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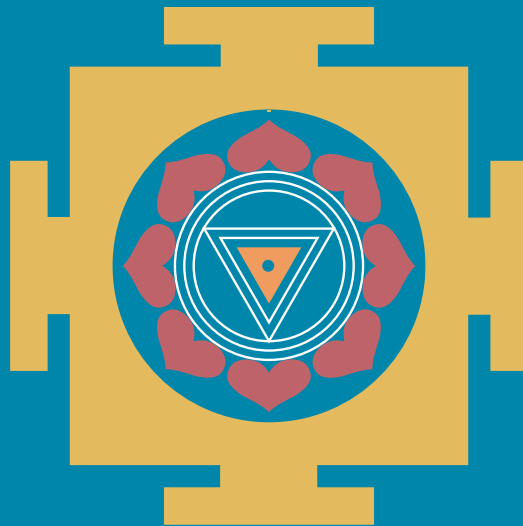
*The first duty of man is to understand
his own nature and the basic elements of his being,
which he must fulfill to the best of his ability.*

ALAIN DANIELLOU

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Cahiers de la Fondation

INDIALOGUES 13
WINTER SOLSTICE



FINE
India-Europe Foundation
for New Dialogues

INTELLECTUAL
DIALOGUE



Jacques Cloarec

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EDITORIAL



Jacques Cloarec
FIND HONORARY PRESIDENT



Dear Readers and Friends of FIND,

In this new year 2018 that has already begun, in looking back on the achievements of last twelve months, of which I am very proud, I wish to tell you about the new and very promising orientations at the Foundation.

It is an undeniable fact that we have already entered the so-called “virtual age” with its radical progress in information technology. This is from many points of view a challenge to cultural activities such as publishing books and other kinds of written communication. Our efforts in 2016 with the restructuring of FIND’s website were a first clear step in the direction of adopting the necessary virtual means to get our ideas across to our Readers. In 2017, it was the turn of Alain Daniélou’s work which, according to the challenges of our time, must not only be available as paper volumes, but also in e-book format. The publication of ten e-books last year is a very important achievement, since it gives readers easy access to Daniélou’s thought. There are of course other titles coming up in 2018 to be added to the e-book list.

Another achievement was the presentation of Riccardo Biadene’s documentary *Alain Daniélou: the way to the labyrinth* (in French, English and Italian, as well as in a cinema and TV format of 1 hour 20 minutes

and 50 minutes respectively), which was presented at various venues during 2017, receiving positive comments and generating an interest not only in the work but also in the figure and person of Alain Daniélou. In speaking of Artistic Dialogue, the Summer Mela 2017 hosted prestigious Indian artists such as Shantala Shivalingappa, Bahaudin Dagar, Pelva Naik and Sudarshan Chana as well as Krishna Mohan Bhatt, Sougata Roy Chowdhury and Nihar Metha. The variety of dance and music styles presented in Rome and Zagorolo bears witness of the diversity of the Indian cultural heritage and its importance for the West.

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**I am increasingly convinced that
 Alain Daniélou's heritage is a
desideratum for our times.**

Consolidation of the Intellectual Dialogue platform through the projects carried out in 2017 also evidences a renaissance of Alain Daniélou's spirit. Apart from our consolidation of a very clearly delimited and well-structured Grant Programme, with sound conditions and objectives, with a very committed follow-up of project developments by Adrián Navigante and an integration of our grantees' achievements with the main activities of FIND Intellectual Dialogue, we should mention the paths opened to a

recognition of Alain Daniélou's work and vision of India in different milieus, varying from cultural foundations like the Association Recherches Mimétiques in Paris and legendary institutions like the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, to academic activities in collaboration with the Universities of Heidelberg and Würzburg and our already-established cooperation with the chair of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau.

Despite financial restraints to our budget, we continue to work with maximum enthusiasm and commitment in transmitting the heritage of Alain Daniélou: critical thinking regarding socially accepted norms, a taste for diversity in life, together with a deconstruction of prejudices, a humble attempt to understand the world in its complexity and a conscious commitment to make this world a better place. I am increasingly convinced that Alain Daniélou's heritage is a *desideratum* for our times. FIND is therefore very grateful to Readers and Friends for their support of the Foundation and financial assistance for certain projects that cannot be carried out at present, such as research scholarships and specific projects in each domain, both artistic and intellectual.

With my best wishes for the New Year,

Jacques Cloarec

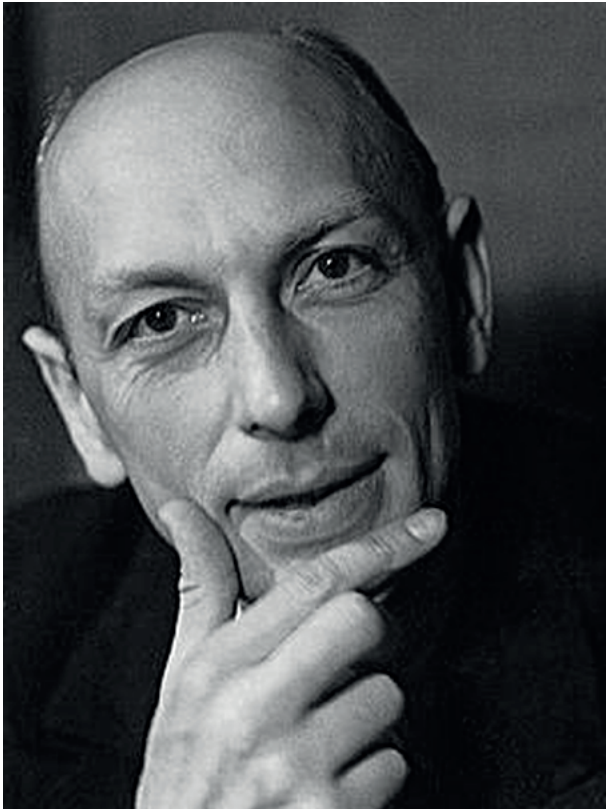
EROS COUNTERPOINTED: HENRI MICHAUX'S VISION OF COSMIC VOLUPTUOUSNESS AND ALAIN DANIÉLOU'S DIVINIZATION OF EROTICISM



Adrián Navigante
FIND RESEARCH AND
INTELLECTUAL DIALOGUE



Michaux's vision of voluptuousness in his writings about his mescaline experience presents various features pointing to a cosmic dimension of Eros. This vision is not only the result of a subjective experience of altered states of consciousness, but also an open door to consider the possibility of an immediate access to a trans-personal élan vital with manifold articulations. Adrián Navigante relates part of the background and the content of Michaux's experience to Alain Daniélou's conception of divinized eroticism, exposing transversal similarities and reflecting on some dichotomic aspects.



Henri Michaux

SOURCE: [TINYURL.COM/Y9UOE998](https://tinyurl.com/y9uoe998)

The Belgian poet Henri Michaux (1899-1984) is known mostly for his ‘psychedelic experience’ covering the period between 1954 and 1966. Many readers erroneously connect his experimentation with mescaline and other psychotropic substances with the kind of crazy and uncontrolled drug adventure typical of the American Beat Generation (Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg), but only a few have delved into the nuanced depth of the poetical elaboration related to that experience.

In the twelve years of coping with the relationship between drugs and madness, Michaux kept a thorough record of his sessions, painted his visions and elaborated poetry and prose with an eye to shedding light on the never-fully-understood realm of mental activity. His work is a very interesting observation and first-hand experience of what in Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* appears as *citta-vṛtti*, that is, “fluctuations of the mind” or “turmoil of consciousness”. Whereas in the classical philosophy of yoga the word *vṛtti* has a negative connotation – since it is related to a state of whirl, hence confusion and fragmentation, and needs ‘suppression’ [*nirodah*] –, Michaux thinks, on the contrary, that the acceleration of the mind produced by mescaline necessarily leads to an instance of emptiness, since the flow of consciousness, when rightly stimulated and exacerbated, dissolves all forms.

Emptiness in the works of Michaux has an ambivalent character, since it can either stimulate spiritual progression or alienate the mind in a turmoil of dissolved forms. But the key references in his experience – especially those depicting a sort of transit from the experience of the individual to a transpersonal domain – do not necessarily revolve around the semantic field of ‘emptiness’. Michaux speaks of ‘plenitude’, ‘intensity’, ‘ecstasy’ and even ‘voluptuousness’, he resorts to Hindu deities and puts an end even to the literary game of continuity in order to embrace the indisputable truth of direct (mystical) experience when

it comes to describing his most impressive vision: that of an unending diversity of gods, in his fifth experience of *L'infini turbulent*.

The scope of Michaux's experience is very broad and does not follow the reductive line of classical yoga. It is true that there is a spiritual experience related to the 'doors of perception', cast wide open through meso-line consumption (he had access to visions the character of which goes far beyond any perceptive or cognitive insight), but within the context of his 'psychedelic sessions', his spirituality takes the form of an amplification rather than a reduction or a restriction regarding normal worldly parameters. Within the framework of Hindu spirituality, this poet would be very close to the Tantric experience

Alain Daniélou's conception of eroticism shows us the difference between the scope of Michaux's poetry (whose source is always trans-personal) and the limits of the poet himself.

he himself quotes towards the end of his account, that of the *Kulārṇavatantra*: "he [the Tantric *vir*] takes pleasure in all instances of delight, but no evil can besmirch him"¹.

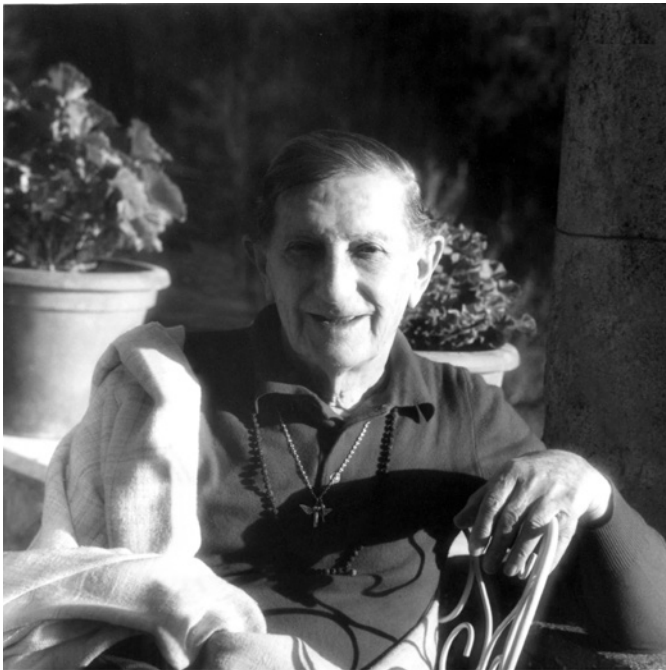
Michaux's vision of an unending plurality and diversity of the divine described in the fifth experience of *L'infini turbulent* is necessarily related to eroticism. He speaks of an "erotic trance" and "non-human delectation"². The immediate external context of those experiences is related to Hindu religious poetry and erotic sculpture³. It is for this reason that, even if his spiritual quest may be different from that of Alain Daniélou (we shall see why in due course), the conception of eroticism stemming from the latter may be useful the better to understand the scope of the poet's experience, his limitations and ambiguities – mostly due to his modern Western and Christian education. Alain Daniélou's conception of eroticism shows us the difference between the scope of Michaux's poetry (whose source is always trans-personal) and the limits of the poet himself. Precisely in the non-identity of 'poetry' and 'poet' (that is, the tension between expansion of scope and fixation of limits) lies the value of a form that touches infinity and does not claim any right to it, letting the magic of the cosmos flow in the stroke of a pen.

