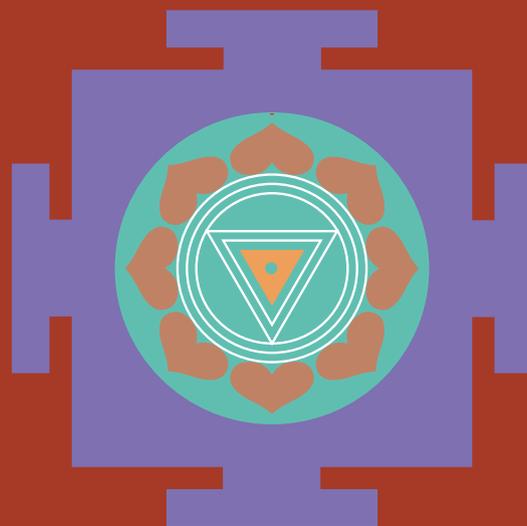


*The first duty of man is to understand  
his own nature and the basic elements of his being,  
which he must fulfil to the best of his ability.*

ALAIN DANIELOU

# Cahiers de la Fondation

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INTELLECTUAL  
DIALOGUE



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Alain Daniélou at the Labyrinth  
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PHOTO: JACQUES CLOAREC



INTERVIEW

# PRE-ARYAN SHAIVITE CULTURE: A TRADITION TO BE RECOVERED INTERVIEW WITH ALAIN DANIELOU

TRANSLATION FROM THE FRENCH BY ADRIÁN NAVIGANTE  
REVISION BY KENNETH HURRY

*An interview with Alain Daniélou concerning the millenary wisdom of the Shaivite tradition (into which he was initiated by orthodox Hindus in Benares), its relationship with Dionysian religion and the importance of recovering such cultural references today. This interview was originally published in the monthly Aurore in the year 1985, shortly after publication of the first edition of While the Gods Play (French title: La fantaisie des dieux et l'aventure humaine). Now, for the first time, it has been translated into English, with minor adaptations and changes.*

**Q |** *La fantaisie des dieux et l'aventure humaine, could you explain the choice of this title?*

**A |** In the Shaivite tradition, the gods are playful beings and the world is the playground of their games and pleasure. It is like a theatre stage where man, much like the other beings, is a kind of spectator. Creation would have no sense without living beings to admire it. The principle of creation needs different perspectives or 'views' constituting the audience of the divine play [*līlā*], and human beings have a particularly important role in this context: they are at the same time spectators and actors. Since they are endowed with a conscious function, they bear a heritage of knowledge that enables them to maintain their role through the different stages of their evolution.

**Q |** *You establish a historical relationship between the Shaivite tradition and the Dionysian when you explain that the origins of the latter can be traced back (at least partially) to the Dravidians. In what way exactly?*

**A |** We didn't know anything about the Cretans until the beginning of the XX century. Recently we have come to know that this civilisation is apparently linked on the one hand to the Sumerians and on the other hand to the Hindus. Little by little we realise that many things considered Greek were in fact taken from the Cretans. In India, a great part of what we know about the Vedic civilisation, that is, Brahmanism, does not originally stem from the Aryans but from the ancient Dravidian civilisation that the Aryans attempted to destroy. This civilisation had a writing system and a cultural network in various parts of the world. Upon the arrival of the Aryans, the use of stone for building as well as the system of writing completely disappeared and remained absent for a period of about a thousand years. A similar phenomenon took place at that time in other parts of the world: Celtic and

Druid civilisations also experienced the Aryan taboo against writing. It is for this reason that nowadays we know nothing about their rituals. From 6000 to 2000 BCE we know nothing of this civilisation except for its survival in India. Indeed, Shaivism persisted in spite of the Aryan domination: its rites as well as its esoteric texts were disguised until the beginning of our era. Once collected and translated into Sanskrit, they provoked a prodigious renaissance that lasted until the Islamic invasions of the XII century. Very few of these texts were translated into European languages. It is also interesting to examine the manuscripts inscribed on clay tablets dating back to between 3000 and 4000 BCE and belonging to a civilisation coupled to the Sumerian. These manuscripts actually serve as authentication for those of the Indus valley and reveal remarkable knowledge of the nature of the universe, the origin of matter and life, astrophysics, biology, evolution and the relationship between thought and language.

**Q | *In what form have these Sumerian texts come to light and what can we learn from them?***

**A |** They are a cuneiform system of writing. Whole libraries were discovered, but only now have we begun to decipher their meaning. The Hittite versions of the Gilgamesh epic are the only texts we know so far, but there are many others. Their content enables us to establish certain matches with what the Indians had preserved of their own oral tradition. We only possess transcriptions dating back to a much later period. For example, one German scholar has carried out research on the plans of Shaivite temples dating from the beginning

of our era and has discovered that these plans are identical to those of Sumerian temples. This culture has been preserved by symbols, so it should be possible to prove its coherence and continuity. University scholars, however, are so overcautious that sometimes their statements produce absurdities. For them, a text does not exist until they find a written document.

**Man has a special role among living species based on his power of knowledge, which makes him a witness of the play of creation and grants him the highest possibilities of development**

They don't consider that in the history of humanity oral tradition plays an essential role, and that most written documents are very recent. Even the Gospels were written a century after Christ's death, which means that the 'witnesses' are not exactly his contemporaries. There is no scripture preserved in its original form. The Sanskrit language was transmitted orally to begin with, through versified and condensed forms. This ensured memorization, transmission and preservation of content and the meaning of the language. Scholars say that the Upanishads date back to that time, but how do they know that? Everything was written down, in both the Vedic and Shaivite traditions, only starting from the 4th century BCE, that is, when the Persians reintroduced a writing system in India, after the Buddha.

**Q | *Aren't the Upanishads the product of Vedic culture?***

**A |** The Upanishadic texts are the result of many elements stemming from the Shaivite tradition, which were in turn transformed and given a refined form in classical Sanskrit. The texts of the Shaivite renewal were, on the contrary, the product of a major revolution against Brahmanism and were not written by people who were great men of letters. The language of those texts is a form of popular Sanskrit with no trace of classical refinement.

**Q | *It would be useful to describe briefly the particularities of Shaivite and Vedic civilization at the time in which they co-habited...***

**A** | They were two completely different civilizations. The Shaivites were a sedentary people who lived in big cities. They had already attained a high degree of refinement.

**Q** | *Was there any caste system?*

**A** | Most probably there was a caste principle, but the castes were created after the radical division from the nomadic Aryans who destroyed the cities and proclaimed racial superiority. There was a first division and afterwards further divisions were introduced. A social organization was created to allow the different types of population to coexist in Indian territory. The Brahmins, who were actually the Vedic priests, took the place of Shaivite pontiffs. Even today, in great Shaivite temples, Brahmins officiate on certain days and Shudra priests on other days. Shaivite ascetics, who are sometimes also great teachers, must not attach themselves to monasteries or material possessions. This is what enables this esoteric tradition to be preserved: the fact that it is not controlled by public authorities. Shaivite ascetics appear and disappear, and nobody knows who they are.

**Q** | *Through these ancient texts, you remind the reader of a millenary wisdom and emphasize the urgency of understanding the sense of these texts. Why now?*

**A** | Ancient Shaivism has a singular conception of the nature of the world, cosmology, matter, time and space and subtle beings, as well as a theory of evolution and cycles revealing the birth, growth, decline and extinction of living beings. According to these texts, the human species is nowadays under a great threat because it has ceased to play the role assigned to it in the order of creation. If we wish to survive, it is very important to understand the role that we are supposed to play in the cosmic context so that the destruction of the world will not be imminent.

**Q** | *Could you define the role ascribed to man according to these texts?*

**A** | Man has a special role among living species based on his power of knowledge, which makes him a witness of the play of creation and grants him the highest possibilities of development. It is through the eyes of human beings and through the capacity of their brain that the Creator contemplates his own work.

**Q** | *You also say: “the destruction of mankind occurs when the transmission of esoteric knowledge finds no recipient to receive that heritage”. What does the word ‘recipient’ refer to?*

**A** | When a species evolves towards its own realisation, there is not only an intellectual and spiritual knowledge of being, but also a transmission through initiation. A real bearer of knowledge is not merely satisfied with what he knows; he must transmit this knowledge in order to make it evolve. In the same way, one who knows the secrets of nature, the world and the divine is responsible for transmitting this knowledge and ensuring the evolution of his species. That is the role of the guru. But of course, he must only transmit this knowledge to somebody worthy of receiving it. The difficulty of our times is to find spiritual heirs.

**Q** | *You also write that Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet has managed to reincorporate many aspects of Shaivism and thus to integrate itself into an ancestral tradition. This seems reassuring with regard to the preservation of knowledge.*

**A** | Buddhism was originally a rather social and moral religion, a reaction against Vedic religion. After several centuries, it was completely reformed. Viewing the different deities of Mahayana, people say ‘this Buddha is Lakshmi’, or ‘that Buddha is Saraswati’, or ‘that one is an aspect of Shiva’, etc. All these Hindu gods and goddesses were integrated into a Buddhist

terminology that perfectly matches ancient Shaivism.

**Q |** *There is still some kind of oral tradition. Is that in your opinion a way to gain access to traditional teachings?*

**A |** Of course. Since the Shaivite renewal, a quantity of important texts – originally transmitted orally – has been transcribed in Dravidian languages and Sanskrit, for example the Puranas, Agamas, Tantras, and also the techniques of Shaivite Yoga. At the same time, a living tradition remains with its rites and customs. Temple builders, for example, still know certain symbols and proportions and when they build a temple, they aim at communication with the supernatural. These things are living realities, but nowadays nobody seems to take any interest in them. I knew certain castes of builders who would complain saying “we are no longer commissioned to build palaces or temples; engineers are now in charge of constructing of buildings on the basis of concrete paving, which won’t even last fifty years”. In Benares, there is a living Shaivite transmission that is kept secret. The monks bearing this esoteric tradition were first persecuted by the Aryans, afterwards by the Buddhists, later on by the Muslims and the British colonisers, and have therefore become very prudent with their teachings. It is not at all easy to access the highest sources of knowledge, but at the same time there is, in principle, no difficulty. You must show that your search is not mere curiosity, and you can become a receptacle of that knowledge. Today, it is terrible to see Westerners who are interested in certain aspects of spiritual culture and life flocking to fake gurus and getting cheated.

**Q |** *In your book La fantaisie des dieux et l’aventure humaine you write: “Man has a double nature, and a double role in creation. On the one hand to transmit and develop the characteristics of the species, on the other hand to hand down the heritage of knowledge, as a result of being endowed with consciousness”.*

**A |** Of course, at a certain level knowledge is perception of another reality and the relationship one can establish with it. At another level, it is the heritage of the progress of that knowledge. These distinctions are very clear in Sanskrit. Each human being is part of a ‘physical chain’, but also part of an ‘initiativ chain’ (which is the same as a chain of knowledge), but individually he/she has to ensure his/her own development and self-perfection. These domains coexist, but they refer to different obligations, sometimes contradictory to one another. If you really feel the need to understand the nature of beings and the world, the initiatic tradition will guide you in a process that can be defined as the evolution of knowledge.

**Q |** *Is an intellectual approach to knowledge through conceptualization sufficient on the level of spiritual search? Isn’t there rather a knowledge that must be ‘experienced’?*

**A |** In order to ‘experience’ this knowledge, one has to encounter a true yogi, but the mere fact of the approach I already mentioned is already very important.

