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Ritual and performance art of a non-mainstream gender group[[1]](#footnote-1)

This case presents an example of an ICH element as an artistic expression that is performed exclusively by a non-mainstream gender group. This group is otherwise not fully accepted in the society, but which in the context of this practice has gained an accepted status in society and a possibility to earn a living. The group in question is composed of people of ambiguous gender, in most cases men who have undergone ritual gender re-assignment although a few have been born with male [intersex](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intersex) variations, and so they represent a potentially marginalized community in India. However, at the same time, they are invested by Hindu mythology, ritual and art with a special social status which helps to counteract this marginalization. The gender re-assignment operation (in which all or part of the male genitals are removed) forms the central ceremony of their community life and is what defines them as a group. In this ritual, after receiving sanction from the Mother Goddess of religious mythology, a group member known as the ‘midwife’ performs the operation. After the operation, the newly initiated group member is given a special diet and placed in seclusion in a way which emulates traditionally women-only rituals associated with a woman who has just given birth. Following a forty-day period of isolation, s/he is dressed as a bride and taken in procession to a body of water where a ritual involving symbolism relating to fertility, marriage and childbirth is conducted and s/he becomes a full member of the group. At this time, s/he is invested with the power of the mother goddess, having completed her/his transformation from an impotent male to a potent trans-gender ‘woman’.

An important aspect of this cultural tradition and its related performing art is that the power of the combined male-female ‘hermaphrodite’ is a common and significant theme in religious tradition: One of the most popular manifestations of a central deity is as a half-man/half-woman figure which represents the deity when he is united with his female creative power. Similarly, in one epic poem a leading protagonist lives for a year as a eunuch while, in another, the members of this trans-gender community showed such devotion to [the](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rama) main protagonist during his 14-year exile that he granted them the privilege of conferring blessings on people during auspicious occasions. This is the origin of their specific performing art in which they sing, dance, and give blessings, enjoying this privilege of performing at central points in the life-cycle related to reproduction―childbirth and marriage―and much of their expressive culture employs fertility symbolism being viewed as vehicles of the mother goddess's creative power. Through these performances and their ritual role, they earn their living and are accorded a degree of status in society. Their performances are burlesques of female behaviour and much of their comedy derives from the lack of harmony between their outrageous behaviour and that of ordinary women who are restrained by norms of propriety: They use coarse speech and gestures and make sexual innuendos, teasing the male children present and also making fun of various family members and family relationships. In one celebrated traditional scene, the part of a pregnant woman is acted out and s/he comments on the difficulties encountered at each stage of the pregnancy.

1. . Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, second edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999). See also: Nita Bhalla with Suchitra Mohanty and Sunil Kataria ‘Supreme Court recognises transgenders as third gender in landmark ruling,’ Times of India, 15 April 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)