Alain Daniélou's 'divinized eroticism': Hindu poetry of life beyond moral prescriptions

Alain Daniélou's lesson in eroticism is an affirmation of Life beyond the narrow scope of ego-centred experience. Cosmologically viewed, eroticism begins when the tension that resulted in the creation of the universe polarises itself and seeks to restore the union that existed prior to creation. *Eros* presupposes a dually configured substratum of manifestation working on the very texture of phenomenal diversity. Resorting to classical Hindu texts like *Chāndogya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*⁴, Daniélou shows us that polarisation is the first tendency leading to the manifested world, crystallizing first as orientation (space) and movement (time), then as directed movement introducing the dimension of duration and contributing to the reciprocal complex of matter and sensation, which illustrates the living inter-dependency of subject and object⁵. Daniélou calls this cosmo-logic of creation "the divine", and adds that it is manifested "in every pro-creation, in every creation, in every

voluptuousness”⁶.

The implications of the former sentence are manifold. In the first place, pro-creation (something that for many people represents the body as opposed to the soul) also belongs to the divine order of things, both because it is the manifestation of a power that goes beyond the will and desire of individuals, and because every pro-creation takes place within specific rhythmic patterns and cycles. Secondly, creation (and here we should think of artistic works) reproduces on the level of human experience what is radically external to the boundaries of everyday consciousness – but it does not alter the logic of cosmic patterns. Thirdly, voluptuousness appears as the immediate manifestation of divine power in the field of human experience and is therefore not at all foredoomed to the egotistic frustrations and destructive excesses that many spiritual trends ceaselessly affirm. If “the union of sexes is the expression of the nature of being”⁷, there is something mysterious, magical and incomprehensible in the very erotic act, something that has nothing to do with possessiveness, debauchery and perdition, but rather with an experienced wisdom related to cosmic patterns.



Alain Daniélou - Zagarolo
PHOTO: JACQUES CLOAREC

According to Daniélou, living Nature [*prakṛti*, *mahāśakti*, *natura naturans et naturala*] reproduces the rhythm of being, and eroticism can be the human mirror of that rhythm if human consciousness expands itself beyond its ego-centred limits. While the cosmogonic act is related to the desire of breaking primordial unity⁸, the erotic act implies the reverse process, through which the elements of the cosmic Being are re-united in the most sublime sacrificial act. In the accomplishment of that act (traditionally framed in a ritual), the forces of creation are experienced both in an act of introspection and by means of devotional participation in the mystery of reciprocation. From this perspective, voluptuousness has little to do with the type of sexual excesses usually related to human destructiveness⁹. It is, on the contrary, an active participation in the mystery and beauty of a dynamic trans-personal

pattern that is the source of every manifestation of life.

With his Tantric creativity and his unprejudiced knowledge of Hindu tradition, Alain Daniélou challenges the pitfalls of a culture based on manifold strategies of suppression regarding the power of *eros*: condemnation of the body, denigration of matter, separation of force from every material aspect and amalgamation of form with pure spirit. These are features that distinguish Western mainstream culture (dominated by a special type of repressive morality) from other religious and cultural conceptions – including subversive currents in the Christian tradition attempting a sacred restitution of matter (and therefore sensuality as divine power).

To what extent does Henri Michaux share Daniélou's expanded vision of eroticism and what consequences does he draw from immediate contact with the abyssal roots of those forces?

Michaux's erotic vision of the Infinite

Throughout the whole of his mescaline experience, Michaux insists on the his on-going struggle with the drug in order to access another type and another dimension of knowledge. After the fashion of Alain Daniélou, Michaux does not want to *change* but rather to *understand* reality, both in its external and in internal forms. These two poles come closer when human consciousness is 'altered' – that is, expanded and straightened – by psychotropic substances, producing a fantastic reciprocation of "visions and fluidity"¹⁰ as if a coalescence of subject and object were possible. Why should the form of this experience be a 'struggle'? To reach a vision of coherent totality, a beatific insight into the dynamics of the divine or even a moment of delight [*jouissance*] challenging human finitude, the poet must go through the most violent fragmentation, atomization and dissolution of consciousness, a true *descensus ad inferos*, an initiation into the realm of turbulent infinity. For Michaux, this is always an ambivalent experience, in which revelations flow through the gaps of one's own being and shake the very structure of the mind that we associate with 'sanity'; an experience in which the realm of the finite, usually seen as a prison by spiritual seekers, suddenly appears as a desirable oasis, preventing the atrocities of a "the Great Whirl [*le Grand Tourbillon*]"¹¹.

After the fashion of Alain Daniélou, Michaux does not want to *change* but rather to *understand* reality, both in its external and in internal forms.

In following the whole of Michaux's psychedelic phase, that is, seven years of experience from 1954 to 1962 and twelve years of literary elaboration from 1954 to 1966, we notice a progression in his relationship with mescaline. In his first book, *Misérable Miracle* (1956), Michaux is overwhelmed, the madness induced is too strong and the artificial nature

of the paradise is a feature of an infernal reversal that sometimes dominates the scene of experimentation altogether. From *L'infini turbulent* (1957) to *Paix dans les brisements* (1959) and *Connaissance par les gouffres* (1961), there is a clear progression: the experience becomes less dramatic (though not less strong), and there are semantic signs of an adaptation of the experimental subject to the effects of the substance (already in the titles of the works:

“peace” and “knowledge”, even fragmentary and somehow threatened, replace the ambivalent opposition “misery-miracle” and the references to an almost unbearable “turbulence” of being). Balance is gained through confidence and familiarity¹².

Already in his second book of the mescaline period, *L'infini turbulent*, the reader encounters a sort of beatific vision that needs to be recalled before dealing with the experience of cosmic eroticism, not only because it is a clear sign of the special place that Indian religion and culture have in the author's literary production, but mainly because the erotic vision could be seen as a complement and expansion to the first vision of the divine. Michaux's account of this irruption of the divine into the world of human existence has no parallel in the whole of his production, and it is so unflinchingly affirmed that it generated negative responses on the part of literary critics like Maurice Blanchot, who was disappointed to see the open-endedness of literary production totally frustrated by an article of faith. Michaux writes: “the incredible, what I had yearned for since my childhood, what I had utterly excluded as impossible to experience, the unheard-of, the inaccessible, the excessively beautiful, the sublime always forbidden for me, finally took place. *I saw millions of gods*”¹³. Of course, for Michaux this is no declaration of faith, but rather an immediate, concrete and experiential fact, as he explicitly avows: “But somebody could object the following: after all, didn't you just believe what you saw? To which I would say: why would I just believe? *They were just there*”¹⁴. The problem appears when the reader is supposed to follow him: either one must have gone through that experience or just take it for a metaphysical *nec plus ultra*¹⁵. Does everything come to a standstill with this account? We shouldn't think so. Michaux experiences the infinite in the modality of multiplicity: millions of gods. His account tells us something about his fascination with Hindu Polytheism with its endless perspectives reproducing themselves unceasingly and taking divine form every instant. It seems that for Michaux the one and the many go hand-in-hand with each other when the many appear transfigured and the one is not fixed in a homogeneous feature of transcendence. For Michaux one and many are closely and essentially connected; the problem is duality: mind and matter, soul and body, good and evil and other drastic divisions. This is the product of a delimitation exercised by a limited state of consciousness. What happens when the mind goes beyond those limitations?

In the first part of *L'infini turbulent*, Michaux distinguishes three modes of the infinite: pure, demonic or diabolical, and insane. In his mescaline period, he became acquainted with all three of them. Michaux's vision of millions of gods corresponds to the first mode of the infinite. In his first book on mescaline, *Misérable Miracle*, he retells an overdose experience, a fit of induced insanity from which he returns quite traumatised¹⁶. The reader has to wait for the erotic vision in order to be introduced to the demonic infinite. Demonic or diabolical? That is the key question. Michaux is always very precise with the terms he uses, but in this case there is a semantic oscillation, as if he could not decide whether there is a difference or not. The difference between ‘demonic’ and ‘satanic’ is very well explained by Paul Tillich in his essay *Das Dämonische* (1926), in which he states that demonic power is creative and produces form¹⁷, whereas satanic or diabolical power destroys every form and frustrates every attempt to create form¹⁸. From this perspective, Michaux's erotic vision should be classed as ‘demonic’, in the first place because it is all about something ‘visible’, something that reveals itself to the experimenting subject: “I haven't yet been able to understand, what? The fact that is it not the vision that counts, but the trance that betrays, arouses

me and grows, grows, grows and pushes me and precipitates me into utter enjoyment”¹⁹. This revelation (which has a form corresponding to Michaux’s vision) does not entail features of any other normal ‘look’, but is rather internal, a vision ‘from within’ [*sub specie interioritatis*] that nevertheless implies an absence of clear boundaries between inner and outer realms: “The whole world seems to experience an extraordinary pleasure [...] The earth and the waters and the mounts, also the trees offer an extravagant outlay in the tortions of lasciviousness”²⁰. If Georges Bataille affirmed that eroticism is a distinctively human phenomenon (as opposed to procreation)²¹, Michaux’s vision de-centres the human aspect and expands eroticism to natural phenomena and even artificial objects. In fact, artefacts were Michaux’s neutral refuge when he was overwhelmed by the illumination of mescaline, but the erotic revelation does not leave anything out. He cannot trust the neutrality of anything in the universe, because all forms are animated by the power of an unleashed *eros* that resembles an infinite dislocation and an earthquake²². After all, eroticism is not just part of the Infinite caught by the poetic and psychedelic vision; it is simply the other name of the infinite.

Negative and positive aspects of Eros

If we consider Michaux’s experience of cosmic *eros* in his mescaline experience, one of the most conspicuous aspects is its ambivalent character. He speaks, for example, of a “descent into the delights of indecency”, a “huge exhibition of defilement”, “an impure or *antipure* absolute” and “grotesque rhythms [...] engaged [...] in sexophobia”²³. The defiling aspect is associated with profanity, which seems to be the opposite of Daniélou’s sacralisation of eroticism. Daniélou emphasizes

Daniélou emphasizes the cohesive and unifying power of *kāma* as well as its liberating intensity, whereas Michaux points to the aspect of dissolution contained in the very act of erotic power on the level of the individual.

the cohesive and unifying power of *kāma* as well as its liberating intensity, whereas Michaux points to the aspect of dissolution contained in the very effect of erotic power on the level of the individual: “an impossible rhythm [...]. Dissolution! Dissolution! That is where I find myself within this trance, and it is impossible to escape: exultation through general derangement”²⁴.

Daniélou, on the contrary, takes a broader point of view: “Erotic realisation is an unavoidable need of human balance [...]. Human beings have to fulfil their desires, and only after can they free themselves from everything they desire, love, accomplish, in order to attain the real freedom of non-action, and afterwards of non-being”²⁵. This point of view regards not only the cosmic roots of desire but also the social function of its fulfilment and the framework in which that is possible. But Michaux’s point of view is not just that of an individual overwhelmed by an uncontrollable cosmic force. It is also an experiential ascertainment of a force that is impossible to explain and very difficult to control when experienced in its fullness. If an individual is saturated by that force, he enters an “infernal sphere”²⁶, but there is no sadism or cruelty there. Michaux makes it clear that what characterizes that experience is “a general, universal impurity, exclusively sensual [...], sensuality without admixture and universally overflowing”²⁷.