**Q |** *You also say that the heritage of knowledge cannot disappear completely. Can you explain why?*

**A |** Of course. If a certain form of knowledge is part of what human beings must know about the universe in order to assume their own role, it cannot disappear without mankind entirely disappearing with it. The world does not develop just by chance. What bothers geneticists is the fact that the final product is already contained at the moment of birth. In the same way, all elements of the human genre are present from the very beginning of its existence, even if it takes millennia to express them. ❖

# EAST AND WEST IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE



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*Rabindranath Tagore, colonial India's greatest intellectual artist, was a multi-faceted genius who absorbed and assimilated the best ideals of both East and West. In this essay, Sunandan Roy Chowdhury, FIND grantee 2018 and editor of the Indian publishing house Sampark, shows how both cultures found a shared meaning in the thought of this great personality.*

ALL PHOTOS ARE COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA BELONGING TO THE EXHIBITION FOR THE 150 ANNIVERSARY OF TAGORE IN 2011

Rabindranath Tagore had many friends, fellow intellectuals, both in the West and the East. Gilbert Murray, Professor of Greek at Oxford, and an internationalist whose contribution to the League of Nations is highly regarded, was one of them. In 1934, Murray wrote a letter to Tagore, and the last paragraph and half read as follows:

*The artists and thinkers, the people whose work or whose words move multitudes, ought to know one another, to understand one another, to work together at the formation of some great League of Mind or Thought independent of miserable frontiers and tariffs and governmental follies, a League or Society of those who live the life of the intellect and through the diverse channels of art or science aim at the attainment of beauty, truth and human brotherhood.*

*I need not appeal to you, Tagore, to join in this quest; you already belong to it; you are inevitably one of its great leaders. I only ask you to recognize the greatness of your own work for the intellectual union of East and West, of thinker with thinker, poet with poet, and to appreciate the work that may be done by the intellectuals of India not merely for their own national aims, however just and reasonable they may be; there is a higher task to be attempted in healing the discords of the political and material world by the magic of that inward community of spiritual life which even amid our worst failures reveals to us Children of Men our brotherhood and our high destiny.*

*Believe me, with deep respect,  
Yours sincerely,  
Gilbert Murray<sup>1</sup>*

This letter was written when the war clouds on the sky of Europe were gradually gathering. It was written by a man who was, I feel, a true internationalist and to a man who embodied universalism, of course, with his special touch to it.

To understand how East and West shaped Tagore we need an understanding of the India and Calcutta that he was born into, and the formative years of his life. It is important to understand the religious, social and cultural influences on the young Tagore.

Rabindranath was born in 1861. In 1857, four years before his birth, British India – which was in some ways inaugurated in 1757 with a victory of the English East India Company in a battle famously known as the Battle of Plassey (Palashi in Bengali) - was rocked by a revolt in the British Indian army. Indian soldiers – Muslims and Hindus - of the British Raj rose in revolt and their revolt was fuelled by the challenge to the British from a group of Indian rulers. However, this revolt popularly known as the Sepoy Mutiny did not succeed. The British reinforced their military and administrative prowess. Though soldiers rose in revolt and the rulers, mostly from north India challenged British rule, the English-educated Bengali middle class of Calcutta – then the capital of British India - did not support the rebels. It is amply clear that the English-educated middle classes of India were in favour of British rule. Administrative and military superiority was further reinforced in the minds of the people of this newly English-educated class by a dominant belief that the English had a superior culture to that of India. In structural terms, a major development that followed the

Mutiny of 1857 was the creation of the first three universities in British India, namely, those in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

Rabindranath with Countess Anna de Noailles, the French Minister of Fine Arts, and Victoria Ocampo (seated) at his exhibition at the Galerie Pigalle, Paris, May 1930.



It was in such a world that Rabindranath Tagore was born. His grandfather Dwarakanath was an astute businessman and made a great fortune in the opium trade – between British India and China, at its high point in the first half of the nineteenth century. Dwarakanath's father, a landlord, had built a family mansion in the heart of colonial Calcutta and Dwarakanath's wealth ensured that the family enjoyed an extremely affluent and international lifestyle. While Dwarakanath himself was a close friend of Rammohun Roy, a bold social reformer and founder of the Brahma religious sect, Rabindranath's father Abanindranath was a devout Brahma and attached great value to spiritual life. The family was profoundly Westernized. Members of the large extended Tagore family brought changes in women's wear and adopted Western mores – most notably in women's blouses, playing the piano and experimenting with the blending of Indian and Western musical styles and immersed themselves in English and Western literature. And the influences were not only limited to matters of culture. Rabindranath's eldest brother became the first Indian to qualify for the Imperial Civil Service, a British institution meant for governing the vast unruly Indian world. So, there were clear signs that the family believed in the British-Indian order of the day. So much so that when Tagore became a school dropout at the age of fourteen, this eldest brother of his famously commented that Rabi i.e. Rabindranath was a good-for-nothing fellow.

It was this Anglo-Indian world that formed the backdrop of Rabindranath's early years. While he was a quiet rebel in that he dropped out of school early, many elements of this world influenced him deeply. Music, for one, definitely opened up his senses to the notes of the Western world. But more profoundly, he believed in the Brahma religion. He had his own sense of modernity and he admired this modernity as manifested in the personality of Rammohun Roy.

I quote Tagore, as he talks about Rammohun:

*In India what is needed more than anything else, is the broad mind which, only because it is conscious of its own vigorous individuality, is not afraid of accepting truth from all sources. Fortunately for us we know what such a mind has meant in an individual who belongs to modern India. I speak of Rammohun Roy. His learning, because of its depth and comprehensiveness, did not merely furnish him with materials for scholarship, but trained his capacity to discriminate between things that are essential and those that are non-essential in the culture which was his by inheritance. This helped him to realize that truth can never be foreign, that money and material may exclusively belong to the particular country that produces them, but not knowledge, or ideas, or immortal forms of art.*

*In Rammohun Roy's life we find a concrete illustration of what India seeks, the true indication of her goal. Thoroughly steeped in the best culture of his country, he was capable of finding himself at home in the larger world. His culture was not for rejection of those cultures which came from foreign sources; on the contrary, it had an uncommon power of sympathy which could adjust itself to them with respectful receptiveness.*

*The ideal I have formed of the culture which should be universal in India, has become clear to me from the life of Rammohun Roy. I have come to feel that the mind which has been matured in the profound knowledge of its own country, and of the perfect thoughts that have been produced in that land, is ready to accept and assimilate the cultures that come from foreign countries. <sup>2</sup>*

There are a few key concepts that Tagore imbibes from Rammohun or in other words concepts where Rammohun's worldview finds admiration and acceptance in Tagore. The first is modernity. Tagore sees Rammohun as modern, and even though there is no explicit mention, this modernity in the Indian context is colonial modernity. European colonialism creates its own modernity or 'modernities', if you wish. Rammohun Roy was a product of that modernity, a unique encounter of West and East that happened in the colonized world. A second concept, intimately related to the first, is that the modern mind such as Rammohun's and by extension Tagore himself as well, has the discretionary powers to accept and reject from the cultural world that one is born into. In Rammohun's life we see the movement against Sati [suttee] – a practice where widows were forced to be burnt on the funeral pyre of their dead husband. It was a clear case where Rammohun rejected the culture of his time and stood headstrong to reform it. And such acts must have influenced Tagore. The third concept which forms the third strand in this triangle, is that of assimilation. One, your mind is modern, two, you do not accept all that is yours, and three, you freely take from other cultures and in turn blend them into your culture. This assimilation is integral to any notion of modernity in colonial and post-colonial India. Rammohun had assimilated ideas of the West and of the East into his intellectual being. And Tagore hails this assimilation. Clearly, Rammohun and his Brahma movement were sources of great influence on the young Tagore.

Here one should add a few words about the Brahma movement. With the onset of colonial rule in India in the late eighteenth century, Christianity and Christian missions also became a prominent force in the land. A dominant strand of thought among British colonialists and European missionaries was that Indian religion and culture were inferior to Christian/Western ones. Among other things, the protagonists of the church looked down

upon Hindu idolatry. The self-respect of the higher classes and intellectuals of India took a beating at the constant tirade against their social customs and religious practices. Men of reason such as Rammohun started searching for answers and looked deep into the traditions and knowledge resources of India. In that enquiry, the thought of the Upanishads – ancient Indian texts in Sanskrit gave new light. Rammohun and his peers founded a religion called the Brahma religion which believed in a singular formless God. It rejected idolatry altogether and created a new religion based on rational texts of ancient India. In a word, this was India's or the Indians' answer to the cultural ascendancy and arrogance of Western rule as it had manifested in India in the nineteenth century. The East-West encounter created new thought structures in India and the Brahma religion was one of those. To give one example as to how markedly different Brahmaism was from traditional Hindu practices, the Brahmans would sit in a prayer room and there were chants, but there would be a complete absence of any idol of a god or goddess – the hallmark of a Hindu temple. While there was a rejection of inherited cultural practices, there was also assimilation. The forms of prayer, specially chanting had elements of Christian prayers, not so much in content but definitely in form, in the way prayers were performed with solemnity. So, as we see, East and West, West and East blended early into Tagore's consciousness.

In his autobiographical *Atmaparichay* we hear him say,

*there was a genuinely deep love of English literature among my elders. Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott had a strong influence over our family. ...* <sup>3</sup>

So, this was the immediate East and immediate West of Tagore in the formative years of his boyhood and youth. The Upanishadic tradition of solemn reason-centric spirituality, the Brahma religion – itself a result of East-West encounter and English/Western ideas and ideals of liberalism, romanticism and humanitarianism were the initial ways in which West and East shaped the mind of Tagore. As much as he had stepped aside from the dominant Hindu world of his immediate East, later in his life he would also be immensely disillusioned and disappointed by some major Western ideas/ideals too.

In this paper I concentrate on his essayistic writings, his letters, his travelogues – often in the form of letters, his conversations with fellow intellectuals, and other forms of communication. It is these texts of his that offers us a repository to understand how West and East shaped him. In other words, how he navigated through the concept worlds of the West and the East.

## The West in Tagore

In *Meeting of the West and the East* he writes,

*I say as an individual that the West and the East did meet in India in my younger days. It was the same feeling which I had when I listened to those in my family who recited verses from English literature and from the great poets of those days. Then also I felt as if a new prophet of the human world had been revealed to my mind.*

*You all know it was the last vanishing twilight of the Romantic West. We had been living in the atmosphere of the lyrical literature of poets like Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and we know what inspiration they had within them. And what it was for*

*the rest of the world. There was an upheaval of idealism. In Europe, the French Revolution had not died out, and people were dreaming of freedom, of the brotherhood of man. They still believed in the human ideals that have their permanent value, ultimate value in themselves. And it moved my heart. I cannot express how it did move my soul.*

*...The West at that time believed in freedom of personality. We heard about Garibaldi, about Mazzini, and it was a new revelation, an aspect of humanity with which we were not quite familiar – the great ideal of the freedom of man, freedom of self-expression for all races and all countries. <sup>4</sup>*

The romantic ideal appealed to Tagore and many of his fellow Indians. Individuality too was a Western idea/theme that attracted many modern Indians. The idea of being modern for Indians in colonial India was informed with themes such as freedom and individuality. And both of these appealed to Tagore as well. So, if one sees that Tagore admired the freedom to select and reject from one's cultural world, this celebration of freedom is a wisdom or a way of thinking where the West is the lighthouse. And the same is the case with individuality.

Tagore writes in *East and West*,

*Willingly therefore I harness myself, in my advanced age to the arduous responsibility of creating in our Educational Colony in Santiniketan a spirit of genuine international collaboration based on a definite pursuit of knowledge, a pursuit carried on in an atmosphere of friendly community life, harmonized with Nature and offering freedom of individual self-expression. ... Individuality is precious, because only through it we can realize the universal. ...the individual in the West has no unsurpassable barrier between himself and the rest of humanity. He may have his prejudices, but no irrational injunctions to keep him in internment from the wide world of men <sup>5</sup>*

Much as Tagore celebrates individuality, Europe's message of freedom also appealed to him greatly. He writes,

*There was a time when we were fascinated by Europe. She had inspired us with a new hope. We believed that her chief mission was to preach the gospel of liberty to the world. We had come then to know only her ideal side through her literature and art.” <sup>6</sup>*

### **What does Asia think of Christian Civilisation?**

In 1926, in an interview with F. L. Minigerode of the New York Times, Rabindranath eloquently talked about his thoughts on Europe, where he felt inspired by Europe and where he felt disappointed. He himself uttered a few times, 'What does Asia think of Christian civilization?' and went on to give his answers to the question.

*As a boy I looked eagerly forward to the time when I should pay my first visit to Europe. I dreamed of magnificent things there – not material things, but fine thoughts, fine characteristics. I looked forward to a meeting, there people with conscience*

*that guided not only the individual but the nation. I had, however, counted too much upon the spirituality that seemed to abound in the early days of the nineteenth century ...*

*... [those] made me believe that in Europe I should find a consciousness in men, in peoples, in nations; that I should discover a continent where all the people were striving for high ideals – I was poignantly disappointed.”<sup>7</sup>*

The central point that emerges from this passage is that the poet was searching for spirituality in the West. Knowing the early influences on Tagore this should not surprise us. As I have mentioned earlier in this paper, he grew up in an atmosphere where the reason-centric spirituality of the Upanishads and the Brahmo religion held sway. His mind, I suppose not least because of his father’s influence, developed a spiritual leaning early on.

