Book Review

City of Mirrors: Songs of Lālan Sāi, text, translation and commentary by Carol Salomon, edited by Keith E. Cantú and Saymon Zakaria. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xxxiv + 611 pp., £117.50 (hb). ISBN 9780190680220.

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An enlightened composer, celebrated as a folk poet, a philosopher, a ‘Baul emperor’ and a spiritual teacher, Lālan Sāi—also signed as Lālan Fakir or Darbeś Lālan, in his colophones (*bhaṇitā*)—lived in the nineteenth century, in the discreet reality of nonconformist religious lineages in rural Bengal. In the course of the twentieth century, intellectual craftworkers of cultural nationalism transformed him into a Bengali cultural icon. His songs, produced, consumed and distributed in different media, became a symbol of egalitarianism. They started being widely commodified in the spheres of folklore and intangible cultural heritage. And yet, up to present day, Lālan is revered by esoteric renunciates and practitioners from both sides of the India–Bangladesh borders. *City of Mirrors* is so far the most important publication dedicated to the poetry of Lālan Sāi in the international scholarly arena.

This book is based on the unpublished, unpolished and mostly handwritten work of Professor Carol Salomon, carefully edited and sensitively compiled during many years, after her tragic and untimely demise. Carol Salomon was an expert in Bengali language, literature, and religious traditions, who worked with dedication to the study of the Lālan corpus combining printed sources, various archives, hand-written manuscripts, and field-work engagements with singers and practitioners. She left us with an incredible amount of drafts, notes and translations related to a large selection of songs, that she identified as the most authentic core of Lālan’s lyrics. This invaluable stock of unpublished material would have remained hidden from the interest of contemporary scholars if it was not for the immense editorial work carried on by Keith Cantú and Saymon Zakaria. The editors have reconstructed Carol Salomon’s work with sensitivity, sawing together the interconnected parts of her research, and supplementing her hand-written manuscripts and annotations with other useful tools for the readers.

The book starts with a preface—followed by its Bengali translation—written by the scholar's husband, Richard Salomon, whose input was instrumental in ascertaining that each editorial choice pointed in the direction that Carol Salomon would have liked to see for her work. An introduction by Jeanne Openshaw, who authored several books and articles on Bauls, contextualizes Lālan Sāi's role in the broader history of the Baul tradition. The core of the book contains 137 songs of Lālan Fakir, presented in Bengali script, and in Roman transliteration, allowing scholars of other or older Indic languages to enjoy the original. The songs are followed by Carol Salomon's English translation, of incomparable rigor and beauty. The lyrics are followed by an explanatory summary of the themes discussed in the songs, their stratified and multiple meanings, according to Carol Salomon's field-work notes and inter-textual research. Finally, the book contains a useful glossary of technical terms, and an index that helps to browse the voluminous amount of songs and annotations by searching for single key terms and concepts.

The book enormously benefited from the personal, professional and ethnographic experience of the editors within the Fakiri traditions of Bangladesh. When missing original versions of a translated song, the editors have carefully retraced the Bengali lyrics by relying upon other edited or printed sources, hand in hand with existing hand-written and oral versions, in constant dialogue with living lineage holders, sādhus and practitioners. In this way, the editorial work has truly followed the spirit and the methodology of Carol Salomon's own research on Lālan, a research constantly preoccupied of going beyond the illusionary existence of a single, original text, giving justice to overlapping and coexisting versions, cutting through the oral/literary divide, and incorporating the perspectives of local interpreters, gurus and performers. In this radical perspective, songs are far from being studied as a crystallized piece of literature, but rather emerge as an ever-changing and lively process, negotiated in an open-ended dialogue which involved performers, practitioners, audiences and also scholars. Choosing to incorporate pictures of Carol Salomon's hand-written songs of Lālan Fakir from her notebooks, the editors not only gave us a glimpse of the personal life of a superb scholar, but also placed her in such continuum, as part of the uninterrupted tradition of listening, copying, learning, and reflecting upon Lālan's songs, across and beyond South Asian borders.

Apart from representing an unprecedented work for students and scholars interested in Lālan Fakir, in Baul studies, and in South Asian literatures, this book can be extremely useful also for those interested in discussions on Sufism, Yoga, Tantra, anthropology and ethnomusicology of South Asia. Lālan's verses represent a blending of Islamic esoteric ideas, Śākta elements and Vaiṣṇava vocabularies, embroidered together in the upside-down language of *sahaja*. His enigmatic images and metaphorical songs, carefully annotated by Carol Salomon, constitute a precious primary source to explore the social, cultural and religious history of South Asia, particularly in regard

to issues of syncretic cosmology, psychophysical practices, and gender dynamics. In conclusion, *City of Mirrors* offers to the Bengali as well as to the international readership a rigorous work on Lālan Sāi without compromising the tasteful *rasa* of his poetry.

Just dive
Into the Ocean of the Heart and you'll see.
You can learn the deepest secrets.

The original city
Is an extraordinary place,
Built with astounding skill.
There's no water in the lakes,
But the land is flooded.
Would you believe such strange business
If you just heard about it?

At the slippery quay of the Trivenī
Waves surge without wind.
The dumb speak, the deaf hear,
And a half pice, texted on a touchstone,
Proves to be gold.

This story is not fit to be told.
The mother of the world floats on the sea.
Lālan says, The father
Is in her belly,
And when he is born,
He drinks his wife's milk.

(p. 317)