There seems to be two reasons for Michaux's ambivalent description of the cosmic *eros*. The first one is the inevitable reaction of the individual experiencing it first-hand, which is the case of his erotic vision: he is overwhelmed, and there is not only fascination with that but also fear and even a sense of awe. The second is the effect of the erotic power: it dissolves in order to unite, it reduces solid matter to ashes and burns the distinctive traits of a person. Behind this point of view it is clear that although India was important for Michaux, the spiritual model he used for his poetry has Christian roots and therefore rejects the symmetrical association of the erotic with the divine²⁸. His quotation of *Kulārṇavatantra* toward the end of *L'infini turbulent* shows where his limitations as poet (and therefore as a human being) lie. The "satanic trial" of his erotic vision did not permit him to say the same words as the Tantric adept of that text: "He indulges in all instances of delight, but he is not besmirched by evil"²⁹. This means that Michaux was fully affected by the experience, hence he could not assume the perspective of a detached observer – this would imply a dose of asceticism or indifference toward the erotic that he was not prepared to assume. The fundamental question is whether the problem lies in the opposition 'ascetic-erotic'. In *L'érotisme divinisé*, Alain Daniélou traces a continuity between the erotic and the ascetic: since asceticism is a negation of life, one should embrace it after ruling out all other paths of mundane and/or spiritual self-realization – even the identification with the gods, because the Indian gods also belong to the sphere of *kāma*. Behind Michaux's visionary attempt, there is a man who wants to come closer to a type of spiritual model based on the opposition between right and wrong, good and evil, pure and impure, etc. Daniélou's search for an erotic cosmology implies, on the contrary, a return to old pre-Christian values and modes of existence that, in his view, are a potential solution to many problems of Western civilization today. It suffices to mention some features of Shaivism that Daniélou himself emphasized: respect of all forms of life in nature, de-construction of the place of human beings in the cosmos, acceptance of natural patterns and cycles with an eye to learning one's own position within that field, and a will to learn and share (as opposed to power and greed). This philosophy can be seen as a complement to Michaux's intuitions, on condition that the visionary poet elaborates on his hermeneutical tools and assumptions in order to counter-balance the dark aspects of immediate saturation in cosmic eroticism through the light shed by Daniélou on the same subject. ❖

1 Apud Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent*, in: *Œuvres Complètes II*, p. 877.

2 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem*, pp. 866-867,

3 He explicitly mentions a reading of "Hindu religious poems" together with "Buddha's life". Shortly after that he refers to "the images of the Hindu pantheon", both male and female (cf. Michaux, *Ibidem*, p. 864).

4 Cf. his Upaniṣadic quotations in: Alain Daniélou, *L'érotisme divinisé*, pp. 51-53.

5 Cf. Alain Daniélou, *L'érotisme divinisé*, p. 19.

6 Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*, p. 52.

7 Alain Daniélou, *Ibidem*.

8 Cf. *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*, 3.11.8.4: *prajāpatir akāmayata prajā sṛjeyeti sa tapo 'tapyata* [Prajāpati

desired: may I become many].

9 When sexuality is denounced as destructive, a specific (and isolated) aspect is emphasized, which points in the opposite direction, as the integrative effect of forces that Daniélou describes with the help of Hindu mythology and cosmology. Destructiveness implies lack of proportion and lack of rhythmical patterns, hence an utter isolation of human desire from the rest of the cosmic tissue of forces, or perhaps more precisely a betrayal of one's own place in the cosmos. As opposed to this view, Daniélou always emphasizes the aspect of restitution, the perception of wholeness and the expansive element of eroticism due to its immediate connection with divine (expansive and integrative) and not purely human (restrictive and possessive) patterns.

10 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem*, p. 808.

11 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 813.

12 In *L'infini turbulent*, Michaux speaks of the Buddhist dispositions of *Bardo Tödol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) as strategies to appease the mescaline effects and “make an ally out of the agitator”. He also prescribes “confidence in approaching the Infinite” (Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 814).

13 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 852.

14 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 853.

15 The gods are an ultimate point of transfiguration, without which the subject experiences a permanent acceleration through which time becomes devoid of all spatialization and every objective content. As he himself writes: “Lack of gods: proliferation and time” (Henri Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, in: *OC II*, p. 678).

16 Cf. Henri Michaux, *Misérable miracle*, V: l'expérience de la folie, in: *OC II*, pp. 723-758.

17 Cf. Paul Tillich, Das Dämonische, in: *Der Widerstreit von Raum und Zeit, Gesammelte Werke VI*, Stuttgart 1963, p. 43.

18 This is the reason why Tillich states that the satanic has no existence in itself, since everything that exists must be able to reach a form (cf. Paul Tillich, *Ibidem.*, p. 45).

19 Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent, OC II*, p. 866.

20 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 867.

21 Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme*, in : *Œuvres complètes X*, Paris 1987, p. 17.

22 Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent, OC II*, and also p. 869.

23 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 869.

24 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 871.v

25 Alain Daniélou, *L'érotisme divinisé*, p. 166. But even from the perspective of individual erotic experience, Daniélou is very close to a harmonious plenitude, as one can see in his rather mystical account of his first sexual encounter: “Donald was a baseball player, a twenty-year colossus two metres high. One evening, he came into my room and took me in his arms without asking me for permission. All of a sudden, everything was filled with light, an incredible voluptuousness invaded my whole body. I muttered to myself: ‘there must be a God, otherwise this bliss would not be possible’” (Alain Daniélou, *Le Chemin du Labyrinthe*, Paris 1981, p. 73).

26 Henri Michaux, *L'infini turbulent, OC II*, p. 873.

27 Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 869.

28 To account for it, it suffices to read Michaux's statement that in eroticism “the diabolic operation exists” (Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 871), which does not prevent him from saying “I am not any longer embarrassed, nor do I feel ashamed” (Henry Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 870).

29 Apud Henri Michaux, *Ibidem.*, p. 877.



BETTINA BÄUMER AT THE LABYRINTH



INTERVIEW: ADRIÁN NAVIGANTE
PHOTOS: SARAH EICHNER

On the occasion of FIND's 2017 Forum on "Normativity and the Margins: The Question of Tantra", the eminent Indologist Bettina Bäumer (one of the highest authorities on Kaśmir Śaivism in the West and also a spiritual figure of our times) visited the Labyrinth and participated in the workshop organized by Adrián Navigante (FIND Intellectual Dialogue) and Andrea Acri (FIND's grantee and maître de conference in Tantric Studies at the École Pratique de Hautes Études), providing a great opportunity for a long discussion of her life and work, of which the highlights are published here in the form of a dossier.

and the presence of Nature. Do you feel something similar here?

A | I do feel the special spiritual power of the earth around Rome and maybe especially at Zagarolo, although I cannot really compare. The place created by Alain Daniélou has a great aesthetic quality and a lot of potential for cultural and intellectual dialogue between India and Europe. About the spiritual quality I cannot say anything, the time was too short and we were too busy to meditate!

Q | When we look back on your life-experience, you seem to have been deeply influenced by both the Western and Indian sides. Raimon Panikkar and Henri le Saux belong to the former, Swāmī Lakṣmaṇajū and your relationship with Hindu scholars, poets and saints represent the latter. Did you experience any difficulty in reconciling those “poles”? We know for example that Raimon Panikkar had no problem whatever in dealing existentially with Advaita Vedānta and Roman Catholicism, but that was not the case of Henri le Saux, who in spite of his Hindu initiation went through a very hard process of self-discovery towards the achievement of a type of wholeness that did not rule out painful contradictions and deep conflicts. On the other hand, Hindu mystics are usually impermeable to Christian influences, at least in terms of any external religious standpoint producing some sort of conflict with regard to their own path. How was that inter-cultural experience in your case?



Bettina Bäumer with
Jacques Cloarec

A | My intercultural experience was at the beginning strongly influenced by my teachers Raimon Panikkar and Abhiṣiktānanda (Henri le Saux) in their very different ways. Through them, I could dive deeply into the Indian and Hindu world without having to give up my Christian roots. But then I had to proceed on my own path of integration and discovery. I was spared the inner struggles Abhiṣiktānanda went through thanks to them. But in a way, I knew I had to go further, culturally, spiritually and intellectually – not in

the sense of criticism but of finding my own way. And I found it in Kaśmīr Śaivism and in Swāmī Lakṣmaṇajū, who became my ultimate Guru and through whom I could really enter the tradition. This again involved not only spiritual acceptance, but also had cultural and philosophical implications. The great advantage of Kaśmīr Śaivism is its openness to other traditions and its non-exclusivity, or rather its inclusivity. Swāmī Lakṣmaṇajū was also completely open and never showed any negative attitude to other religions or traditions and he had excellent relations with Christians and Sufi Muslims. I found that Hindus are interested only in the mystical aspects of Christianity, not in its dogmatic or historical aspects.

Q | What was your relationship with Hinduism before your immersion in the Indian experience and how was it taken by Western scholars around you? You wrote a PhD thesis at the University of Munich on Creation as Divine Play (Schöpfung als Spiel), but your mentor at that time was neither an Indologist nor a Yoga master, but the famous German theologian Karl Rahner, well-known for the active intellectual role he played at the Second Vatican Council back in the 1960s and the Heideggerian tones of his theological writings. Were there tensions around your tendency to delve into and even embrace the Indian paradigm of thought and experience?

A | None of my Professors at Munich, including Karl Rahner, objected to my attraction to Hinduism. They somehow trusted my Christian roots. There were no tensions as far as I remember. Tensions occurred only with my Professor of Indology at Vienna who thought I had gone too far in my immersion in Hinduism.

Q | There are many people who have a close relationship with India, but only a few remain there to the point of changing their lives' focal point. When did you realize that you would remain in India? Was it at the very beginning or was it a gradual process in which you were never fully aware of something that was taking place by itself?

A | At the beginning of my life in Varanasi in 1967, I did not know whether I would remain there for life. I only knew that there was so much to learn in that culture that a short stay even of a few years was not enough. Later, friends advised me to spend six months in Europe and six months in India, but I found that this amounted to schizophrenia. I had to have a focal point and remain connected with Europe by shorter stays and engagements, teaching, etc. I feel more relaxed at having chosen India as my centre of gravity, in spite of problems with climate, pollution, etc.

At the beginning of my life in Varanasi in 1967, I did not know whether I would remain there for life.

Q | The fact that your Indian (dīkṣā?) name usually appears between your name and surname wherever we see a reference to your person emphasises its considerable importance. "Bettina Śāradā Bäumer" brings to mind not only your own human person but also a divine pres-

ence, that of the goddess Sarasvatī. Was there a radical change in your person and your attitude to life, identifying a "before" and "after" your initiation, or would you say – like Alain Daniélou / Śiva Śaran – that the effects of an initiation are imperceptible and gradual, that nothing really changes, contrary to what many people say, immediately after the event has taken place?

A | Śāradā is not my dīkṣā name. There is no tradition in Kaśmīr Śaivism of getting a new name at initiation. But when I applied for Indian citizenship there was an option of officially adding an Indian name. I asked the close disciple of my Guru, Prabhā Devī, and she

felt inspired to give me the name Śāradā, the Goddess of learning, of wisdom and music. The reason for adding it now is secular: it is in my Indian passport! As far as dīksā is concerned, I am sure that life ‘before’ and ‘after’ is substantially different. It may be imperceptible from outside, but spiritually it is the turning point towards divinity, a point of ‘recognition’.

Q | Your seminars and workshops at the Abhinavagupta Research Library in Benares are well-known as a combination of intellectual and spiritual work. There you combine readings in Sanskrit with different kinds of spiritual techniques. When did you start those activities and how do you reconcile both the intellectual aspect of understanding sources and the bodily/spiritual acts leading to the realization of a doctrine?