*In my travels through the so-called highly civilized countries – in Europe, in America, in Japan – I have found all the existing influences carrying the nations headlong toward material things, to the exclusion of spiritual things.<sup>8</sup>*

Clearly, for Tagore, freedom and individuality were key points but he was a deep soul and his quintessential search in life was for the soul’s meanings, for the emancipation that leads the soul to purer and purer stages. And in the West too, he tried to find this soul. While he had troubles with accepting certain parts of modern Western civilization, he nevertheless found purity of soul in the West and this he found in the embodiment of Christ. Troubled with the pursuit of material pleasures in the West, he evokes the figure of Christ.

He told his American interviewer that if Christ came to New York he would be forcibly turned back for lack of dollars, if for no other reason. He goes on to say,

*Is it not true today that such an utterance as “Blessed are the meek” is political blasphemy? Suppose Christ said in America: “Blessed are the poor.” It would be judged economic heresy. And if He told your country that it is as easy for the prosperous to reach the Kingdom of Heaven as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, would he not be thrown into prison? Perhaps America would not go so far as to inflict physical punishment upon Christ because of his utterances.<sup>9</sup>*

While on one hand he makes this satirical remark about the reception of Christ in modern day America, Christ holds an unending and deep appeal for Tagore. He writes to Edward Thompson, his English friend and biographer,

*Indeed it is a great pity that the Europeans have come to us as Imperialists rather than as Christians and so have deprived our people of their true contact with the religion of Jesus Christ. A few individuals like C.F. Andrews, whom we have known as the true followers of their Teacher, have created in us a respect for Christianity which the most brutal lathi charges, shootings and detentions without trial of the British Government in India have failed totally to dissipate.<sup>10</sup>*

It is amply clear that Tagore is in spiritual unison with the soul of Christ and his indictment of the modern West is because, he feels, that the pursuit of material goals and the greed for money has led the modern West to turn its back to the ideals of Christ. This is the central cause of his unquiet in his encounters with the West.

While he is critical of the materiality of the West, he does not overlook the patterns of history, and advocates a marriage of Eastern and Western ideals.

*Anyhow, the Western continents have been striving for liberation from the maya of matter striking hard whenever they encounter any of the roots of that ignorance which breeds hunger and thirst, disease and want or other ills of mundane life. In other word, they have been engaged in securing for man protection against physical death. On the other hand the striving of the Eastern peoples has been to win for man his spiritual kingdom, to lead him to immortality. By their present separateness East and West alike are now in danger of losing the fruits of their age-long labours. That is why the Upanishad, from the beginning, has enunciated the principle, which yet may serve to unite them. ‘Gain protection’, it says, ‘from death by the cult of the finite, and then by the cult of the infinite you shall attain immortality’. All that moves in the moving world is science. ‘God envelops all this’ is the province of the philosophy of the Infinite. When the Rishi enjoins us to combine them both, then that implies the union of the East and the West. For want of that union, the East is suffering from poverty and inertia and the West from lack of peace and happiness. <sup>11</sup>*

Here, as we see, Tagore enunciates the principles he feels are the central bloodline of both Eastern and Western civilizations. I feel that there is some amount of over-generalization in such a formulation and it may not present an accurate picture of either the East or the West. But, if we take Tagore’s view of the *longue durée* – to use Fernand Braudel’s phrase, of the two civilizations, then what is significant is the marriage he proposes, and the reasons on which he grounds his proposal.



Tagore in Osaka with Yokohama Taikan, W. W. Pearson, Mukul Dey and other Japanese friends, 1916.

His unquiet with the West though becomes accentuated with the onset of the First World War and then it keeps coming back till his death in 1941 in the middle of the Second World War. And, of course, his most profound critique of the West are his lectures on nationalism, published in 1917, a year before the First World War ends and in the same year that Lenin led Russia to revolution.

*“And what is the harvest of your civilization? You do not see from the outside. You do not realize what a terrible menace you have become to man. We are afraid of you. And everywhere people are suspicious of each other. All the great countries of*

*the West are preparing for war, for some great work of desolation that will spread poison all over the world. And this poison is within their own selves. They try, and try to find some solution, but they do not succeed, because they have lost their faith in the personality of man.*

*They do not believe in the wisdom of the soul. ... They have efficiency, but that alone does not help. Why? Because man is human, while machinery is impersonal. Men of power have efficiency in outward things; but the personality of man is lost. You do not feel it, the divine in man, the divinity which is humanity.”<sup>12</sup>*

As you can see, Rabindranath is not an ardent admirer of system. His critique of the West, that he repeats time and again, and most forcefully pens in the nationalism lectures of 1917, is that the West has built systems and has butchered the soul of the individual on the altar of systems. This could well be true though I myself am not completely in agreement with Tagore on the system versus individual human soul thematic. His indictment of the West continues especially when he discusses nation and nationalism.

*Today the Western people have come in contact with all the races of the world when their moral adjustment has not yet been made true for this tremendous experience. The reality of which they are most fervidly conscious is the reality of the Nation. It has served them up to a certain point, just as some amount of boisterous selfishness, pugnacious and inconsiderate, may serve us in our boyhood ...But the time has come at last when the Western people are beginning to feel nearer home what the cult of the nation has been to humanity, they who have reaped all its benefits, with a great deal of its costs thrown upon the shoulders of others.*

*Europe is fully conscious of her greatness and that itself is the reason why she does not know where her greatness may fail her. There have been periods of history when great races of men forgot their own souls in the pride and enjoyment of their power and possessions. ... Through this present war has come the warning to Europe that her things have been getting better of her truth and in order to be saved she must find her soul and her God and fulfill her purpose by carrying her ideals into all continents of the earth and not sacrifice them to her greed of money and domination.<sup>13</sup>*

It is amply clear that while he is uncomfortable with nation, the immediate source of his indignation towards the West is the First World War. It is important to note that his lectures on nationalism were delivered in 1917 when the First World War was going on. And he sees the pursuit of money and empire as the reasons for war, and he urges Europe to leave them and embrace its own great ideals; and these ideals as we have seen earlier are those of freedom, of individuality, of brotherhood.

And he eloquently holds forth on his view of the Christian world; for him, Christ is the one who leads humans to salvation. One can clearly see his angst about the nearly total reliance on systems in modern Europe. And his assertion that more than machines which will rust themselves out, it is the human spirit that is the undying flame. He sees that the West thrives on law and order and elbows out through a maze of systems the possibility of a great man or a great woman.

In the context of colonial domination, he thinks nation and nationalism not only oppress the colonized but the colonizer as well.

*It is the continual and stupendous dead pressure of this inhuman upon the living human under which the modern world is groaning. Not merely the subject races,*

*but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are every day sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of world-wide suspicion and greed and panic.<sup>14</sup>*

Does he see any solution to the problems? His answer to that is in the following lines.

*I have often been asked by my Western friends how to cope with this evil, which has attained such sinister strength and dimensions. In fact, I have often been blamed for merely giving a warning, and offering no alternative. When we suffer as a result of a particular system, we believe that some other system would bring us better luck. We are apt to forget that all systems produce evil sooner or later, when the psychology which is at the root of them is wrong. ...*

*...Therefore I do not put my faith in any new institution, but in the individuals all over the world who think clearly, feel nobly, and act rightly, thus becoming the channels of moral truth. Our moral ideals do not work with chisels and hammers. Like trees, they spread their roots in the soil and their branches in the sky, without consulting any architect for their plans.<sup>15</sup>*

## China and Japan in the mind of the poet

While Tagore's immediate East was India and the Calcutta he was born into, we have now seen his intellectual encounter with the West, but there was also the East of China and Japan for him that was a luminous encounter for both sides.

When Tagore visited China in 1924, everyone in India's Eastern neighbor was impressed by his views. While critiques were there, Tagore's supporters were also many. Among them it is particularly important to note the thoughts of Liang Chi Chao, who was president of the Universities Association, Peking. He gave the welcome address before Tagore spoke. And, he not only lauded Tagore but more importantly he saw China and India as two brothers. He described India as China's elder brother and he went on to delineate how in a great number of fields in the past India had contributed to the culture, religion and society of China thereby enriching the Chinese world. He singled out India as the only civilization that China has looked up to through the centuries.

As far as China is concerned, Tagore had only positive words to say. And, when it came to the China – Japan issue, he sided with China and did not mince his words when he spoke on Japanese military expansion in China. However, he has written at greater length on Japan and showed mostly a positive appreciation of Japan with the lone critique of nationalism in Japan and its concomitant aggressive expansionist posture.

In his diary of his Japanese sojourn, we hear his belief that Japan has learnt technology from the West but Japan will not give up its soul. He writes,

*In Japan, the Eastern mind has received the education for work from the West but they themselves are the rulers of their own work. Hence a hope gathers in my mind that may be in Japan we will see a synchronization of the work efficiency of the West with the feel of the East. If that happens, then that will be the ideal of unity.<sup>16</sup>*

He also comments on the harmony in work culture of China and Japan. He praises the

fact that the cultures take great pride in physical labour and he sees a certain dignity manifested in their physical labour. He wishes for the day when the same rhythm of work will be witnessed in India. He particularly appreciates the fact of women and men working together.

Another element of Japanese life and social organization that touches his mind is the celebration of beauty in every inch of society. Yet while seeing the celebration of beauty, he is also pained to see the ill effects of imitation of the modern West in Japan. He laments in one of his letters that in all his journeys he has witnessed how modern industrialism has cast a long ugly shadow on the entire world and one cannot escape from it wherever one travels. He also regrets that Japan has changed from its traditional wear to Western clothes and he bemoans this Westernization.

However, alongside Westernization, he finds the real self of Japan in things such as minimalism and brevity. He is particularly appreciative of Haiku poetry, how in three lines Japanese genius can express itself beautifully and aptly.

He gives examples of such poems.

*Heaven and earth are flowers*

*Gods and Buddha are flowers*

*The human soul is the inner sanctum of the flower*<sup>17</sup>

He says that in this poem the unity of Japan with India has found expression; the fact that on the same branch there are the twin flowers, of heaven and earth, gods and the Buddha – if the human soul were absent these flowers would only be external things – the beauty of the beautiful is only because of the human soul.

A particular facet of Japanese life that Tagore admires is restraint, with words, with actions; in every moment of individual and social life. He says that if two cyclists clash and both fall down on the road, they get up, dust off the dirt from their bodies and they go their way. When Tagore asked the Japanese where they had obtained this national character of restraint, they told him that it was because of Buddha's teachings. Tagore feels Buddhism forms the central theme of Japanese life. And there he sees that the message of unity and of restraint has been the great gift of Buddhism to Japan. That brings us back to his idea of the great personality. It is Buddha's teachings that he feels are central to the development of Japan over the centuries.

## Concluding Remarks

In the West the personality of Christ, in the East the personality of Buddha and in modern times the personality of Gandhi. Tagore's West and Tagore's East revolve around the celebration of great men, men whose teachings can influence millions, can create unity among cultures and lead to understanding between men and men between societies in the East and West. There is one other central element that informs his worldview, and that is suffering. As we know, in Christ's life and in Buddha's teachings, suffering forms a very central plank. In Tagore's thoughts too suffering is a core idea; it verges almost on a conviction.

*Our voice is not the voice of authority, with the power of arms behind it, but the voice*

*of suffering which can only count upon the power of truth to make itself heard.*<sup>18</sup>

And, his voice was heard, with great attention, by intellectuals in the East, in India and in China and Japan, and even more in the West where intellectuals and scientists as great as Romain Rolland and Albert Einstein had deep conversations with him, and some - as we have seen at the beginning of the paper - urged him to take the role of leading a world peace movement, as it were.

To conclude, I see some important axes in his thought world. One, his critique of the modern West's excess of science and efficiency and, two, when all of this gets organized under the rubric of nationalism and is expressed either as colonialism or as aggressive nationalism leading to conflicts among industrialized nations; third, the human greed that capitalism feeds on and, fourth, the imitation of the West in the East and in the world in general.

