allah popular among some Sufi groups, yet linked to Kālā, the black destroyer: "Kālā conceals in himself the name of Maulā [God] himself. The sky is black, black is earth and so are air and water. The moon is black, the sun is black and so is Maulā Rabbānī" (Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, 197).

2. This whole stanza presents translation difficulty due to specific gender pronouns in English and purposeful ambiguity in Lalan’s lyrics. Both "him" and "her" would refer to the "Man of the Heart," of which "Man" here is translated from Bng. mātā which can mean human (of any gender) yet refers to a specific being or beings. The word used for "heart" is man, from Sanskrit manas—a relatively common word in which refers to both the mind and emotions, yet is physically placed in the heart rather than the head; deeper symbolic meanings can of course be derived in either the Sufi or Tantric context.

3. Bng. ādyā (from Skt.)—primordial, primary, pertaining to the source

4. Bng. param tattva (from Skt.)—the macrocosmic reality, or macrocosmic emanation (cf. the relationship between jīvātma and paramātma, individual spirit and supreme spirit)

5. lit. the Vedas, often used in Lalan songs as an epithet for religious scripture in general

6. Bng. manjānā, often used in Lalan songs as an epithet for religious scripture in general

7. Bng. lā mokām—Ar. lā maqām or lāḥūt, one of the five mystic "stations" (Ar. nāsūt) in Sufi mysticism; in Baul syncretism linked to the crown or sahārārcakra (cf. Salomon, Carol. "The Cosmogonic Riddles of Lalan Fakir," 272)

8. Bng. nūrī (from Ar. nūr), possibly relating to a feminine conception of the Supreme in semen, see note 10. (cf. Ibid., 272, 283)

9. Bng. mātā, also a verb that means "to be absorbed in madness or enthusiasm"—in another popular song Lalan characterizes the lā maqām or sahārārcakra as an attic in which "a madman who is the Lord sits" (Salomon, Carol. "Baul Songs," 196) which lends credence to this dual-interpretation.

10. Bng. jahārī, also a derivation of Arabic zahrā, "luminous"; al-zahrā is the surname of Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima which symbolically refers to the ākki in menstrual blood (cf. Salomon, Carol. "The Cosmogonic Riddles", 283.)

[English translation by Keith E. Cantú, with assistance from Bidhan Fakir, Umayon Sadhu, Prof. Nandini Abedin and the research of the late Dr. Carol Salomon]