Bettina Bäumer and
Adrián Navigante
during a promenade
at the Labyrinth

A | My so-called retreat-seminars, whether in Vārāṇasī, in Himācal Pradeś, in Ṛṣikeś or in Śrīnagar (to mention only places in India), combine serious textual study with meditation, silence, and musical recitation. The participants enjoy this combination which is enriching, and which is actually traditional, e.g. Buddhist teachers follow the same method. I started this combination from the beginning of my teaching, maybe from 1981 or 1982, when I was teaching the Upaniṣads in Europe. There is no question of having to reconcile the intellectual and the spiritual aspects of the scriptural text, they belong together and get separated only in a dry academic context. One Israeli student, after a seminar on some Tantra, told me that she had studied Tantra at Hebrew University, but she felt that it was like “learning to swim on dry land”!

Q | At the 2008 international conference in honour of Raimon Panikkar, which took place in Venice, you said that the only possibility of survival for mankind is mysticism. I suppose you mean that mysticism is the only way to reconcile inwardly the ‘tensions’ created and appearing in the outer world. However, not all human beings are mystics. Do you think that a mystical attitude to life can be taught and learned?

A | According to my teacher Panikkar, all are mystics, only they do not know it. To be a

mystic or aspire to it consciously is of course a great task which demands total commitment. But by saying that mysticism is necessary for the survival of mankind, I mean 1) a deepening of our self-understanding and connecting to our divine source, however we may call it; 2) a way of overcoming all kinds of tensions, divisions, conflicts, dualism and separation – between people, between communities, between cultures, and - most important - between Man and Nature. An ecology that is not based on a mystical union with Nature remains only scientific and political and cannot lead to a complete change in our attitude to Nature. Can a mystical attitude be taught? Yes, because it connects to a deep longing in every man and woman, and it only needs to be awakened. The awakeners, of course, have to be mystics themselves, with a sense of compassion.

Q | Still another question regarding mysticism. You take it as a way of reconciling seemingly unbridgeable divergences, for example differences in doctrine (dualism or non-dualism), opposed ways of thinking (monotheism and polytheism), ostensible cultural contrasts (Christian morality and African tribal habits) and so on. But it is also true that even a mystical attitude crystallizes in a context of habits, modes of behaviour and concrete inter-subjective practices which are not the same in different cultures. Taking your own personal case: how did you develop this habit of reconciling different paradigms? For example, what does the place where you pray and meditate look like? Can you easily combine Hindu and Christian iconography (like Kālī and the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and Shiva), without any feeling of contradiction, or do you choose one single cultural and religious framework as a guiding line to avoid syncretism?

A | As far as cultural adaptation is concerned, I accept the context of a tradition and live with it as far as possible. For instance, the culture of Vārāṇasī, which is very much determined by a Hindu way of life with its sacred times and spaces, festivals and rituals, has become my way of life. When I am in Kaśmīr I adopt the life-style and cultural habits prevalent there. Of course, when I am in Europe, I have no problem because I have grown up in that culture. But generally I feel at home in a cultural environment with a predominant sense of the sacred, and I feel displaced in a materialistic and consumerist type of culture. Religiously I would not call it syncretism, but I do keep different religious symbols in my meditation spaces which I find meaningful and inspiring. In my meditation room in Varanasi there is a Śivaliṅga with Nandi, a Russian icon of the Virgin Mary, and of course a photo of my Guru. In my place in the foothills of the Himalaya I have built a stone-and-mud meditation hall where I also keep a photo of my Guru, a photo of a Śiva in meditation from Vietnam, and in the small niches there are icons of the Devī, of the transfiguration of Christ, and at the entrance a Ganeśa and a Nandi. They are not meant for worship, but are symbols of my belonging and love for the traditions represented. All images, whether *mūrti* or icon, are pointers to that which transcends all names and forms. We often recite a verse in Sanskrit on Śiva:

We praise the One who has eight forms,

The one whose form is the universe,

The one who is beyond form,

The one who is embodied in the Mantra,

The one who is an embodiment of pure Consciousness. ❖

THE TOUCH OF GODNESS

PAÑCAVYOMĀNTARĀTĪTE CINMĀTRASPARŚALAKṢAṆE

[O GODDESS] BEYOND THE FIVE VOIDS [...] WHOSE CHARACTERISTIC IS THE TOUCH OF PURE CIT

JAYADRATHAYĀMALA 2.1.68CD



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The ‘touch of the goddess’, or the use of gesture by the most ancient Tantric communities of the female or sākta tradition, is a special way of knowing reality by means of a sensory, ‘tactile’ procedure. Through feelings and emotions, without using ‘the thinking mind’, mati (knowledge) is transformed from abstract consciousness into live experience, becoming ‘the intuitive mind’, a carefree mind, the spaciousness of freedom. Gioia Lussana delves into this little-known tradition of the Indian Subcontinent and shows us its different aspects.

In the original Tantrism of India¹, relations with a deity are not expressed only by a spiritual yearning, but are incarnate in a sensory experience, particularly in tactile form². In Tantrism, it is the senses that guide knowledge, whether ordinary or religious, and especially *sparsā*, the most physical of all the senses: touch. The divine is touched, felt, smelt, tasted, inhabited, rather than evoked or thought about. During the ritual act, the god/goddess comes to 'sit', to 'dwell' in the body of the adept and, in so doing, touches his/her body, and settles tangibly there. Although the substance of the 'seat', i.e. the body, remains what it is – matter –, it partakes viscerally and sensorially of the divine essence.

In this highly ancient context of what is prevalently a female cult, the physicality of matter acquires a live and noetic value, immanent but also transcendent. Indeed, unlike the Western conception in which the divine has a purely 'other' function, Tantric India re-

cognises a view of the sacred that is simultaneously immanent and transcendent. The gods dwell in everything that exists, even while they maintain their own inscrutable, indefinable and in some ways unreachable nature. Through the rite, the adept becomes aware of the deity dwelling intrinsically within him/her (the matter is live) and, in fact, awakens within

According to the typical epistemological approach of Tantric Yoga, matter is not 'material', but condensed consciousness, versatile, 'auto-poietic' and generative, like the Great Goddess, Mother of all

him/herself the presence of the sacred. The breath of life, *prāṇa* or *spanda* as it was later called in mediaeval Tantrism, meaning the energising, life-conscious vibration that is the divine breath, is both physical and psychic at the same time. In Śivaite texts, the breathing process (*prāṇana*) is strictly related to living movement (*jīvana*). These two forces become a single vibration (*spanda*) or wave (*ūrmi*), that is concrete, tangible and, at the same time, conscious.

The Tantric world has no place for tripartite anthropology, so typical of the Greek world and reclaimed by Western mysticism, according to which 'the pneumatic - or spiritual - man' is clearly differentiated from the 'psychic man', still embroiled in sensorial life and emotional mind. Tantra conceives a single live current, physical and spiritual together, of which the world and we ourselves are made.

In Tantric cosmogony, the reality of the origins, pure immobile consciousness, desire ignites. At a certain moment it wishes 'to move' and, out of delight, to become the world, something multiform and variegated that appears other than itself. The energising quality of consciousness (*śakti*) then becomes the things that exist. *Śakti*, or the Great Goddess of the most ancient Tantric communities, comes to represent "incarnate consciousness", manifold living matter that maintains however the noetic quality of when it was solely motionless splendour.

Particularly in the female aspect of the sacred, the Hindu Tantric phenomenon reveals a manner of consciousness that does not pass through the ordinary rational mind, but arouses, as it were, a 'thinking quality' already intrinsic in things, and expresses itself

through Yogic gesture and action. According to the typical epistemological approach of Tantric Yoga, matter is not ‘material’, but condensed consciousness, versatile, ‘auto-poietic’ and generative, like the Great Goddess, Mother of all.

*Prāk samvit prāṇe pariṇatā*³ states the fragment of a lost *Tantra*, often quoted in medieval Śivaite literature. Consciousness evolves, or ‘comes out’, makes itself visible in things created, maintaining its cognitive capacity and revealing itself in everything that palpitates with life. The Great Goddess as Śakti, worshipped in the primordial Tantrism of the initiatic community of Kāmākhyā in Assam, is simultaneously consciousness, the means of knowing, vital energy in all visible forms. As such – worshipped in the form of a cleft rock as the primordial *yonī* – she is cared for, nourished and left to rest; in a word, ‘handled’ like a creature of flesh and blood, by the priestly *corpus* of the temple. Being made by her, whatever exists is conscious, alive, sacred. Not only living matter, therefore, but even what is deemed ‘inanimate’ is animated by consciousness. Consequently, what authentically expresses the sacredness of the Great Goddess is not just the *mūrti*, her theriomorphic or anthropomorphic representation, but rocks, mountains, so-called inert substances and all of Nature, meaning everything that is in constant metamorphosis, like life itself. Indeed, everything changes, and it is that very ‘change’ that primarily incarnates the divine in all existing forms. Change in an organised manner, retaining the memory of relationships sorted out: this is the life represented by the goddess as Nature. ‘Nature’, as the future participle of *nasci* actualises the generative aptitude that vegetation and the goddess’s femininity make manifest, as does that of every mortal woman.



Kumāri Pūjā at Kāmākhyā
PHOTO: GIOIA LUSSANA

The *tāntrika* achieves consciousness of him/herself and the world through his/her body and the living matter of the things he/she touches. He/she also knows through direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) of reality, facilitated by ‘boundless’ use of the senses, just as boundless and uninhibited is the energising capacity of the Great Goddess.

This concrete ‘tactile’ epistemological process, without the filter of thought and language, has an unforeseeable outcome: it promotes the opening up of the adept’s intuitive mind: creative, fervid and vibrant like the blood that runs physically through his/her veins; blood, moreover, which the goddess avidly drinks. Through the wide-open doors of the senses, no longer mortified or demonised – since they are not viewed as enemies, but as

powerful allies⁴ - the mind is freed from the rational one-way mode of operation that regulates and articulates ordinary life and enters the extraordinariness of a liberated condition. In this condition, whatever is known is not rigidly determined, but is living potentiality, shielded, preserved and thus set in motion by the fecund womb of the goddess as generator. The mind's creativity come to blossom through physical gesture and sensitive matter: a *poiesis* or 'active mind' or 'thinking matter'⁵: *practical wisdom*, to use Grassmann's expression⁶, referring to the possibility of 'incarnate wisdom' in which things speak and think, as nuclei of living energy.



Gioia Lusssana in a private ritual
at the Kāmākhyā Temple

The physical sensation of the direct touch triggers an emotive colouring (*bhāva*) of the mind of the adept involved in the rite. At the start, the inner or emotive state is intrinsically linked to the yogin's sensoriality⁷. The physical sensation (and the emotion that unravels from it) is the fuel that increases the inner vitality and consciousness of the *tāntrika* (which are effectively the same thing). Consciousness is like a fire that intensifies through (physical and psychic) feeling, which is why Tantric Yoga is a path of intensity. That which is burned away by increasingly intense feelings and emotions is whatever separates, encumbers, obstructs, hides, freeing that vast, living, undivided and luminous space that we all are⁸. This intensification tears the veil of everyday reality and provides access to the experience of non-duality, in which life and consciousness shine undivided. In Tantric India, the feelings (and emotions triggered by them) are *karaṇeśvarī* or *svaṣaṇvid-devī*, self-aware female deities, powerful qualities of Śakti in person.

Emotion derives from *e-movère*, carry away, shake, rouse with the impetus characteristic of life desiring to express itself, like the sun that rises or plants starting to shoot. The very word 'liberation' in Sanskrit, *mukti* or *mokṣa* (from *muc-*), literally means to carry outside, let emerge what is already there.