His worldview is to counter these ills in an exploration of truth and divinity through suffering, through a genuine unity of cultures and through the celebration of beauty in everyday life. He wants to rely on great men of past and present for the deliverance of human societies. He feels it is these great men who will lead us to the light. I will end my paper with a Buddhist saying, which shows that personality is important, but organization too has its importance. And as Buddhists would chant,

*Dhammam saranam gachchhami.*

*Shangham saranam gachchhami*

*Buddham saranam gachchhami*

Follow the path of Dharma

Follow the path of Sangha (i.e. Organised Order)

Follow the path of Buddha.

1. Letter from Gilbert Murray to Tagore, 17 August, 1934, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (EWT), New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1996
2. Letter from Tagore to Gilbert Murray, 16 September, 1934, EWT
3. *Atmaparichay* [in Bengali], Reprint, Calcutta, Viswa Bharati, 1993
4. *Meeting of the East and the West*, EWT
5. *East and West*, EWT
6. *ibid.*, EWT
7. Interview with F.L. Minigerode of the New York Times, 1926, EWT
8. *ibid.*, EWT
9. *ibid.*, EWT
10. Letter from Tagore to Edward Thompson, 27 October 1937, quoted in U. Das Gupta Edited, *The Oxford India Tagore*, New Delhi, OUP, 2009
11. Tagore, *Union of Cultures*, EWT
12. Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, San Francisco, San Francisco Book Club, 1917
13. Tagore, *The Meeting of the East and the West*, EWT
14. Tagore, *Nationalism*
15. *ibid.*
16. Rabindranath Tagore, *Japanyatri* (in Bengali), Reprint, Calcutta, Viswa Bharati, 2015
17. Tagore, *Japanyatri* (in Bengali), Translation from Bengali to English is mine
18. Tagore, *Nationalism*

# BĀBĀ KĪNĀRĀM AND THE AGHORĪ TRADITION IN NORTHERN INDIA



Christof Zotter

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*The fascinating life of Bābā Kīnārām, the founder of the Aghorī movement in India, presented and analyzed from original Indian sources (in Sanskrit and Hindi) by German indologist Christof Zotter, who has researched the subject of Aghorīs for some years.*

ALL THE IMAGES IN THIS ARTICLE ARE BY CHRISTOF ZOTTER  
TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION BY ADRIÁN NAVIGANTE



The entrance gate of Krīṃkuṇḍ known as the “door of discernment” [vivekadvāra]

### Kīnārām and Aghorīs, British imagination and emic sources

Bābā Kīnārām is the best-known *aghorī* in Northern India, associated with the most fantastic legends about the *aghora sampradāya*. He bears the title *aghorācārya*, that is, master of the *aghora*. This title already contains much more than a mere lexical question: it brings to the fore some important elements of the religious history of India deserving clarification.

The word *a-ghora* (the *a* being the equivalent of an *alpha privativum* in Greek) dates back to Sūrya’s Bridal Hymn in the *Rigveda* (10.84.), which states that the bride should not have a gruesome look [*aghoracakṣus* = ‘not evil-eyed’]. Both the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* (4.5.11.) and the *Śvestāsvatara Upaniṣad* (3.5.) use the adjective *aghorā* (in the feminine) to refer to Rudra’s manifested form [*tanū*] as friendly and not fearful. The word is also used to refer to the fifth face of *pancamūkha* Shiva in the sense of ‘not-terrible/dreadful’, and is usually understood as a euphemism in this context<sup>1</sup>. The modern noun *aghorī*, lit. “the one who is aghora”, is often seen as a euphemistic designation, too. A description of the ‘dreadful’ behaviour of *aghorīs* appears in almost every book about Hinduism. These ascetics are associated not only with Bābā Kīnārām’s heritage, but even with that of a much older group called *kāpālikas* (skull-bearers) and known for their marginality and norm transgression. As for instance H.W. Barrow reports, the *aghorīs* appear in many court cases in colonial India at the end of the XIX century, usually accused of cannibalism, necrophagy, and manslaughter<sup>2</sup>. Barrow’s source was the three-volume manuscript by E. T. Leith, “Notes on the Aghori and Cannibal-

ism in India”. This manuscript, however, was not only based on court cases, but is a hotch-potch of information gathered also from travel reports and written exchanges with court officials, journalists and pundits.

There is no doubt that the *aghorīs* were an essential part of British demonology, and in view of the unreliable documents and even more unreliable reports from British authors, it is very difficult—indeed, almost impossible—to unravel facts from fiction. However, there are emic sources which tell us something different, especially when we focus on the founder of the tradition.

### The legendary life of Bābā Kīnārām

According to the official sources of the *kīnārāmī* (followers of the Kīnārām lineage), Bābā Kīnārām was born in the early morning of the 14th of the dark half of the month of Bhādra. His father, a *kṣatriya* called Akbar Siṃha, was at that time 60 years old. Six days after his birth, a name had to be chosen for the child. Considering the age of Akbar Siṃha, the priest suggested giving the child away and buying him back. This symbolic act is usually carried out to protect a new-born when his father is old or when elder siblings might not survive. To this fact, we have to add the ominous date on which he was born: the 14th of the dark half-moon. The circumstances of Kīnārām’s birth and childhood point on the one hand to a certain aura of transgression and marginality and on the other hand to typical signs of an extraordinary personality associated with saintliness.

In the book *Auḡhar Rām Kīnā Kathā* (edited by Lakṣmaṇ Śukla), we find the episode of Kīnārām’s reluctance to drink milk until he was initiated by Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva who came to him disguised as three sages. The story of his marriage is linked with this early episode and highlights in typical hagiographic style the extraordinary insight of this man: following the traditional custom, the first marriage (arranged by his parents) took place when he was 9 years old<sup>3</sup>. Three years later, in the context of the *gaunā* ceremony (his second marriage), he felt the urge to drink milk and eat rice. Since milk and rice are known as a dish for widows, Kīnārām’s mother opposed his wish. But he insisted so vehemently that she had to give in. Immediately after he finished, the family received the news of the death of his wife to-be.

The young man abandoned his house shortly after the ceremony and sought a guru. He went to Ghazipur and there encountered a lay saint called Śivārām, who became his first spiritual guide. Kīnārām is said to have served him until the death of Śivārām’s wife, at which point he left him and continued his pilgrimage. Interestingly enough, some sources<sup>4</sup> affirm that Śivārām was none other than Kīnārām himself, and argue that the boy known as “Kīnā”, in Bhojpuri meaning the “the bought one” (see above), received in his name giving ceremony also a secret name chosen according to his zodiac sign [*rāśī*]: Śivā. In any case, saints do not only encounter teachers, and the story of Kīnārām includes many other episodes in which he met people whom he helped, such as a woman from a town called Naīgaḍīh or Naīdīh whose son had been taken prisoner and flogged because he could not pay his debts. Kīnārām freed him and showed him a buried treasure to help him pay what he owed his landlord. Full of gratitude and awe, the young man became his first disciple and adopted the name Bijārām. He accompanied Kīnārām on his pilgrimages, and one day,

while begging for alms in a city, they were sent to prison (as was usual with beggars owing to the law) and condemned to grind corn. Kīnārām ordered all sādhus in prison to stop working and when they did so, he beat one of the mills with his stick and shouted *cal* (“rotate”). At that moment, all the mills began to rotate at the same time. On seeing this scene, the *navāb* threw himself at Kīnārām’s feet and freed him together with all the imprisoned sādhus. Variants of this legend exist, for example in Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi’s book “The Sacred Complex of Kashi. A microcosm of Indian Civilization”, in which the main character of the story is an aughar called Kharab Das (instead of Kīnārām)<sup>5</sup>, or even in William Crooke’s essay “Aghori, Aghorapanthi, Aughar”, according to which Kīnārām frees his teacher, not his disciple<sup>6</sup>.



Wall painting in Śivāla (Benares) showing Bābā Kīnārām on his throne with his guru Kālūrām (left) and his disciples Bījārām and Jiyāvanrām (right)

More important than these standard hagiographical accounts are perhaps the legends showing other important elements of the Aghorī tradition: the importance of the Goddess in the life of Kīnārām, the meaning of meat in the Aghorī tradition and the tension between Kīnārām’s spiritual authority and the temporal power of kings. Concerning the first aspect, Udhayabhāna Siṃha and Lakṣmaṇ Śukla refer to Kīnārām’s pilgrimage to Hinglāj in Beluchistan, where he lighted the ascetic fire [*dhūnī*] and meditated for a couple of days on the banks of the Aghor river<sup>7</sup>. During his meditation, Kīnārām was regularly visited by a woman who brought him food. When he asked her name, she revealed herself as the local goddess Hinglāj Devī. She told him to go to Benares and meet her there at the spiritual centre of Krīmkuṇḍ in the form of a hidden *yantra*. This brings us to the second aspect concerning meat and social engagement (as opposed to vegetarianism and ascetic isolation). Kīnārām established himself at Benares, following Hinglāj Devī’s instructions<sup>8</sup>. But before Kīnārām came to Benares, he went with his disciple Bījārām to the Girnār mountain in



The figure of Dattātreya—a syncretic deity representing the union of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva—occurs in a number of traditions as original preceptor [*ādīguru*]. He is simultaneously worshipped by Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas and Śāktas and is even present in Muslim cults. It is difficult to say whether Kīnārām was initiated by a real guru belonging to the *aghorī* tradition at the mountain of Gīrnār or whether his initiation was the result of a vision [*darśana*] he had at the summit of the mountain. No solid conclusion can be drawn on this subject from existing texts.

Other sources point to yet another guru: an *aghorī* who lived at the Maṇikārṇikāghāṭ with his wife told Vidyarthi that Kīnārām had been following Rāma devotionally for twenty years; he served him, but he could not really find him. One day, Kīnārām had the idea of drinking wine. No sooner had he raised the glass than the god held his hand. Kīnārām spoke thus: “I cannot leave it as it has brought me in contact with you and thus wine is my guru”<sup>14</sup>. There are also other legends linking Kīnārām to the consumption of alcohol – which is also an important element in *aghorī* rituals. We should not forget that some of the legends about Kīnārām present mythological elements linking this saint to the figure of Bhairava, which is the most terrible aspect of Śiva. It is therefore not surprising that many features and figures revolving around Kīnārām have to do with atypical, transgressive and violent behaviour – without being devoid of sacredness. ❖

1 Sir Monier Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1995).

2 H.W. Barrow, “On the Aghoris and Aghorapanthis”, in: *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* 3.4., 1893, pp. 197-251.

3 In some other accounts, he is said to be twelve years old when he married (cf. among others, Paraśurām Caturvedī, *Uttarī Bhārata kī santa-paramparā*, Ilāhābāda 1972, p. 690).

4 Such as, for example, Lakṣmaṇ Śukla, *Aughar Rām Kīnā Kathā*, Vārāṇasī 1988, p. 18, and Udhayabhāna Siṃha, *Aghorācārya Bābā Kīnārām jī*, Vārāṇasī 1999, p. 31.

5 Prasad Vidyarthi, *The Sacred Complex of Kashi. A microcosm of Indian Civilization*, Delhi 1979, p. 302.

6 William Crooke, “Aghori, Aghorapanthi, Aughar”, in: *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume 1, Delhi 1999, p. 27.

7 The river is called Aghor or Hīngol, and the place where Kīnārām meditated is the westernmost *sākta pīṭha* (main shrines and pilgrimage destinations related to Shaktism in the Indian subcontinent).

8 Lakṣmaṇ Śukla, *Aughar Rām Kīnā Kathā*, p. 24 and Udhayabhāna Siṃha, *Aghorācārya Bābā Kīnārām jī*, pp.

67-68. Cf. also Lakṣmaṇ Śukla, *Aughar Rām Kīnā Kathā*, pp. 27-28 and Udhayabhāna Siṃha, *Aghorācārya Bābā Kīnārām jī*, pp. 39-40.

9 Cf. Dharmendra Brahmācārī Śāstrī, *Santamata kī sarabhaṅga-sampradāya*, Paṭṇā 1959, p. 147.

10 Lorenzen explains that supernatural episodes accompanying the death of saints are no exception but rather the rule (see David Lorenzen, “The Life of Nirguṇī Saints”, in: *Bhakti Religion in North India. Community Identity and Political Action*, Albany 1995, pp. 188-189).

11 Cf. Lakṣmaṇ Śukla, *Aughar Rām Kīnā Kathā*, pp. 76-79, and Udhayabhāna Siṃha, *Aghorācārya Bābā Kīnārām jī*, pp. 110-115.

12 William Crooke, “Aghori, Aghorapanthi, Aughar”, in: *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume 1, p. 26-27.