The attentive *tāntrika*, who seizes the instant when the senses and emotive life start to express themselves, participates in the nature of *spanda*, the energy-consciousness of the origins, in which the rational mind still does not function, but the pure leap of *nirvikalpa* is in force. The mind still does not think, but feels, intuitively, by doing. The physical gesture triggers the creative mind (*pratibhā*), typical of the artist or the saint.⁹

In Hindu Tantrism, as a rule, the gestures (*ceṣṭā*) made by the adept during the rite acquire the function of absolute psychic catalysts. What we mean by the gestural dynamism of the śākta rite of the origins is not however just what is codified in the *mudrā*, in the *nyāsa* or in the high-performance and energising *mantra*¹⁰, gestures that require an alert and participatory performance by the yogin.

The ‘touch of the goddess’, or the use of gesture by the most ancient Tantric communities of female or *sākta* tradition, has a unique value. This means that it differs from later Tantrism (particularly the Śivaite schools of mediaeval Kaśmīr) in which participatory attention in performing the gesture is crucial. In the initiatic community of the goddess Kāmākhya the gesture is already active in its spontaneous and unwitting form as the matrix of consciousness.

The outstanding semantic value of the gesture and its ‘participatory’ performance on which Tantric Yoga focuses is typical both of aesthetic and religious experience. It is encountered in various art forms, from poetry, dance, to the theatre; the same quality is also found in the static gestures of sculpture, or in the motionless āsana of Yoga. In śākta rituality, even the rapid gesture, performed ‘unconsciously’ has the same high-performance and sacral value. Any type of gesture, even a ‘distracted’ one, is an expression of the vital dynamism (and, as such, is conscious) of the Śakti. Within the rite, but even outside it, every action performed by the body evolves, in any final analysis, ‘naturally’, in the direction of harmony, of the coherent rhythm that governs all things. In this way, the rite differs from everyday life as a celebration of existence itself. The element actually revealed as distinctive is *the degree of awakening* of the adept, or his/her vital, sensory and emotive capacity to take part wholly in this experience, in a *nirvikalpa* condition.



Yoginī at the Kāmākhya Temple

PHOTO: GIOIA LUSSANA

In line with what we have said so far, it is interesting that the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya*, - one of the basic texts of the tradition of the goddess Kāmākhya in Assam - explicitly emphasises that liberation, which in such a context coincides with attainment of the *siddhi*, can occur only ‘without effort’ or ‘in a carefree manner’ (*līlayā*)¹¹. This may be interpreted as some sort of gratuitousness of intention, a ‘doing-for-the-sake-of-doing’ that sometimes even appears as a lack of attention to what is done, and yet equally obtains, almost as an intrinsic outcome, the specific abilities mentioned in the texts as final liberation. In such a highly archaic

context, it is as though the conscious presence of the gesture loses its personal or identified quality in the performer of the rite and were only the echo of a vaster, transcendent consciousness, that ‘touches’, ‘observes’ and ‘contemplates’ the adept performing the rite from an impersonal perspective.

The Yogic gesture, in any case, must be performed in a condition of relaxed ease, a passive tranquillity in which the focused quality of attention, in its most extreme results, even ceases. The mind *gets lost a bit*, dissolved in doing, as it were ‘forgets about itself’. This ‘carefree’ attitude implies entry into a rhythmic movement. The *prāṇa* is this movement.

The unfolding of the gestural rhythm follows its own natural criterion, its inner coherence: the origin and manifestation of that peaceful joy experienced by the yogin. This kind of motionless spontaneity is what, according to Tantrism of the non-dual tradition, opens the passage to authentically spiritual experience, in which the adept lies down as it were in the infinite lap of the Great Goddess as Śakti, meaning the freedom of a vast heaven that includes everything.¹²

Ritual action (and, in any final analysis, action *tout court*) thus finds within it, ‘in its performance’, an aptness, an almost self-sufficient *raison d’être*¹³. Through the physical dynamism triggered by a state of relaxed ease, the adept feels, intuitively, discovers, a conscious order that the gesture merely discloses. We could call it ‘unwitting attention’, contained within the material action, revealing a greater attention that comprises the adept him/herself, the rite and all things. Subject (*grāhaka*) and gestural experience (*grāhya*) are cancelled out in an open consciousness, a kind of non-mindedness (*acitta*), that possesses however a quality of all-inclusive presence.

In later Tantrism, Abhinavagupta, using the sources of two lost Tantra-s, the *Gama-tantra* and the *Vīrāvalī-tantra*, debates in his *Tantrāloka*¹⁴ the living relationship between *jñāna* or *matī*, consciousness, and *kriyā*, ritual gesture or action. In order to impact reality like living yeast, *Matī* must transform itself from abstract consciousness into live experience. To that end it becomes ritual gesture, gliding or easing into (*adhiśāyini*) living matter. The ‘touch’ becomes the fruit of the mutual fermentation of consciousness and physical gesture.

This is all confirmed in the practices of the Nāth siddha in mediaeval India, whose ritual practice was oriented towards the concrete handling of matter: body fluids or substances from the natural outside environment. Awareness of internal rhythms - cardiac and respiratory - render the yogin and the alchemists of mediaeval India capable of widening the bounds of consciousness to include the dynamics of the involuntary or parasympathetic nervous system. They knew how to develop a corporeal, pre-verbal consciousness, with a liminal value relating unconscious internal functions to the inorganic, vegetal and animal world and, in a wider sense, to consciousness itself.

The cult of the Great Goddess of Tantric and pre-Tantric India - always linked to chthonian darkness and to what is invisible or unconscious - had already discovered a way of using the mind that includes physical matter, a ‘physiological consciousness’ which, needing neither thoughts nor words, by creative intuition knows and operates through feeling (physical and psychic). In short, a vaster consciousness supplements the ordinary mental level with the more subtle, hidden, physical processes that are usually inaccessible.

From a non-dualistic standpoint, this is the very mind of the *tāntrika* who, from the unfurled sensory ‘touch’, achieves a ‘sensitive objectless intelligence’, extending in space, made of infinite sky: pure creativity, like the cosmic womb of the Great goddess. ❖

1 This study has been prompted by several themes of the author's PhD thesis on original Tantrism. It is based in particular on the cult of the Goddess Kāmākhya in Assam. The related research has been published in *La Dea che scorre. La matrice femminile dello yoga tantrico*. Bologna 2017.

2 *Sparsā*, touch, derives from *sprś-*, which means 'to touch', 'feel with the hand', 'come into contact with' or 'experience'. In Hindu Tantrism, in particular the śākta, 'touch' is not a merely physical experience, but assumes epistemological value.

3 "In the beginning consciousness evolved into vital energy". Cf. *Tattvārthacintāmaṇi*, attributed to Bhaṭṭa Kallaṭa, lost commentary on the Śivasūtra, circa 9th century.

4 Cf. *Mālinīvijayottaratantra*, 15.45-46.

5 Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 205b; here *poiesis* is not only 'poetry', but art and 'creation' in a wider sense: the condition in which from what is there springs creatively into being something further (and not foreseen).

6 H.Grassmann's expression is quoted by J.Gonda in *Four Studies in the language of the Veda* with regard to the term *māyā* and the constructive thought that *ma-* implies. See pp.119-193.

7 Cf. R. Torella, 'Passions and Emotions in Indian Philosophical-Religious Traditions' in P.Bilimoria, A.Wenta, *Emotions in Indian Thought-Systems*, Routledge, New Delhi 2015, pp.57-101.

8 A. Sanderson purposely coined the expression '*the prescription of intensity*'. Cf. *Meaning in Tantric Ritual*, pp.79-81.

9 *Pratibhā* is consciousness itself, greeted by Abhinavagupta as *pratibhācamatṛtim*; creative intuition or intuitive tasting. Cf. *Parātriṃśikātattvavivaraṇam* 2.

10 On *nyāsa* and *mantra*, see A. Padoux in *Tantric Mantras: Studies on Mantraśāstra*, pp.54-80.

11 'Liayā *siddhibhāgyo*'sau *bhavatyevaṃ varānane*'. V, 8. "O beautiful faced one, by this way, without effort all siddhis become available."

12 We find a similar attitude to this Tantric 'presence – non-presence' also among the followers of traditional Chinese Taoism (see, for example, *Zhuangzi*, chap.19) where rhythm and spontaneity (*tzu-jan*) belong to the nature of all that lives and has to be simply 'discovered' in relaxed ease. Later, in the *Ch'an* the same attitude is designated as *wu-hsin* (= 'absence of self-consciousness'). This spontaneously free condition implies a sensation of slight inebriation and action unmotivated by concerns for a concrete result.

13 The ritual gesture or Yogic practice implies two inter-connected qualities: coherent order (*yukti*) and spontaneous and harmonious fluidity (*āgama*) to make the structure orderly and trigger the generation of another gesture.

14 I, 150-151. Trans. R. Gnoli.

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ŚAIVA YOGINĪS AND THEIR ANIMAL FACES: REMARKS ON ORIGINS AND MEANINGS



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Yoginīs are frequently represented in therianthropic form - with animal faces or, more rarely, with a wholly animal appearance - in Śaiva Tantric texts and in sculptures enshrined in the circular mediaeval temples dedicated to them. This representation raises several questions. Why are these sacred female figures often conceived and represented with animal traits? What is the origin of this mode of representation? What meanings and implications lie behind these portrayals? Chiara Policardi approaches these questions with competence and insight, considering the origins of the animal-faced mode of representation and discussing the possible meanings of this form.

Ambivalent, multiple, manifesting on the borders of wilderness and after transgressive rituals, capable of deeply transforming their devotees, and - peculiarly - often represented with seductive feminine bodies but animal faces: these are some of the characteristics of the *yoginīs*. This group of goddesses or demi-goddesses – studied only since relatively recent times – is closely associated with the Tantric phenomenon, and the *yoginī* figure emerges primarily in the Hindu Śaiva domain.¹

The Śaiva cult of *yoginīs* flourished to its greatest extent from the eighth to the twelfth centuries CE. Although Tantric practices connected to these sacred figures are attested both before and beyond this period, it was in these centuries that the primary scriptures relating to *yoginīs* were composed. In these texts, the term *yoginī* is used to designate both powerful goddesses and female adepts who ritually embody the deities. In fact, female divinisation represents a distinctive trait of the Tantric *yoginī* cult.

Originally pertaining to strictly esoteric cultic contexts, the phenomenon of *yoginīs* subsequently became widespread and achieved prominence in the broader Indic religious landscape. Two different kinds of evidence prove this process: on the one hand, the *yoginīs* were incorporated in the Purāṇic literature, a sign of the attempt to incorporate the cult into the “orthodox” tradition, while, on the other, they received royal patronage.

Historically, these mediaeval centuries represent a period of extreme political instability, in which states quickly rose and died and tribal kingdoms tried to elevate themselves on the fluid political map – its borders continuously re-defined by ongoing regional warfare. This climate of fraught uncertainty was probably a factor for exponents of royal families to turn their devotion to *yoginīs*. They addressed these potent goddesses for protection, success in military actions, and achievement of political stability, thus contributing to no small extent to the blossoming of the *yoginī* cult. It was thanks to royal patronage, indeed, that from the end of the ninth through to perhaps the thirteenth century monumental stone temples dedicated to *yoginīs* were erected over the entire Indian subcontinent.

These shrines stand out as unique structures in the architectural panorama of mediaeval India: hypaethral and circular-shaped, their entire internal perimeter is sectioned by a series of niches that house the goddesses’ images (see figure pag.28). These sculptures usually present sensuous feminine bodies, but, whereas some of them have finely delineated, gentle faces that complete their beauty, others show terrifying expressions, and several others have clearly non-human, animal faces (see figures pag. 30, 33, 34).

This theriocephalic representation of *yoginīs* finds attestation in textual sources as well. Tantric Śaiva texts related to *yoginīs* belong to two main corpora: that of the Vidyāpīṭha (“Female Mantra-deities Corpus”) and that of the Kaula (“[Tradition] of the [Goddess] Clans”). The tantras of the Vidyāpīṭha, dating from the eighth-ninth centuries, predate the *yoginī* temples by at least two centuries, while several Kaula scriptures, post tenth-century, belong to the period of the major *yoginī* temples. In both these traditions, the figures of *yoginīs* are frequently conceived and depicted as partly anthropomorphic and partly theriomorphic in form, as an anatomical combination of human and animal traits or, more rarely, with a totally animal appearance.

Thus, *yoginīs* are often endowed with a dual nature, human and non-human, feminine and animal, at the same time. This coexistence of two natures, this very conception and the mode of

representing it, has not been given the sufficient attention it merits.

The therianthropic form of *yoginīs* poses to the modern reader and observer several and manifold questions. The question that is both the most immediate and, so to speak, the ultimate question pertains to a why, as often happens in research: why are the *yoginīs* often imagined and represented with animal traits in texts and images? Or, in other words, why are these deities so closely intertwined with animals?

What is the origin of this mode of representation? Are the *yoginīs* inheritors of a particular tradition, as is often the case in Indian religious and cultural expressions?

How does this composite form relate to their functions? Is it meaningful to find as a rule a key body part such as the face occurring in animal form? What meanings and implications lie behind these portrayals?



Ram-faced yoginī from Lokhari, Uttar Pradesh. New Delhi National Museum
PHOTO: VIRTUAL COLLECTION OF ASIAN MASTERPIECES, 2013

These questions, which could be ramified and multiplied, frame complex and wide-ranging issues: what follows is not intended as an exhaustive discussion but as illustrative remarks. After considering the origins of the therianthropic mode of representation, attention will focus on the possible meanings of this form, in particular on the hypothesis of an animal mask of the *yoginīs*.

The antecedents of *yoginīs* and their animal faces

The peculiar mode of conceiving and representing the *yoginīs* that combines animal and human in a composite anatomy does not appear *ex nihilo*. As often happens in Indian cultural history, the *yoginīs* are inheritors of an earlier tradition. As a deity typology, the *yoginīs* demonstrate remarkable continuity with precedent, non-Tantric figures. Among the possible historical antecedents of therianthropic *yoginīs*, three classes of figure emerge as the most prominent: *gaṇas*, *yakṣiṇīs*, and *mātr̥s*.

These conceptual and figurative models historically contribute to the formation of the *yoginī* figures, converging in this class of Tantric goddesses around the seventh century.

As is well-known, the *gaṇas* are a group of beings belonging to the retinue of Śiva. Featuring especially in Purāṇic texts and in friezes on the base of Hindu monuments, they are described and represented with varied appearances, but, interestingly, they are often represented with animal and bird heads or faces. According to the myth, Śiva conferred the leadership of these beings to a figure whose most distinctive trait is an animal head, namely Gaṇeśa.

The foremost characteristics that *gaṇas* share with *yoginīs* are precisely their nearness to Śiva and their animal features. Moreover, both *gaṇas* and *yoginīs* have supernatural powers and may behave as spirits of a possessing nature. However, while the *yoginīs* are frequently considered as deities *tout court*, the *gaṇas* are figures surrounding a god rather than gods themselves. Indeed, usually, they do not receive any direct cult.

The foremost characteristics that *gaṇas* share with *yoginīs* are precisely their nearness to Śiva and their animal features.

Instead, from indeterminably early times, cult is paid to the *yakṣiṇīs* or *yakṣīs*, a class of demi-goddesses usually regarded as having local, regional or non-Brāhmaṇical origins. As is well-known, these deities are intimately connected with the natural world and in particular with vegetation and water. They are believed to dwell in trees,² and may be considered as the personifi-

cation of the life-giving essence of the tree, the sap. Moreover, according to several textual sources, the *yakṣiṇīs* possess supernatural powers, which they may bestow on humans, and are capable of changing their form at will; also, they are sometimes regarded as spirits of a possessing nature.³

Besides supernatural powers, instability of physical form, and their possessing nature, *yakṣiṇīs* and *yoginīs* also share an ambivalent character, and the iconography of *yoginīs* in some cases is informed by vegetal motifs – the most significant examples are found in the Hirāpur temple in Orissa –, while Tantric texts mention *yoginīs* that reside in trees or may use the terms *yoginī* and *yakṣiṇī* interchangeably.⁴

While theriocephalism is not the most conspicuous trait of *yakṣiṇīs*, since an association with flora rather than with fauna is their hallmark, animal-faced representations are relatively abundant among early depictions and textual descriptions. An interesting representative of this therianthrope *yakṣiṇī* typology is Aśvamukhī, a *yakṣiṇī* peculiarly represented as horse-headed in texts and images. She features in a Pāli *jātaka* as the mother of the Buddha-to-be, and is portrayed on several art-historical records, both Buddhist and Hindu, usually in the act of detaining a young Brāhmin. She is a clear example of how very early in the history of Buddhist phenomena these local beings were incorporated into Buddhist religious beliefs, imagery, scriptures, and art.⁵

While *gaṇas* and *yakṣiṇīs* represent significant antecedents, in the genealogy of *yoginīs* the most immediate precursors are to be seen in the figures of *mātrīs*.

Since early times a rank of female deities called simply *mātrīs*, “Mothers”, has been venerated throughout the entire Indian subcontinent. Among the earliest textual sources on these deities, the *Mahābhārata* describes the *mātrīs* as dangerous, wild, and uncountable figures.⁶ These mother-goddesses are initially not affiliated to a specific religious tradition, as testified by material records portraying them found in cultic complexes of various sectarian orientations. In the early phases of their cult, the Mothers are deities intimately connected to birth and childhood, fertility and life, but also to sickness and death, embodying the well-known religious conception of a deity that is simultaneously a life-giver and a death-dealer. They are indeed characterised by an ambivalent nature, and are helpful

if propitiated, baneful if angered.

From an initial association with Skanda and Kubera the *mātr̥s* subsequently shift toward a more decidedly Śaiva affiliation. Moreover, by the Gupta age a particular group of seven Mothers (*saptamātr̥s*) emerges. These goddesses are conceived and represented as śaktis, hypostases, of the major Brāhmaṇical male gods, assuming name, emblems and mount of the corresponding god. This transformation is clearly the result of assimilation by the Brāhmaṇical tradition. Nonetheless, in such a religio-historical development, the early *mātr̥s* transmit their original characteristics to *yoginīs*. As Hatley (2012: 110) has effectively captured, “[t]he *yoginīs*’ theriomorphism, shapeshifting, multiplicity, extraordinarily variegated appearances, bellicosity, independence, and simultaneous beauty and danger all find precedent in these early Mother goddesses”. Indeed, throughout the eighth century, while the *mātr̥s* as an independent group of deities were gradually receding into the background, losing importance in worship, in parallel, the cult of *yoginīs* was assuming definite contours, relevance, and diffusion.

One of the most conspicuous strands of historical continuity between *mātr̥s* and *yoginīs* lies in their theriocephalic representation. In numerous cases, the Mothers are depicted in a composite form and with infants having corresponding animal faces. Significantly, various sculptures of *yoginīs* show a similar maternal iconography, in which an animal-faced infant seats on the knee or on the hip of the theriocephalic goddess.

Interestingly, some sculptures of *yoginīs* characterised by such maternal iconography also bear emblems related to the sphere of death, which clearly derive from the Kāpālīka influence on the *yoginī* cult, thus creating an ambivalent image. This is the case of a sculpture from Lokhari: the *yoginī* is represented as jackal-faced and a similar animal-faced child sits on her lap. Both mother and child are depicted in the act of howling. In one hand the *yoginī* holds a skull-vessel, while a human corpse lies beneath her seat. In this image, the face of a jackal, an animal peculiarly connected with cremation-grounds, the skull-cup and the corpse clearly refer to death imagery, which is however merged with the typical maternal iconography of mother with child.

Hence, the *yoginīs* owe their composite form to the continuity of tradition: they clearly inherit this feature from precedent, non-Tantric figures. As White (2000: 30) writes, referring to *yoginīs*, *ḍākinīs*, *rākṣasīs*, *bhūtas*, *pretas* and the like, “when their cults became ‘tantric’ – or when Tantra emerged out of their cult practices – [it] is a chicken/egg question that is impossible to resolve”.

Nonetheless, both textual and iconographic sources show that the animal component is not a meaningless hereditary trait in *yoginī* figures, but has a powerful position within the Tantric and, more generally, Śaiva discourse. Indeed, the relationship between the three classes of beings identified as precursors of *yoginīs* and *yoginīs* themselves can be interpreted in the frame of the hermeneutical category of “reuse”. The theriocephalic representation of *yoginīs* can be read as a previous, traditional form that is resemantised in the Tantric context. Precedent typologies of deities, and in particular the category of goddesses known as *mātr̥s*, experience a process of transformation and resemantisation over the course of time, finally emerging as *yoginīs* in the Tantric tradition. It is a phenomenon of reuse and reinterpretation of previous forms, which acquire new meanings in a new religious context. The very fact that a specific form – in this case the animal-human combination – is updated and reused attests its vitality and significance.



Sloth bear-faced *yoginī*,
Hirāpur *yoginī* temple, near
Bhubaneśvar, Orissa
PHOTO: STELLA DUPUIS

Significance and meanings of therianthropism in the Śaiva *yoginī* cult

What is, therefore, the meaning and significance of the therianthropic form of *yoginīs* in the Tantric context?

The *yoginīs*' therianthropism is essentially related to the coexistence of their two natures, the human and the animal, within a single composite anatomy. In a minor number of cases such coexistence is expressed in a shapeshifting ability from anthropomorphic appearance to theriomorphic and back. Hence, it is not only the animality of the figure that is relevant, but above all its duality, its ambiguity, its nature that simultaneously contrasts and synthesises two different categories of beings. In this way, too, opposite conceptual categories are made contiguous, such as nature-culture, wild-domesticated, irrational-rational, and the like. In general, therianthropic deities are often surrounded by a condition of tense ambivalence. In different religious contexts, animal-human figures, as a typology of beings whose elements are neither separate nor unified, are frequently associated with rituals of transition and liminality, such as initiation rites for instance.

The combination of different beings in a composite anatomy might be reminiscent of the category of monstrosity. However, the sensuous bodies of *yoginīs* in sculptures elude this possibility, for they give form to figures that juxtapose the fascination of the feminine and the unpredictability of the animal, conveying a simultaneous sense of attraction and inquietude. Even textual descriptions of therianthropic *yoginīs* often express such an ambiguity between beauty and terror.

The textual and iconographic material concerning the animal aspect of these figures is very elusive, and does not lend itself to a straightforward interpretation. Indeed, ambiguity and polysemy

appear as inherent features of *yoginīs*. On the one hand, *yoginīs* are highly dangerous beings, but on the other, in certain circumstances, they can bestow the highest spiritual realisation to the practitioner and grant all his desires within a very brief period of time.

In an attempt to plumb the conceptual world that has generated these richly expressive therianthropic forms, as far as the meaning and significance of the animal-human form of *yoginīs* is concerned, it is possible, in my view, to identify three lines of interpretation, which are intended as interlocking and not mutually exclusive. These can be subsumed in few key words and organized in three sets: (1) metamorphosis, *melaka*, and supernatural powers; (2) liminality, wilderness, and otherness; (3) an animal mask?

An Animal Mask?

Among these, I will focus on the hypothesis of an animal mask, which has not been advanced in previous studies.