13 Paraśurām Caturvedī, *Uttarī Bhārata kī santa-paramparā*, pp. 692-693, Dharmendra Brahmācārī Śāstrī, *Santamata kī sarabhaṅga sampradāya*, Paṭṇā 1959, p. 139.

14 Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi, *The Sacred Complex of Kashi. A Microcosm of Indian Civilization*, pp. 226, 303).

# VODU AND NATURE: THE VODU ADEPT'S COMMUNION WITH NATURE



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*Basile Kligueh knows African Vodou from the inside and has conducted long-term research on it; he offers a comprehensive picture of this religion based on its cosmology, reconstructing a way of life that brings us closer to Nature and its divine powers.*

The real spelling of the word is VODU (in Ewe) or VODUN (in Fon). Ewe and Fon are the two main languages among the Aja-Tado, the people covering Africa's West Coast, from the Nigeria-Benin border to the Upper Volta Region of Ghana, including Togo: they number over fifty million.

Nowadays, only the Aja-Tado can claim that the word VODU means something in their many languages. In the many Aja-Tado languages, and particularly in Ewe, Vodou means the World of the Invisible Ones. The term is a contraction of the expression "*Evowo fě du*". Translated using popular etymology, it means the World of the Invisible Ones.

In the West, we are usually familiar with "Voodoo" from its variants in Haiti and Latin America. It is also related to Candomblé, Macumba or Santeria. These latter kinds of spiritualism are tainted by Christian practices, because Vodou is one of the few kinds of spirituality that adapts itself in time and space. It resorts to Nature and merges with its environment.

From the farthest Western coast of Africa, among the Aja-Tado, Vodou set off for the New World with the slave trade.

To understand Vodou, you must first understand its operating principle and insert this principle into the life of the Vodou adept: lastly, Vodou Cosmogony will demonstrate how the Vodou adept utilises his environment to draw on the Primordial Energy of Nature, which is called the Invisible. Is that a religion, or way of life?

## The Principle of Vodou

Vodou goes from the psyche to the physical; the invisible is visited to throw light on the visible; all Vodou rites constitute a ritual drama that makes subtle suggestions, through the five senses, to the psyche, which in turn reacts on the physical body through somatisation.

The world in which the Vodou adept lives has both a visible and an invisible side or, in scientifically acceptable terms, a physical and a psychic side. Whatever the Vodou adept deems true in the visible, material or physical world is for him first realised in the invisible world or psyche.

This invisible world is called "Fetomé", the origin of whatever is born on Earth. This superterrestrial world also represents the memory of Mawu, the Supreme Being. We should add that Mawu's memory represents the collective psyche, of which the individual psyche is a link in a chain.

For the Vodou adept, the visible is only a feeble materialisation of the invisible, the invisible controls the visible. He believes that he is conditioned by the dynamics of the invisible realm. How does he deal with that?

A few examples will help to understand better this question of the visible/invisible

mechanism.

Let us consider the trauma caused by an accident, whatever it may be. According to the seriousness of the accident, the victim will remember, long afterwards, all the details of the event. He remembers to the extent that he feels he is dying, both there and now. Science notes and recognises this condition, which is called “trauma”. Victims often receive psychological aid.

Whatever explanations science gives to the principle of memory, I propose the notion of “psychic eyes”. Thus, it is with psychic eyes that the victim sees again the details of his accident, by extrapolation: the individual’s five psychic senses.

In Vodou, psychic messages are sent from far away or near at hand, conceptual or full of imagery, sad or happy, constraining or appeasing. Nowadays, this principle is starting to be used for certain ailments in some Western hospitals, by means of hypnosis.

Each situation constitutes a case apart, but the Vodou adept always proceeds from the inner to the outer, from the invisible towards the visible.

Let us suppose you wish to reproduce someone’s head for the purpose of healing. This means that a disharmony takes place at the level of the person’s head, which may range from simple matters with no outcome to madness itself. In this case, an anthropomorphic head is made, representing the patient’s head. The ceremony or ritual drama witnessed by the patient formulates clear and precise messages that the five senses, as channels of communication, understand and integrate. Sometimes, the subtle nature of the message goes beyond the understanding of the five senses, but the psyche records and integrates them



The individual is confronted by his own head, which he must integrate: the mirror of himself

PHOTO: XXX

perfectly. In such a case, we may think of subliminal images.

The ritual drama of making the anthropomorphic statuette whispers to the five senses that “his head is being made”. This is what I call *suggestion*. The patient goes back home with the statuette of his own head. Later, he must perform certain rites more or less regularly with the statuette; not only to continue the rebalancing rite for his own head, but also – and

above all – to reintegrate it. This is what I term *autosuggestion*.

The individual's psyche can be tuned with his physical side by replacing the patient with a family member or animal (ram, chicken, pigeon, etc.). This can be performed either in the patient's presence, or during the ritual drama in his absence. The case of Nicéphore Soglo, a former president of the Republic of Benin, provides a good illustration.

“During the first democratic presidential elections in Benin, Nicéphore Soglo was very sick. He was unable to stand and his bodyguards had to support him to the ballot box. A spell had been cast on him. France repatriated Mr. Soglo to Paris and hospitalized him at the Val de Grâce. Leading French medical specialists saw their illustrious patient slipping away from them and could not diagnose his sickness. His family brought from Kétou a traditional practitioner, who worked in parallel with the invisible forces to rebalance the president while modern Western medicine revigorated his physical body”<sup>1</sup>.

For the Vodou adept, all our ills and joys dwell first in our psyche: our physical body and its ecological environment are but the poor vessels of the material manifestations of the invisible, of the psyche.

## **Vodou, a way of life**

Over twenty years ago, in my doctoral thesis, I maintained that Vodou is a religion. Nowadays, however, I doubt it is just a religion. The more I go into it, the more I see Vodou as a philosophy, a way of life, a spirituality in which the human being finds his balance and reconciles himself with his environment. At the same time, the environment turns out to be very complex. It starts with the Vodou adept himself, extending to his family, both on his father's and mother's sides. The environment embraces society and includes nature. The common point to all these environments lies in their visible and invisible, physical and psychic aspects; two opposites that support, penetrate and balance each other.

Every three years, the Malgaches dig up the family bones: the ceremony consists in exhuming the remains of an ancestor, and gathering the whole extended family to have a feast. The bones are replaced in a new shroud and reburied.

Among Vodou adepts, no exhumation takes place.

The fact of not exhuming the dead belongs to the sphere of Ancestor worship. In our prayers, we invoke them in a way that suggests that they are absent but present. They are in the invisible realm, in our memories, transmitted from generation to generation. This is a collective memory, to which our prayers all too often have recourse: not only do we invoke them systematically in our prayers, but the living must also harmonise with the spirits of the Ancestors, and there is also the question of reincarnation.

In certain Ewe communities, it is forbidden to eat bat meat, which is an excellent red meat. Dove meat is also forbidden. Observing these taboos honours the memory of the Ancestors and Nature. This is because, at a certain moment in our migratory history, these animals saved the life of our Ancestors when they pleaded for the aid of the Supreme Being, Mawu, in times of peril. Even intellectuals observe these taboos, albeit without understanding the reason for them, nor asking why, since the whole world is harmonised thereby.

Among most of the Ewé, male babies are circumcised after their eighth day, but only if their umbilical cord has fallen off. This operation, which plays a primary role in hygiene, has to be understood at a second level: when the umbilical cord falls off, the child no longer belongs only to his mother, but to the whole community. This is why, on the eighth day – only if the umbilical cord has fallen off – the child, whether boy or girl, is presented to the sun and its first name is revealed in public.

The purpose of the yam or maize festival is to give thanks to Nature, particularly the environment and the spirits of the ancestors, for giving us the harvest. Here, nature and the spirits of the ancestors are related to Mawu, the Supreme Being. Without performing these festive rituals, no one in the community concerned can eat the new yams or the latest maize harvest. For these festivals, members who have moved away return to the community, and the whole extended family is reunited at least once a year.

In actual fact, the festival of the sacred stone in the south of Togo commemorates the spirits of those Ancestors who made the one-way journey into slavery. To all appearances, an ox is offered to the sea so that the Supreme Being will provide an abundance of fish. Most of the population are not fishermen however, but merchants, and in reality the ox is offered

instead of a human being, so that no child belonging to the community may ever again make this journey with no return.

### The festival of the sacred stone in the south of Togo commemorates the spirits of those Ancestors who made the one-way journey into slavery

With regard to individual taboos, they can be classified in two categories: taboos linked to a Vodou that treats sickness, and taboos linked to initiation into Fa-destiny. Such taboos are prophylactic. Some special types of Vodou are for the treat-

ment of certain kinds of sickness. This means that the ecological ingredients that compose the Vodou serve to treat sickness. If you are healed of your sickness in the temple of this particular Vodou or by a priest of this Vodou, you will often be considered as belonging to the community of this Vodou. You become one of its “Children”. It goes without saying that you observe the precepts and taboos of this Vodou, because you have a particular profile.

You can also be initiated into your destiny. I call it the Fa-destiny. It is the Word (Breath) through which the Supreme Being (Mawu) has fashioned your present incarnation. This word constitutes a profile: at a minimum it traces the outlines of the fields in which your life will be successful. The allegories of the sign of your Fa-destiny (Kpôli = the fence being erected) show what the ecological elements of “Nature” (Cosmos?), often personified (cf. *Lafontaine’s Fables* for example; others would say “gods”), have done to Fetomé, Mawu’s memory, before being on earth today. These allegories can make you in the field of Fetomé a rat, a monkey, a lion, a snake, a baobab, or even cotton, and so on. Each of these elements constitutes a very precise profile that the priests must conjure out of Fetomé (the Supreme Being’s Memory) and adapt their characteristics and properties to the life of the initiate. In this, we see what they do to nourish, defend and protect themselves: in short, their life. To give an example of this: the sign *Fu-mèdzi* means that when the tortoise withdraws into its shell, no predator can catch it. Indeed, when the tortoise withdraws into its shell, what we have is a round ball with nothing coming out of it. An initiate of this sign may be physically plump. As a character, the person must (his main taboo) always round off the corners of everything in his or her life. The strange lines that decorate the tortoise’s shell are the traces left by the talons of sparrowhawks, lions, and panthers that have sought to catch and eat the

tortoise. But their talons, however sharp they may be, only slide off the tortoise's shell. This means that the struggles of the *Fu-mèdzi* initiate will leave visible and durable traces on his or her life. The taboos of this initiate may be not to eat tortoises or kill them, to be always vigilant, and to reject compromise. Very often, the taboos intervene when the person does exactly the contrary of what is good for everyone else. At that point, by way of example, the following may be said to the *Fu-mèdzi* initiate: "Don't forget that, although the tortoise has withdrawn into his shell, when fire is applied to his behind, he comes out!"

Sometimes, new initiates say: "Me? I'm used to eating this meat", or "That's my favourite colour! That's how I see things; that's how I've always lived!"

Personally, I propose a deal to the new initiate: for one week, he must do what he usually does. The following week, he must scrupulously observe the taboos. Then, he makes his choice. So far, they voluntarily choose the taboos after experiencing them in their own lives.

I still believe that many things happen in the psyche and that very often the psyche manifests itself physically. The life of a Vodou adept is not a calmly-flowing river. The individual recognises himself in the community and the community recognises itself in the individual. Incidentally, a proverb says that "If there's a single redhead in the village, the village will be known as the village of redheads".

A consultation for an illness may require the individual to be reconciled with his brother, his sister, or any family member, or even to reveal the problem of a friend or of an absent family member. This inconsequential ritual of being reconciled to a family member necessarily reunites the family in seeking to maintain solidarity.

Consultation may reveal that the individual covets someone else's wife: it may just be a fantasy in his mind. The ritual may require him to leave the village, or do any sort of thing to teach him that taking someone else's wife destroys the community: disorder in the family, shame, quarrels, even altercations between two clans. On top of that, legend has it that an adulterous couple remained stuck together and could only come apart in the market place; another says that a man maintains a continual erection until his penis reaches his knees. Whether or not such legends are true, they help reinforce the taboo concerning other men's wives.