Hare-faced yoginī, from Lokhari,
Uttar Pradesh

PHOTO: AFTER DEHEJIA, V., 1986. YOGINĪ CULT
AND TEMPLES. A TANTRIC TRADITION, DELHI:
NATIONAL MUSEUM, P. 158

The form and concept of a mask are strongly suggested by iconographic depictions of *yoginīs*. Analysis of the single sculptures reveals that in some instances the head is wholly theriomorphic, but in several cases an animal face is combined with other components of the head, such as the hair and the ears, that appear clearly human. In other words, only the outer surface of the head is depicted as animal-like. Particularly significant examples of this animal-human juxtaposition are found in the

temple of Hīrāpur, in Orissa (see figure pag. 33), in the shrine of Bherāghāt, in Madhya Pradesh, and among the statuary from Lokhari, in Uttar Pradesh (see figures pag. 30 and here below).

If animal-faced *yoginī* representations hint at an animal mask, who is the figure wearing that mask, a deity or a woman? And why is she wearing it? Do *yoginī*-related texts offer evidence to unravel the issue?

As a matter of fact, the texts do not appear to offer decisive evidence that can unravel the issue.

In the Śaiva context of the *yoginī* cult, the imitation of animals appears interwoven with the conception of possession.

There are no explicit hints pointing towards the idea of an outer surface that conceals or disguises the face of an entirely human or anthropomorphic being. However, as Shulman (2006: 20) remarks, in India a specific word for “mask” is lacking. He observes that the languages of India refer to that part of the guise that primarily concerns the head simply as “face” (*mukha*, *ānana*, *āsya*, etc.). Is it, then, possible that behind the designations for animal-faced *yoginīs* there is a reference to a mask? Possibly yes, albeit far from being certain. If masks were employed in the *yoginī* cult, would they be more explicitly attested in texts? Not necessarily: Indological studies show that in several cases

art-historical or visual records attest facts or usages that do not find evidence in texts, and vice versa.

Thus, texts leave a possibility open, while iconographic sources present strikingly peculiar features that call for an explanation. The cases are striking and numerous enough, I believe, to make the hypothesis of a mask plausible. Not only are they striking and numerous, but they are also found at distant geographical locations (Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh) and are attested from rather distant chronological periods (from ninth century to eleventh century): thus, they are not limited to a single temple tradition.

What could be, then, the meaning of this mask-like form?

The divine status of *yoginīs* in sculpture is suggested by the multiple arms exhibited in several cases. Thus, it is not rare to find an animal-faced *yoginī* presenting four or more arms. As is well-known, in Indian art the multiplicity of bodily parts is a clear indication of divine status. If the animal-faced *yoginī* is a goddess, then, why is she wearing a mask? As a divine being, she does not need a mask to transform herself: she possesses supernatural powers, among which the most conspicuous is the shape-shifting power.

In my view, these images may refer to rituals in which human women identify themselves with animal-faced goddesses, ritually behaving as animals and birds, and possibly assuming the guise of the deities they represent. Some texts offer glimpses of rituals in which the practitioner imitates the calls and movements of animals; the most significant passages are found in the *Jayadrathayāmala*, a Tantra belonging to the Vidyāpīṭha tradition.⁷

Now, in different religious conceptions familiarity with and identification with animals is a sign of the initiates' proximity to the realm of the supernatural and divine. In the Śaiva context of the *yoginī* cult, the imitation of animals appears interwoven with the conception of possession. In the earliest sources on *yoginīs*, *āveśa* and cognate terms from the root ā-√*viś* define an altered state of consciousness, in which the *yoginīs* possess the initiate. Such an experience is transitory, usually very brief, and always intense. If such a possession is not controlled by the practitioner, it is of a baneful nature, but

if the adept himself provokes and controls it, he can obtain knowledge and supernatural powers. This state of possession manifests itself in various external signs, including the imitation of animals in both behaviour and calls. This might indicate that the initiate is undergoing a radical change, shifting away from his ordinary identity.

Did these rituals implying possession on the part of the *yoginīs* make use of animal masks? As is known, masking, which is probably a universal phenomenon, constitutes a prominent dimension in South Asian traditions and religions. Across the different Indian traditions, the mask, being a means of transitory alteration of physical appearance, allows disengagement from ordinary time and facilitates entry into a different domain. In ritual contexts, the mask is a medium accompanying the transition from one status to another.

Thus, in religious practices connected to *yoginīs*, women might have worn animal masks to assume the identity of animal-faced goddess *yoginīs*; in such rituals, the mask might have been a tool to facilitate transformation, both the women's own transformation and that of the male practitioner. As Shulman (2006: 20) remarks, "the mask is normally considered a technique for transforming identity. [...] [I]n general, there is a sense of exchanging and expanding, let us say, a human persona to the point where it assimilates or appropriates a divine (or demonic) existence". In this respect, in *yoginī*-related practices, the animal, presumably, was not seen as a negative "other", as a threat of loss of human identity, but as an otherness that allows a redefinition and reconstruction of a new, expanded identity.

We might suppose that animal-faced *yoginī* sculptures represent simultaneously deities and women, in deliberate ambiguity. Indeed, as said, female divinisation lies at the heart of the cult of *yoginīs* and, presumably, the categories of human women embodying *yoginīs* and divine *yoginīs* were not mutually exclusive units in the minds of early mediaeval Tantric practitioners. Possibly, *yoginīs*, and also therianthropic *yoginīs*, straddle the real/imagined divide, in a fluid continuum of reality. If we interpret the sculptures as reflecting an intentional and programmatic overlapping of deities and ritual reality, both the mask-like faces, which appear to be fitted onto human figures, and the multiple arms, which are instead appropriate to a deity, would find an explanation.

In conclusion, the animal appearances represent one of the strongest threads that connect the *yoginīs* with their antecedents and with a pre-Brāhmaṇical and non-Brāhmaṇical past. At the same time, it seems that in the Tantric terrain this ancient root blossoms, insofar as the animal element irrupts constantly into the feminine world of the *yoginīs*, carrying multifaceted meanings. In particular, the animal traits of *yoginīs* may point towards rituals of possession, in which animal masks were used by human women to facilitate identification with animal-faced deities, to induce possession by divine *yoginīs*, leading the initiate to an altered state of consciousness and, maybe, to an inner transformation. ❖



1 Due to its semantic breadth, a caveat is in order concerning the lexeme “yoginī”. It does not express a monolithic concept. In the history of Indian religions the term appears in different scenarios, conveying distinct meanings in diverse socio-historical contexts, thus designating a spectrum of female sacred figures. Indeed, already Dehejia in her pioneering work (1986: 11-35), identifies at least eleven distinct meanings for the term *yoginī*, which in extreme synthesis can be recapitulated as follows: *yoginī* as an adept in yoga; *yoginī* as a partner in *cakra-pūjā*; *yoginī* as a sorceress; *yoginī* as an astrological concept; *yoginīs* as presiding deities of the internal *cakras*; *yoginīs* as deities of the Śrīcakra; *yoginī* as the great goddess; *yoginīs* as aspects of Devī; *yoginīs* as attendant deities of the great goddess; *yoginīs* as acolytes of the great goddess, corresponding to the *mātrīs*; and *yoginīs* as patron goddesses of the Kaulas. As noted by Keul (2013: 12-14), we are not dealing with a case of

homonymy – where terms accidentally have the same form but no semantic relation between their meanings –, but with a case of polysemy: the different meanings are interconnected, at different levels. In the present paper, as the above suggests, I will refer to *yoginīs* as a group of goddesses or sacred figures affiliated to the Śaiva Tantric tradition.

2 See e.g. MBh XII.163.1.

3 See Kessler 2009.

4 See Dehejia 1986: 36-38.

5 See Policardi forthcoming.

6 MBh III.213.41-52; 214.1-17; 219.1-15; IX.43-45; XIII.83-84.

7 See Serbaeva 2013: 200; 202.

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A NOTE ON THE DRAVIDIAN SOUTH: CASTE SYSTEM AND CLASSICAL LITERATURE



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The caste system in Tamil Nadu is distinguished from that of the northern part of India, especially regarding the question of hierarchy. The status and role of Vellalars (ancient land-owning community) became a model for the Tamils, whereas any designation of Brahmins by the name ‘Tamil’ was forbidden. In the ‘Dravidian South’ the caste system was not acknowledged as such, though discriminating Tamils and Brahmins played a considerable role in the discourse of Tamil identity. In this contribution, Sarah Kamala Sadacharan shows how the Tamil identity was formed through the arts (poetry, drama and music) and preserved within the context of classical literature.

The problem of caste in the Tamil context: peasants and power

The caste system in southern India is not like that of the North. The typical designations and divisions found in the “Aryan”¹ caste system are not entirely applicable to Tamil society. The origins of the social hierarchy in Tamil Nadu relate to the type of society that existed there in ancient times. According to representatives of the “invasion theory”², ancient Tamil Nadu society differed consistently from northern standards in many ways: “Most authors on the Sangam age describe Tamil society as clearly stratified in a rudimentary form of caste system with limited endogamy and few interdictions on commensality”³. This system was not the result of a process, but something that remained unchanged since the beginnings of that civilization. The caste system in Tamil Nadu distinguishes itself from the northern part of India not only in its generalities, but also in the question of hierarchy according to function. We illustrate this aspect by taking the example of the Vellalars (ancient land-owning community), who were very important for that society and, albeit peasants, had ruling social power.

At the time of the migrations from the northeast, tribes were socially differentiated from town-dwellers. Quite early on we already find, besides the free tribesmen [*viś*], a tribal nobility and warrior group, which, in due course, produced the tribe’s prince [*rāja*] and priest [*brahmana*]. During their ethnic settlement, the dominant Aryas interacted with the aboriginal people, who nonetheless carried out important activities as day-labourers and artisans. The most decisive criterion for delimiting the three first groups of the caste system (the Aryas: *brahmana*, *rājanya*, *vaiśya*) vis-à-vis the oppressed aboriginals was the darker complexion of the latter. Caste division was based on discrimination according to skin colour [*varṇa*]. The four *varṇas* were at the beginning social strata, into which the actual

castes were later incorporated and ranged⁴. In south India, these strata were structured as tribal societies with chieftaincies and kings, in which Brahmins gained increasing influence. The Sangam-Literature shows the conflict between these two models of society: Aryan and Dravidian⁵.