I don't mean that among Vodou adepts no one takes another man's wife, or that there is no adultery. But if you know in advance the shameful and traumatic procedure to remedy the affront, you think it through thoroughly before taking the path of adultery. Refusal to make reparation often leads to divorce: the wife abandons the conjugal hearth; the husband repudiates his wife. Now, among the Aja-tado, it is not just two persons who get married, but two families, even two villages. In order not to break up two or more families, or villages, the guilty who refuse to make amends for their sins exclude themselves, or are automatically excluded from the extended family.

## Vodu Cosmogony

After reading Michel Onfray, I now have misgivings about explaining to a Westerner that Mawu (the Supreme Being) corresponds to the Christian God or the Muslims' Allah. I feel that the West has suffered a religious trauma since the Emperor Constantine legitimated



male and female before coming to earth. A father at the top, unique androgynous children of each species, and a multiplication at least by two. This is the origin of my pyramidal conception of Vodou cosmogony.

I propose a Vodou cosmogony starting from Fa allegories. Fa or Ifá is a divination geomancy and a geomancy of creation. I also think that Fa is the Word that communicates between the invisible and the visible; as William Bascom says: “Ifá Divination, communication

between God and men”. Fa is also the encyclopaedia of Vodou. The keys of the creations of all types of Vodou are to be found in Ifá myths and allegories. Furthermore, all Vodou temples and the various priests of the multiple Vodou deities always call on Bokon (Bokônô, among

the Fon, Babalawo among the Yoruba) to communicate with their Vodou entities.

I think we can accept that this cosmogony is imaginary. Not because it doesn't exist, but because the Supreme Being and his initial manifestations are conceived in a world beyond time, Fetomé, before materialising on a terrestrial level, and also because the conception or description of this cosmogony is open to the poetic fantasy of those who conceive it. Again, we can accept as imaginary the iconographic portrayals of the four basic manifestations of the Supreme Being (fire, air, water and earth), owing to the skill of artistic intervention. The difficulty in Vodou cosmogony lies in the fact that the invisible has to be translated into the visible, making more or less material what is conceived in a world beyond our time. My visual conception of Vodou cosmogony cannot claim to be unique or the best. Its merit lies in its inspiration by the allegories and myths of the Word of creation and communication that is Fa.

Vodou cosmogony moves on three levels: Mawu, Fetomé and Agbegbomé.

### **Mawu (Maou)**

Although I know of no Ifá myths or allegories that speak of Mawu's birth, in them he always acts as a father, the begetter of all the children in Fetomé. Mawu intervenes directly with his children to judge, make order or to separate them in the event of conflict, or else to demonstrate the birthright of those who deserve it. His children have direct recourse to Him to ask for advice or remove their doubts.

Certain Beninese scholars claim that Mawu (Maahu in the Fon language) is paired with Lisa. Lisa is the mystic name of the chameleon. These same scholars maintain that Lisa is the Husband and Mawu the Wife.

For me, such allegations are gratuitous and baseless affirmations, since their authors provide no explanation, still less any appearance of a demonstration. On the last occasion, in February 2017, that I heard this gratuitous affirmation, the author, a Beninese, distributed the drawing of a new moon and of a chameleon, taken from the Internet, without any hint of an explanation or demonstration.

Mawu always intervenes as father of all his children. No myth or allegory states his sex,



**Fa myths present the Supreme Being with innumerable children as unique but androgynous specimens in timeless space...**

but all concur in placing Him at a height from which He descends to meet his children. All myths and allegories unanimously present him as a Father.

According to popular etymology, the term Mawu comes from the phrase “*Améa e wu*”, ‘this Being surpasses’. The Fons say Maahu (*Mèdé ma hu*), ‘none can surpass Him’. Whether in Ewé or in Fon, we may feel authorised to translate Mawu or Maahu literally as “Supreme Being”.

The translation of “Supreme Being” is confirmed by incantations in honour of Mawu. Any African name can be explained by its matching incantations.

Indeed, during a prayer, having invoked the different deities and the various disembodied Ancestors, known and unknown, Vodou priests lastly invoke Mawu as follows: “*Mawu Ségbo Lisa, Ata kokodabi, bé dzèna vônô, bé yé nu aha lé Eku shi xé féa nè*”. Literally, in popular etymology, this incantation means: “Supreme Being, Ancient Soul with multiple materialisations, Omnipotent and Eternal Father, say that He has drunk at the inn of Death and has settled the bill”. As we see, the very name of the Supreme Being is itself an entire programme.

“Sè” translates as soul or spirit. “Gbo” means old or ancient. “Lisa” remains as the mystic name of the chameleon, but whenever a myth refers to Lisa, it is invariably translated as “multiple behaviours” or “multiple colours”. Consequently, the term “Lisa” in the Mawu incantation is a qualifying term or adjective meaning “multiple materialisations”. In any case, no Fa or other myth or allegory gives Mawu the role of husband. Modestly, I continue to seek the Fa sign that hints at a spouse for Mawu.

During rites, the priests may be heard naming the Supreme Being indifferently as “*Mawu Ségbo Lisa*” or “*Amétô Lisa*”. “*Amétô Lisa*” can be translated as “Father of many changes”, or “Father of multiple materialisations”.

Ultimately, Ifa allegories and myths confer on Mawu, the Supreme Being, the role of father; the Being through whom everything exists. Not only does he always descend from on high to meet his children, but also neither myth nor allegory places anything before Him.

## Fetomé

Myths and allegories present Fetomé as a world beyond our time, a supernatural world. It is also called “*Efè*”. The term “*Efè*” is often used to designate the place where disembodied souls go. Some conflate this term with the city of Ilè-Ifè, the mythical city in Nigeria, among the Yoruba. Although there is no Fa sign that speaks of Ilè-Ifè in the allegories, Ilè-Ifè, the mythical city, is still today a major centre of Ifa geomancy. The term “*Tomé*” means city, town or world. We may add that the city of Ilè-Ifè is located on the migratory itinerary of the Aja-Tado. It is from there that they departed to reach Tado on the present-day border of Togo and Benin, before settling definitively on the West Coast of Africa.

The Fa myths and allegories all start with “At Fetomé, such-and-such a thing happened ...”. Certain signs indicate clearly that you have to pass through Fetomé to reach Agbegbome, the terrestrial world. The whole terrestrial environment, including the human, is found at Fetomé as a unique and androgynous prototype. There is a single spitting snake, a single python, a single river ... In short, every terrestrial species is a child of Mawu at Fetomé. We

might say that all the species are there on the same footing of equality, because each species acts like a human being. But nowhere is it stated that at Fetomé there is a Man or a Woman. However, the Viper could be the wife of the hunter, the partridge that of the farmer: any species can be the wife or spouse of the other. Things become more complex if one says, for example, that “At Fetomé, the eye, the ear, the mouth and the nose are children of the same mother ...” Who is this mother? Nowhere is it indicated. Or yet again, “At Fetomé, the vagina is a merchant, the penis and testicles are farmers ...”.

However, all the signs that speak of the journey from Fetomé to Agbegbomé, the earthly paradise, allude to a stopover at Edu-Legba (the collective Legba), the guardian of the gate between the two worlds, to decide on the sex of the individual, his or her destiny and earthly mission, and to perform propitiatory rituals. This last point leads me to say that Fetomé represents a world in gestation, a world in the bud, the memory of Mawu. On consulting the Fa, what the allegories and myths say about Fetomé pertain to the consultant according to the priest’s interpretation. The gestation or budding of the world spoken of by the allegories bid me to propose that Fetomé is the memory realm of Mawu in which the terrestrial world is prepared and that each single specimen there is androgynous, and lastly, in coming to earth, at Edu-Legba, the guardian of the threshold, as each individual or species passes, attributes a physical or apparent sex. At the same time, certain rituals – and especially those of Mamiwata (the individual’s spiritual spouse) force me to say that, among Vodou adepts, each individual bears within him/herself a part of the opposite sex of his/her own apparent sex.

When someone dies on earth, in the Ifa language we say that he has left for Fè (Efè, “*E yi Fè*”), understood as “*E yi Fétomé*”.

In short, Fetomé not only represents a supernatural world or the memory of the Supreme Being where the world-to-become is prepared, but also that when one dies on earth, one goes back there. Seeing that at Fetomé one is called to come into the world, the deceased who goes to Fetomé will return to Agbegbomé, the earthly paradise, whence an initial idea of reincarnation among Vodou adepts.

## Agbegbomé

“*Agbé*” means living, life, material, materialised, physical, visible, touchable.

“*Gbomé*”, as stated above, means world, town, circle.

Popular etymology thus translates Agbegbomé as “World of material life”. We also say “*Kodzogbé*”. This last term gives a deeper meaning to the third stage of Vodou cosmogony:

- “*Kodzo*” means judgement, trial
- “*Gbé*” or “*Agbé*” means life and, at another level, also ‘actual’, ‘present’.

Again based on popular etymology, “*Agbegbomé*” or “*Kodzogbé*” is translated as the terrestrial world or the world of trials.

From these literal explanations, we may deduce that the terrestrial world of the Vodou adept is a world of trials, a world in which life materialises. The word ‘trial’ should here be understood as ‘difficulties’, ‘temptations’, ‘sufferings’. I am tempted to say that, for the Vodou adept, neither hell nor purgatory exists after death. Everything happens here below. This

is why reincarnation is conceived, in order to improve, each time, the terrestrial mission of the Supreme Being that it constitutes.

Agbegbomé is material well-being, but not isolated. It is intimately linked to Fetomé, the origin of the material world, the thought or memory of Mawu. When the Vodou adept dies, he returns to Fetomé, whence he will come back to the world to continue the mission of material realisations of the Supreme Being that he constitutes.

On Earth, the Vodou adept devises certain concepts and/or rituals that bind him to this supernatural world, which I also term the physical world:

- **The Fa or Ifá** is the word by means of which the Supreme Being shapes your present incarnation. The incarnated word incorporates the essence of your potential for materialisations, the fields in which you are best prepared for success in this life.

- **The head, “Etá”:** when your head has to be stabilised or established (materialised), it creates disorder in your head: this can even become madness. Lack of a head also means that your plans will not succeed, that you have no precise goal, or even that your head is too full, but lacking any order. Whatever one says, in every culture in the world, the head constitutes the essence of a human being’s life. Now, the Vodou adept knows that he is a terrestrial mission of the Supreme Being. If he lacks a head, how can he achieve this mission? So fashioning a head in the form of an anthropomorphic statuette of clay becomes a container for himself, a mirror of himself. It is a tool that allows the initiate to bind himself to the psychic, whether individually or collectively: it is what I also call autosuggestion.

- **“Essé-Dzôtô”:** this further materialisation of the psychic world of the Vodou adept takes infinite shapes. It is his/her spiritual double. It contains not only the initiate’s androgyny, but also his past incarnations that influence his present incarnation. I have the impression that “Essé-Dzôtô” allows us to draw on the consequences of previous incarnations so as to achieve our present life as best we may.

The rituals binding the Vodou adept to his past lives, which I have attended or practised, lead me to suggest that, for the Vodou adept, one is often reincarnated in the same family lineage, albeit not necessarily. A woman can be reborn as a man, a White can be reborn as a Black, and vice-versa. It is not a question of a material or physical reincarnation. It is actually more a question of a psychic reincarnation, a breath from the Supreme Being that continues to develop in terrestrial matter. Whatever the consequences of former lives, the priest must perform the proper and necessary rites to improve the applicant: such improvement is merely the pursuit of the terrestrial mission that the Vodou adept knows is his.

Explained in this manner by Tóbokô (the father-initiator) Amétamé Abianba, at Akamé in Ghana, reincarnation makes me ask myself – the man of science – the following question: Isn’t reincarnation quite simply the evolution of the world, as discovered by geologists, anthropologists, physicians and other scientists working on the origins of our Earth?

Vodou Cosmogony: a Supreme Being, Mawu, the Endless and Omnipotent Father, conceives his children as unique androgynous prototypes at Fetomé, a supernatural world. When the children are ready, meaning ready for Fetomé, they pass on to the Guardian of the Threshold, Legba, to re-enter the terrestrial world, Agbegbomé. During this halt, the Guardian of the Threshold separates the androgynous prototype into male and female, performs

The terrestrial world of the Vodou adept is a world of trials, a world in which life materialises.

the necessary propitiatory rituals that will allow the Mission of the Supreme Being – which is every individual – to develop, whether well or badly, in the terrestrial world that the Vodou adept still calls the World of Trials.

Doesn't this resemble a woman conceiving a child until it is born? The question, however, remains the same: Is Vodou a religion? A religion of Nature?

Although we perceive the meaning of *religare* (the same practice that binds a group of individuals to the same sacred being), here's what a "non-believer" says, having read my works and observed my practices:

"To me, Vodou seems more than a religion, a philosophy of Ancestral Life. The Vodou adept communicates with the elements of Nature, but he does not worship them. Neither worship, not adoration. Nature is alive: it can be a benefactor, a nourisher, a protector, or it can call us to order. Aware of this Universal Energy (Mawu) at his disposal, the Vodou adept works (in rituals with plants), he speaks and communicates with (by means of Fa consultations) and orders his life according to the steps (initiations). The Vodou adept is aware of his place in the cycle of Life. For him, life is like a dance in which events are linked from pre-life to beyond physical death. A dance in which the Universal Energy (Mawu or "Cosmic?") is never forgotten: on the contrary, that Energy is permanently present: invocations, chants and ritual dramas are there to help us recall...". ❖

# NOTES ON MAṆḌALAS, CAKRAS, AND THE RESILIENCE OF THE CIRCULAR ICON IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN IMAGERY



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*Fabrizia Baldissera, professor of Sanskrit language and literature, presents an inspiring summary of a scholarly and artistic project she conducted with photographer Stephen Roach, both as FIND grantees, on the resiliency of mandalic shapes in different aspects of Indian culture.*

I was really interested in things Indian from a very early age, and my first exposure was a long trip there in 1969, when I travelled overland to North India and Nepal.

Observations leading to the idea of a book, however, occurred first to Stephen in 1994, on one of the voyages in India we made together. His first relevant photographs were taken at that time, and again in 1995, 2004, 2011 and 2016. They come from sojourns in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

For years in our Indian travels Stephen and I had marvelled at the wealth of Mandala-like shapes found in the ordinariness of the everyday.

Stephen, with his artist's interest in the contemporary, was struck by the endless variety of these representations, and their use in a multiplicity of disparate ways. I kept being reminded of their ancient function, both in ritual as well as in geopolitical terms, and wondered at the nuanced feelings these contemporary images might evoke in the minds/hearts of their Indian makers and onlookers. Except for some cases, as in the special *golam* or *rañguli* drawn by women on the floor in front of houses for auspicious reasons, or to mark a particular occasion, the configurations we noticed did not convey a religious meaning. They served entirely different purposes, in fact. Yet the very abundance of these images pointed to an underlying consistency of intent. I felt that their profane use in every street we passed was reinforced by the fact that Mandalas were still so present in Indian ritual life, at all levels of society. We started to work together on the idea of a book where images and words would mirror each other, looking for this elusive metaphor, the circle, image of the cosmos and of the wheel of time, as well as of innumerable natural forms.

Circular images have been frequently employed also in many other countries and cultures. Plato, for instance, believed the sphere was the perfect shape, and decreed that not only the planets, but also their orbits had to be round...but nowhere have we seen such a preponderance of round images, and of wheels, as in India. The Indian flag itself carries the wheel, that may be interpreted either as the spinning wheel of Gandhi, symbol of Indian independence, or, in a more traditional way, as the might of a great sovereign power. The contemporary Indian fascination with these images in everyday life is rooted in ancient ideas, and illuminates a particular poetics that the eye of the photographer reveals in its incessant movement. The circular motion acts in unison with the expansion and contraction generated by outgoing and ingoing breath. It goes from the minutest centre of energy, the *bindu*, 'drop', where the universe contracts to a mere point, to the endless variety assumed by all forms of life in the deployment of the cosmos. It opens and shuts the eyes of deities and humans alike. The photographs follow the labyrinth of these configurations in the stark Indian light of a sunny day, or under the glow of a naked bulb at night. And ancient and new images keep reinforcing and echoing each other.

As a visual artifact, the Mandala, just like a similar image, the *cakra*, 'wheel', is used extensively as a graphic symbol and is found so often in Indian life that it has become ubiquitous, almost non-descript, and in a sense, therefore, people perceive it subliminally, rather than consciously acknowledging its presence. In recent years, in fact, I have asked a number

of people in India if they had considered the overwhelming presence of Mandala configurations in contemporary Indian visual culture and everyone I asked found the question odd. Later, however, several of our Indian friends wrote back to me, or told me that since Stephen or I had spoken to them about it, they had actually started to notice the many instances of contemporary, non-ritual and non-religious Mandala images laying all around them.

We had initially observed that in India, in the past thirty odd years, both decorations and advertising kept making a large use of these images. Only quite recently, however, we started to see new trends in those fields, that point in the direction of a different visual approach, similar to what can be found in western urban environments. Two Indian friends interested in contemporary art, as well as in graphics and printing, one from Maharashtra, the other from Kerala, in recent conversations maintained that lately some of the best Indian designers of advertisement had started using new shapes, different geometrical forms, rather than the customary circles and spheres. We have also seen that in the last fifteen to twenty years, photography and digital technology has replaced most painting in publicity and advertising.



As for decorations and adornments: the love of adornment has continued unabated for centuries...Now, in contemporary India, only gold, diamonds and pearls are considered real jewels. The great favourites are pearls, both as actual jewels, perfect in their roundness, and as a metaphor of excellence. Whereas in the west we speak of excellence as 'flower', like in 'anthology', 'the choice of [the best] flowers', in India excellent poetical verses were called *muktakas*, 'pearls', and the good writer was then supposed to string them together in another circular ornament, a necklace or a garland, *mālā*.

In spite of the new trends in ads which have gained space especially on large high-rise buildings and on the roads leading from an airport to a town's centre, one can still see a profusion of Mandala-like shapes, and not only in ancient religious or political representations preserved in temples and palaces. They are actual images used in road signs, publicity, patterns drawn on clothing and materials, jewelry, decorative architectural elements on pavements, walls and floors, political billboards and symbols, items used for eating or to

decorate tables, contemporary works of art, and in innumerable other settings. This ordinary, everyday use follows highly conceptual religious and political thought as well as being the simple representation of natural elements found sometimes right on one's doorstep.

The most widely encountered image of the Mandala is a circle, but it can also be represented by a *bindu*, a small dot, sometimes made of yellow sandal paste, but more usually of red powder, often drawn for auspicious reasons. At particular times it may also be put on appliances, like on the electrical power boxes of private apartment blocks, for protection.



In this figurative all round consistency one finds an intriguing blend that constantly reiterates deep-rooted structures in Indian thought, as for instance the idea of *samsāra*<sup>1</sup>, the constantly revolving cycle of birth, death and rebirth, sometimes represented by the halo of flames circling the icon of Śiva Nāṭarāja, Lord of Dance, or symbolized by the eye-blink of a deity. And the decoration women put between their brows, a dot, or a tattoo with a half moon and a circle, alludes to eye of wisdom, but is also an allurement.





These images then flow into the constantly changing contemporary visual world, which is increasingly man made and theoretically non-religious and non-political, but where religion, politics and new economy meet in an uncanny covenant.

The importance of the Mandala in its twin religious and political facets was stated in a simple way by André Padoux when in one of his studies on Tantra he wrote of the monarch and of his relation to the kingdom, that was conceived spatially and politically as a *maṇḍala*:

“The *maṇḍala* is a space in which the deities are placed, and where they can exert their power”<sup>2</sup>.

Ritually, the relevant fact is that the deities are placed there by means of Mantras, the secret syllables that empower the *maṇḍala* and make it fit to receive the deities. This requires the presence of a specialized ritualist, who knows the appropriate Mantra for the occasion, and can utter it correctly, so as to attain the desired result. The mandalic configuration applies equally to the sacred diagram, at times called *yantra*, in which the deities are invited during a rite, or to a large pilgrimage circuit that touches different temples or sacred images located in a particular geographical area. On a more worldly level, it also applies to the political conceptions of the oldest extant Indian treatise on governance, economics and pol-

itics intended for the instruction of a king, the *Arthaśāstra*. Its period of composition dates from the middle of the first century BCE to the third century CE, and its views are the same as those of several tantric traditions. All of these indeed agree in considering a realm as a *maṇḍala*, a ritually determined space, protected by deities.

In ancient South East Asia, the city-states with their surrounding territory were called *maṇḍala*, and even today a central region of Myanmar with its presiding city is still called Mandalay.

In some cases, when there is a group of deities that are worshipped together as a set, their sanctuaries may have been arranged in a *maṇḍala* configuration in a particular area, as those around the temple of Vindhyaśāsinī near Varanasi, so that the pilgrims visit them in a certain order. In the words of Padoux, «a circuit of shrines delimits a Vindyaśāsetra, the holy space that is formed by the Vindhya mountains, and reproduces on the territory the triangle that is the symbol of the goddess»<sup>3</sup>. The same occurs for the somewhat irregularly shaped *maṇḍala* formed by the nine sanctuaries of the Navadurgas in Bhaktapur, the ancient city of the Newars in Nepal. When I attended the Navadurgas festival a couple of years ago, I followed devotees who moved around the city-*maṇḍala* starting each dawn in one of the nine portions in which it is ritually divided.

In more remote times, towards the end of the second millennium BCE, the term *maṇḍala* (here taken in its first meaning of ‘circle’) qualified the subdivisions of the most ancient vedic scripture, the *R̥gveda*. As a geometrical and visual configuration, the Mandala is at

### The maṇḍala is a space in which the deities are placed, and where they can exert their power

once spatial, political, symbolical and religious. In spatial terms, it usually<sup>4</sup> indicates a circle or a sphere, and one of its particular uses is in the *vastumaṇḍala*, the diagram employed for building temples and palaces, and also to inscribe figures for a sculptural program<sup>5</sup>. In politico-geographical terms, it qualifies both the spatial extension and the sphere of influence of a particular kingdom, as a cosmological symbol it may be a representation of the planets and of the entire universe, as well as its integration by human beings. In religious contexts, after its first use in the *R̥gveda*, the term *maṇḍala* was also used to qualify the different branches of particular tantric schools, and practices of these schools.

A similar image, the round *cakra*, ‘wheel’ and ‘discus’, appeared first, in the Vedas, as the weapon of Indra, king of the gods, and later as that of Viṣṇu. An early depiction of this wheel in vaiṣṇava context is on a silver coin from the first century BCE. Later, in early Gupta times, there was sometimes an attendant figure, a wheel-man, *cakrapuruṣa*, or, around the fifth century CE, a weapon-man, *āyudhapuruṣa*, like in cave 6 at Udayagiri, and around 578 CE in the caves of Badami. Occasionally, a wheel is found on top of a lotus flower<sup>6</sup>.

In later religious (and alchemical) developments, the *cakras*, conceived in motion, are seen as centres of energy within the human body, in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism alike. In a tantric context *dhyāna*, ‘meditation [as the representation of the deity]’, takes place within one’s body. The tantric adept visualizes the deities present in the six *cakras*, ‘wheels’, located in his<sup>7</sup> own body, that “often form a cosmic *maṇḍala*”<sup>8</sup>. Through his meditating and creative imagination, called *bhāvanā*, the meditating person identifies with the deity, and can perceive the movement of the Mantras going through the *cakras* present in his own body. In a particular śakta current, the esoteric Śrīvidyākaula, the central *maṇḍala* was the

Śrīcakra, consisting in nine sets of nesting triangles, arranged in a specific order with a central dot. Each of them is presided over by a group of nine *yoginīs*. In the hypetral *yoginīs* temples, discs of stone carrying the figures of the *yoginīs* became internalized into circle or wheels, lotuses, or cremation grounds of feminine energy within the subtle body of the practitioner. Several tantric texts situate certain *yoginīs* on specific petals of such internal lotuses. There is a link between the *yoginīs* and the movement of the heavenly bodies. They appear already in *Mahābhārata* 1.7.15, where they are Candra's wives, dwell in the twenty-seven lunar mansions, *nakṣatra*, said to “regulate the life of the world”.

When three dimensional, the Śrīcakra represents Mount Meru, the mythical mountain at the centre of the world.

In political terms, on the other hand, the *cakra* symbolizes the absolute power of a universal conquering sovereign, the *cakravartin*<sup>9</sup>, the wheels of whose chariot could proceed unimpeded from coast to coast.



Even in contemporary politics and economics the round image is frequently found for its wide appeal, used as a poster for a party's campaign, or as an extraordinary spherical grand entrance to a commercial mall..