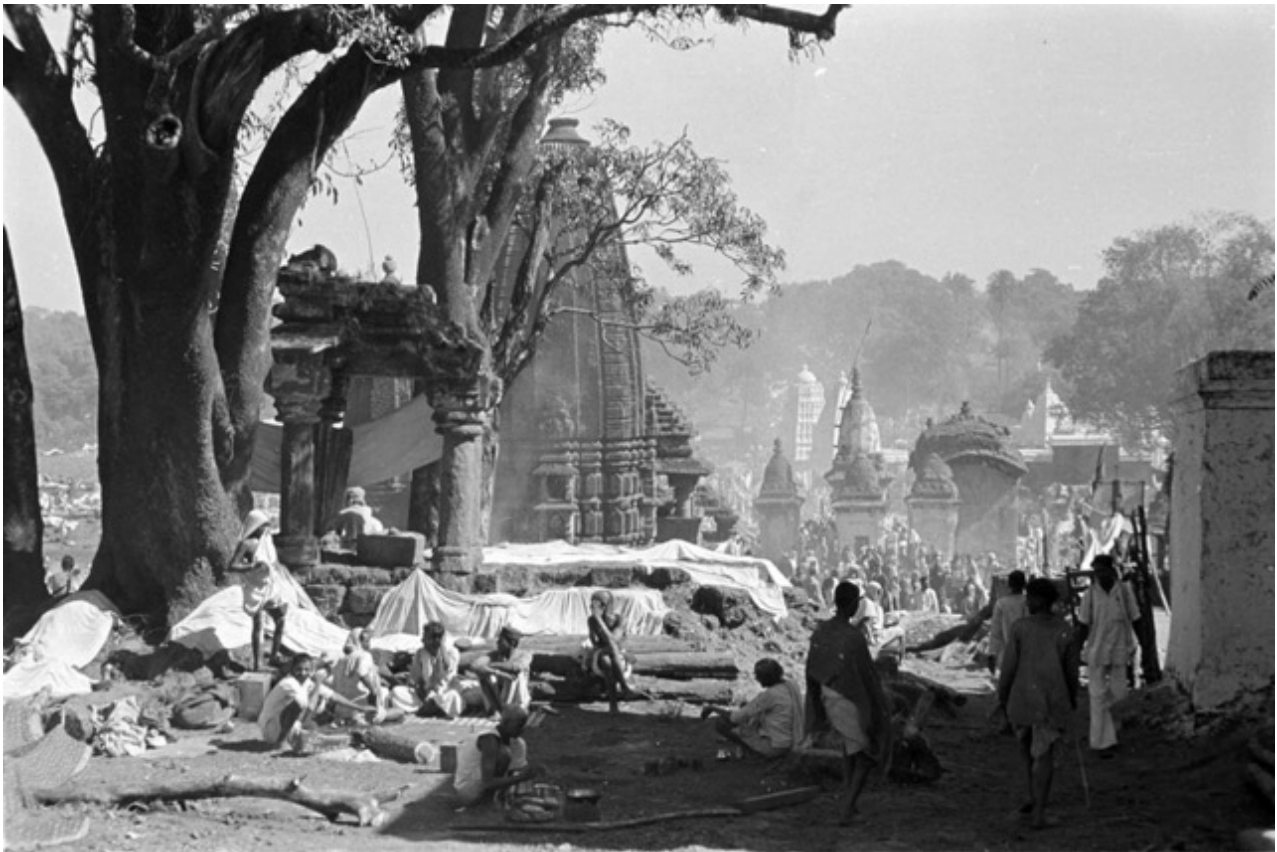
The caste system in Tamil Nadu distinguishes itself from the northern part of India not only in its generalities, but also in the question of hierarchy according to function.

Brahmanic society became more powerful after the invasion of the Aryas from the north, replacing the tribal societies’ bards and singers and gaining a position of influence with the rulers. The bards and singers entertained the kings and recited hymns for them, for which they were well remunerated. The royal milieu also included generous patrons and officials who owned land and properties and maintained cultural and social standards: “The people who enabled poems to be sung, who enabled singers to survive, who upheld culture and society were chiefs and landowners or farmers. Later, the chiefs were called Vellalars. They were the caste of farmers in the Chola period”⁶. The Tamil kingdom of Chola flourished from the IX to the XIII Century. It was

one of the most influential Hindu kingdoms with a vast area of influence from southern India to southeast Asia. It is very often mentioned in the Sangam literature.

Agriculture was particularly important for the whole land. In the Brahmanic legal code called *Manudharma*, which is the most ancient source dealing with the institution of caste, farmers are called *śūdras*, i.e. the lowest rank in the caste system. As early as the hymns of the *Rigveda* the four castes are treated within a creation myth that also deals with the institution of sacrifice. The following account played a very important role in Hindu society after the Vedic period: “this Puruṣa is all that yet hath been and all that is to be. [...] So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Puruṣa. All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven [...]. With three-fourths Puruṣa went up: one-fourth of him again was here. [...] The *brahmana* was his mouth, of both his arms was the *rājanya* made. His thighs became the *vaiśya*, from his feet the *śūdra* was produced” (*RV*, X, 90).

The cosmos (*Puruṣa*) contained everything, and within this order the *śūdras*' position



AMARKANTAK

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is at the lowest level. We are here faced with a mythological account of the origin of caste according to Vedic religion. The Vedas were composed in Sanskrit and are one of the most important models of classical Hinduism, but in Southern India they were never acknowledged as such by the Dravidian people. Later, during the British Raj, artisans, farmers and other workers fell within the category of *śūdras*, but the Vellalars did not call themselves by that name, since it did not recognize the importance of the role and position of farmers in Tamil

Nadu. While farmers in northern India belonged to the lowest caste, agriculture in Tamil Nadu was highly regarded and farmers were greatly respected⁷. From ancient texts we gather that the farmers contributed to the fertility of the land: “[...] as Karkatta [cloud-bringing] Vellalars attract rains by instituting ritual and sacrifice. Their activities and goodwill guarantee the life and well-being of all, ultimately the world”⁸. They were entitled to carry out rituals and sacrifices, which in northern India were the exclusive right of Brahmins. The farmers were the most important caste in preserving a functional society, interacting also with the gods. Even the king was obliged to revere them. Brahmins in Tamil Nadu, on the contrary, were not recognized as part of society, even if they sang and spoke in Tamil.

Whereas the distribution of social functions in Aryan society led to the formation of a high caste of priests, a caste of warriors and a lower caste of farmers, the situation in southern India was exactly the opposite: warriors were degraded as mercenaries and criminal tribes, whereas landowners and countrymen formed the second caste after the Brahmins. The status and role of Vellalars became a model for the Tamils. Actually, they were the ‘ultimate Tamils’, whereas any designation of Brahmins by the name ‘Tamil’ was forbidden⁹. This shows us that the caste system in southern India was not acknowledged as such.

Anyone, with the exception of Brahmins, could become a Vellalar. The only requisite was to follow the religion of the Vellalar Shaivites: “The resultant identity was not primarily based on ancestry and birth; but – and it’s a large ‘but’ – Brahmins were excluded because they were not of the right *i’am*. In Tamil *i’am* could become Vellalars, except the Brahmins, because they were Aryan”¹⁰. The Vellalar society was not exclusive like that of the Brahmins. Anyone who had access to land and was not Brahmin could become Vellalar.

In the discourse of Tamil identity, discrimination between Tamils and Brahmins plays a considerable role. The question of identity only emerges when someone has an opposite from which he/she has to differentiate himself/herself (the more aggressive the differentiation, the stronger the identity affirmation). Language also plays a decisive role in the construction of Tamil identity. When Tamil was recognized as a classical language and thus ranked on the cultural scale with a value similar to that of Sanskrit, the conflict between Aryans and Dravidians and the question of inter-group discrimination removed to the linguistic level. This modality of consciousness and self-affirmation shows that Tamil identity is not held so much for itself, as in opposition to ‘the other’. Development of self-consciousness could begin with knowledge of ancient texts and Tamil culture in general. For this reason, the Tamil writer Maraimalai Atikal (1876-1950) said that Tamils should not compare themselves to Brahmins but rather found their own culture on a deeper level.

Classical Literature and Tamil Identity

What form of consciousness led the Tamils to cultural autarchy? We could say that it emerged within the context of Tamil literature and culture. Legend says that poetry academies (*sangams*) cultivated Tamil literature on the ‘Kumarikkandam’ continent, hence the earliest stage of development of Tamil literature (from circa 200 BCE to 300 CE) is called Sangam literature. Many works of different genres (poetry, epics) stem from this period. They can be traced back, at least in part, to earlier oral transmission: “apart from some epigraphic and archaeological evidence, the classical literature is the most important native source of

historical and cultural information for this period in Tamil South India”¹¹. A whole mythology around the poetry and poets of Sangam literature arose from native sources.

After a long period of emergence, classical Tamil literature was composed by scholars whose works were collected. Around the year 1000 CE, they fall into oblivion as a result of



TEMPLE OF
MAHĀBALIPURAM,
TAMIL NADU
PHOTO: JACQUES CLOAREC

the prominent role of other religious influences. At the end of the Sangam period, influences of northern India on Tamil literature become conspicuous – i. e. texts written mostly in Sanskrit dealing with subjects found extensively in Buddhist and Jain writings. In the XIX century, the texts were rediscovered, and greatly interested Western scholars.

Another important factor that might explain why ancient Tamil literature fell into oblivion was the strong influence of militant Brahmanic Hinduism. Supporters of Shaivism and Vishnuism in the late Middle Ages forbade these texts: “[...] they tabooed as irreligious all secular texts; they disallowed from study all Jain and Buddhist texts [which also included the *Cilapatikaram*]¹². All non-Hindu texts (including Tamil ones) were forbidden.

Tamil literature underwent very strong changes under Western influence during European colonial domination. New genres, such as novels, essays and short-stories became prominent in the late XIX and early XX Century and permeated modern Tamil culture. R. Krishnamurthy (1889-1954), also called ‘Kalki’, wrote short-stories especially on historical subjects. Subramaniam Bharati (1882-1921) is reputed as one of the most extraordinary modern Tamil poets. His disciple Bharati Dasan (1891-1964) was one of the most influential figures on Tamilavan and one of the most important Tamil critics of the XX Century. All of them made use of this ‘new’ genre¹³. The term ‘Tamil’ appears in the context of classical literature; the roots of the language and local identity also lie in the ancient texts. Precisely for this reason it is supposed that *Tolkāppiyam* (the earliest extant text on Tamil literature and

linguistics, presumably from the III century BCE) is the source of Tamil¹⁴.

The so-called *muttami* (threefold Tamil) is divided into poetry/speech, drama and music. It was considered to be of divine origin, created either by Shiva or Skanda Murugan (son of Pārvatī and Shiva). Very early on in history, Tamil scholars distinguished the everyday language (*koṭuntami*) from the polished literary style or poetic register [*centami*]. Around the same time, it was perceived that language did not only consist of the oral part, but also of music, gestures and mimicry. Thus emerged a division between ‘inner’ [*akam*] and ‘outer’ [*puram*] poetry, which classified ‘inner poems’ as poems of the heart and of love, as opposed to ‘outer poems’, related to kings, warriors and battles¹⁵. The point of departure was a sort of ideal human being, described from a universal standpoint. But even on this subject there were different views: Tamil poets on the one hand, who believed the ancient theories about love, and Vedic scholars on the other, who rejected that view. Iraiyaṇār’s commentary on *Akapporul* (a Tamil work on grammar) says that Shiva was the patron of the disciplines [*sanigam*] of Tamil poets¹⁶. He is also seen as the source or even the creator of the language. Tamilavan also writes: “Subramaniya Bharati described Tamil as the language that stems directly from the omnipotent Shiva”¹⁷.

In spite of the adaptation of Indo-Aryan words and their undeniable influence on the Tamil language, the literary style of Tamil Nadu – based on local ancient sources – was something quite particular. As Charles Ryerson points out, “The leaven of Indo-Aryan was working in Tamil as in all other Indian non-Aryan speech, but although Indo-Aryan [...] words were being adopted [...] Tamil developed a literary mode of its own which is essentially South Dravidian”. This South Dravidian style presents some features pointing to the original self-awareness of Tamil identity, a kind of primordial consciousness whose roots are purely Tamil. Of course there are those who affirm that Tamil is not an independent language. ❖

1 The term “Aryan” was an ethnic label used to designate the group of Indo-Iranian people in Vedic time.

2 According to the invasion theory, there were migrations of non-Indian light-skinned (Aryan) peoples in the Subcontinent towards the year 1500 BCE, which overthrew the aboriginal (Dravidian) civilisation of the Indus Valley and established a culture that can be traced back to the Vedas.

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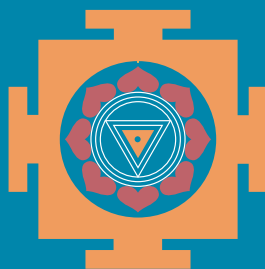
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