Chronologically, the politico-geographical aspect of both the *cakravartin* sovereign and the *maṇḍala* was developed quite early. According to the *Arthaśāstra*, the king has to take into consideration not only his own territorial sphere of influence (*maṇḍala*), but also those of his immediate neighbours, traditionally considered his potential enemies, and those of his neighbours' neighbours, traditionally considered his potential allies. The overlapping of these *maṇḍalas*, territories that each king tried to constantly expand, were crucial areas for diplomatic relationships between different kingdoms. ‘The central idea of the *maṇḍala* was to keep a balance of power among a circle of States...’<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to notice that the *Arthaśāstra*, that considers kings who are in opposition to each other, employs the term *cakravartin* only once, for such a universal sovereign has already conquered all his opponents. The passage says that «within the earth, between the Himalayas and the sea longitudinally, and one thousand *yojanas* in extent latitudinally, constitutes the territory of a universal sovereign (*cakravartin*)»<sup>11</sup>. In this particular case *cakra* also means a country, India, extending from sea to sea. At the same time, when called *maṇḍala*, it was also imbued with a religious meaning, as it represented a sacred space, protected by particular deities, who were often female ones, fierce goddesses of war<sup>12</sup>.

In the particular Buddhist interpretation, on the other hand, the Buddha is called the *cakravartin* as he is seen as ‘the one who sets in motion the wheel’ for a different type of conquest. It is the wheel of *dharma*, the universal Norm, that according to the Buddha should be one and the same for all human beings, irrespective of their origins or beliefs.

In both religious traditions the circular image, moreover, both visually and conceptually, was not intended as a static figure, but represented circular motion, like the wheel of *samsāra*, the ever-repeated cycle of births and deaths, found in the oldest *Upaniṣats*.

The *maṇḍala*’s graphic rendering as a circle – or sometimes as a lotus flower – is often contained within a square<sup>13</sup>, or contains squares or triangles, and in both Hindu, Jain and Buddhist contexts it usually represents the totality of the universe and of the energies/deities at play in it. The physical or mental portrayal of this ensemble has been used as a support for both worship and meditation.

Already some of the oldest śaivite tantric texts, belonging to at least the late fourth century CE, relate that a *maṇḍala* was drawn during tantric initiation (usually on the floor, with red and white powders). The deities who presided to the ceremony were installed in the *maṇḍala*, and a flower was thrown in its centre by the blindfolded initiand<sup>14</sup> in a particular tantric lineage.

The ritual practice of throwing flowers on to a *maṇḍala* drawn on the floor, however, is rather old, and does not belong merely to Tantric practice. It is mentioned already in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the oldest Indian dramatic treatise, whose long period of composition, according to the latest studies of Bansat Boudon<sup>15</sup>, dates from the second century BCE to the first CE. A flower is thrown on the *maṇḍala* as a feature of the *pūrvavāṅga*, the initial ritual consecration of the stage, that recalls the first dramatic representation of the fight between gods and anti-gods, in which Indra, the warrior king of the gods, conquered the anti-gods. Indra and the ritual *maṇḍala* on which the other deities are installed are actually a protection for the performance to come, and flowers are thrown on the *maṇḍala* because of its sacred function, as an homage to the gods who should then protect the performance.



In the Indian dramatic practice, a complex ensemble involving poetical recitation, music and dance, several dance positions make use of the *maṇḍala* configuration<sup>16</sup>. The manuals prescribe the stance called *ardhamaṇḍali* ‘half-*maṇḍala*’, for the classical style Bharatanat-

yam<sup>17</sup>, but circular configurations are equally employed in several village choreographies of the round dances performed throughout India by women during the harvest festival, or by fisherwomen dancing to mark particular moments of the fishing season.

Round are also many favourite sweetmeats, and the surprising fruit and vegetables *maṇḍala* built at Pongal in a traditional *pataścāla* school in Pondicherry to honour the cows as givers of bounty, like the presiding image of Surabhi, the cow that grants all desire...

Both as terms and images, therefore, Mandalas and *cakras* have been around since the end of the second millennium BCE and continue to spin.



A full circle embodies the idea of both fullness and completion. In nature, for instance, it is the case of several ripe fruits, full blown lotus flowers, or the sun, as well as the full moon, complete with its sixteen digits, and of all the visible planets.

At times a ritual or auspicious *maṇḍala* could be inscribed in a square, or be formed by triangles or rhombuses, or be in the shape of a lotus flower.



Commercial advertising imitates nature and makes use of immediately recognizable symbols: the red ad for Indian Vodafone is a set of fourteen perfect circles, plus a few other imperfectly finished ones, organized in a round pattern ... It somehow recalls the marvellous round baskets of flowers used to make garlands in the covered flower market of Bengaluru.

On most wrought-iron gates in front of houses, in Pondicherry, circles adorn in many guises the figure of an auspicious woman (with her beautiful saree, large breasts, flowers and jewels), both a protection from the robbers and the giver of light and food. Round are the plates and all the table implements at a popular restaurant where employees flock for lunch from the nearby bank. And the bank advertisement itself, carries a number of round icons, while its logo portrays a man with his arms raised to protect his head, so that it looks like a Mandala formed by a circle surrounded by several squares ...

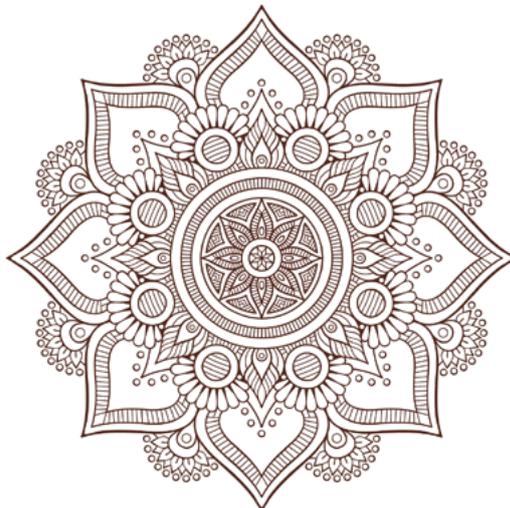


Both in Tamil Nadu and in Karnataka the *golum* drawn in front of houses are traced with particular care. Here even the wall has received red hand marks, similar to the red

and white longitudinal pattern that decorates South Indian temple walls. And later, in the evening, a rickshaw comes to pick us up, its inside decorated like a small boudoir, with a Mandala-like circle of plastic triangles running around the blue light in its ceiling. And all these images recall also the shape of the Śivaliṅga resting on its *yoni* support in its water cell.

As I was looking at the magnificent marble tree, similar to a wave sculpted in lace, in the fifteenth century Jain temple of Ranakpur, an image that represents frozen, captured movement, it occurred to me that I see *maṇḍalas* as ritual configurations where energy is contained and arrested by its limiting circular boundary. It is somehow similar to the superficial tension that holds together the molecules of a water drop fallen on a flat surface, giving it a half-spherical shape. Ritual *maṇḍalas* are also supposed to be beautiful, as «beauty is auspicious»<sup>18</sup>. As a purely visual expression, however beautiful and vibrant with colours and special powder and substances, *maṇḍalas* are powerless. In ritual terms, the key to trigger, to free the latent energy they embody, or in other words to animate the frozen *maṇḍala*, is the correct uttering of the appropriate Mantra<sup>19</sup>. It is the Mantra formula that summons the deities into the *maṇḍala* and actuates that potential movement that is at once – or in ordered succession – a centripetal or a centrifugal one, like the moving of inward and outward breath, a contraction followed by an expansion. It is the movement that turns a central point into multiplicity, and that allows multiplicity, the manifested world of forms, to return to the still or pulsating centre. And as Indian cultural manifestations develop in a rather consistent manner, one can even trace a similar process at work in a classical sequence of music, or of dance. In fact, in ritual the Mantras introduce sound in what would otherwise remain a purely visual experience.

These days *maṇḍala*-like configurations are found also where one would least expect them, not only in all manner of commercial or political ads, but also in patterns on Muslim women veils, or on the advertisements calling the pious to the Haj, just as it could be seen once, as well as now, in the marvellous rounded shape of the tree delicately traced on the arched windows of the Sidi Saiyyed mosque in Ahmedabad, built in 1573. ❖



1 Literally 'the flowing together'.

2 Padoux, Tantra, (2011, Italian edition), p. 190.

3 Padoux, ibidem, p. 188 (my translation).

4 There are also square- or triangle-shaped *maṇḍalas*, used for specific rituals.

5 See for instance A. Boner, S.R. Sarma, B. Bäumer (1982), *The Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.

6 See C. Sivaramamurti (1955), *Sanskrit Literature and Art – Mirrors of Indian Culture*. Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India n. 73, Delhi (pp. 129-133.)

7 I am using a masculine form to refer to the meditating person, here, because usually in the ancient tantric texts the adept is a male. Females do appear and take part in the rites, but as *dūtīs*, 'messengers' or 'consorts'.

8 A. Padoux (2010), *Comprendre le tantrisme*. Les sources hindoues, Albin Michel, Paris.

9 'He who sets the wheel in motion', or, according to Kṣīrasvāmin, 'one who wields lordship over a circle of kings', or 'who makes the circle (i.e. the kingdom) abide by his orders'. A more ancient word for 'emperor', on the other hand, is *sarvabhauma*, 'he to whom the entire earth belongs'.

10 P.V. Kane (1946, 3rd ed. 1993), *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. III, p. 222.

11 *Artaśāstra*, 9.1.18, (translation P. Olivelle).

12 For a study of the relationship between King and Devī, see F. Baldissera (2016), 'King and Devī: instances of a special relationship', in S. Bindi, E. Mucciarelli, T. Pontillo, *Cross-cutting Asian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, (pp. 353-388.); for a study on the Warrior Goddess, see for instance Y. Yokochi (2004), *The Rise of the Warrior Goddess in Ancient India: A Study of the Myth Cycle of Kauśikī-Vidyavāsini in the Skandapurāna*, PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Groningen.

13 Interestingly, some *maṇḍalas* are in the shape of squares containing other squares, or sometimes flowers. See Bühnemann (ed.) et al. (2003), *Maṇḍalas and*

*Yantras in the Hindu Traditions.*, D.K. Printworld Ltd, New Delhi.

14 See for instance Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka*, XXIX. vi. 187b-192a, where the initiate is particularly advanced. The point where the flower fell would indicate the name he was going to have after his initiation.

15 See L. Bansat-Boudon (1992), *Poétique du théâtre indien. Lectures du Nāṭyaśāstra*, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris.

16 See for instance Kalpana Vatsyan (1983, 2nd ed. 1997), *The square and the circle of the Indian arts*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi; and Fabrizia Baldissera, Axel Michaels (1988), *Der indische Tanz*, Du Mont Verlag, Köln.

17 See F. Baldissera, A. Michaels (1988), *Der Indische Tanz*, Du Mont Verlag, Köln; F. Fratagnoli (2010), *Les danses savantes de l'Inde à l'épreuve de l'Occident: forms hybrides et contemporaines du religieux*, PhD thesis presented at the University of Paris VII.

18 This is what is written in Nāṭyaśāstra IV, starting at v. 261, that explains why one dances *ṛtta* even if it does not tell a story. In particular vv. 264 e 265 say:

*kiṃ tu śobhāṃ prajenayed iti ṛttam pravartitam prāyena sarvalokasya ṛttam iṣṭam svabhāvataḥ //264//*

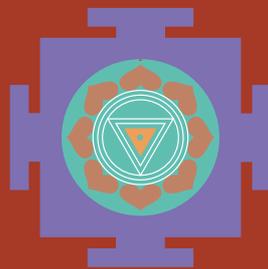
'In fact, it should create beauty (*śobhā*); this is why (= *iti*) *ṛtta* was originated; generally *ṛtta* is desired (= loved) naturally by everyone.

*maṅgalyam iti kṛtvā ca ṛttam etat prakṛtitam vivāhaprasavāvāhapramodām yudayādiṣu //265//*

'As it creates auspiciousness, this *ṛtta* is celebrated (or: 'is famous')

at marriages, births, feasts and other happy occasions.'

19 It actually consists in a particular sound or succession of sounds... Any type of worship needs its appropriate Mantra. The beginning of the chapter on Mantras of the *Vātulaśuddhāgama* says «The Mantras are the form of the gods, and the world is the form of the Mantras», in H. Brunner-Lachaux (1963), Introduction, (*Somaśambhupaddhati* vol. I, Institut Français d'Indologie, Pondicherry, (pp. XXX-XXXI.)



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