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MASTERING ONESELF, MEETING THE OTHERNESS:
THE *VĪRA* IN THE EARLY TANTRIC YOGINĪ CULT

1. Introduction

Transformation is the most important function of the yoginīs. The encounter with these deities or semi-deities causes the tantric adept to undergo a quick and intensive transformation: he gains supernatural powers (*siddhis*) and experiences the change of his ontological status, passing from *paśu* – cattle disposition – to *vīra* – heroic disposition.

What does the encounter with the yoginīs consist of? How does the adept's transformation take place? What states of being are indicated by the terms *paśu* and *vīra*? Basing the study on a limited corpus of Vidyāpīṭha and Kaula sources¹ and adducing illustrative rather than exhaustive evidence, I will attempt in this brief essay to investigate what the role of the yoginīs is in the transformation of the initiate.

To begin, it is worthwhile to introduce the protagonists of the phenomenon.

¹The main sources are: *Brahmayāmala* (BraYā), *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* (SYM), *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* (KJN) and *Kulārṇavatāntra* (KT). The BraYā and the SYM, datable between the seventh and the ninth centuries CE, represent the earliest scriptures that teach the cult of yoginīs. The KJN, probably of XI century, defines itself *yoginīkaula* “Kaula scriptures of the yoginīs”; its primary pantheon is the *krama* or *cakra* of sixty-four yoginīs. The KT is to be assigned to a date after the XII century: it represents a later development of the Kaula tradition.

2. The protagonists

2.1 The yoginīs

In the history of Indian religions the term “yoginī” appears in different scenarios, designating various female sacred figures. Therefore, as several studies demonstrated, the concept of yoginī entails many semantic fields, with possible ramifications in every one of these. In other words, “the word yoginī allows for a number of different interpretations, each being entirely at variance with the next and yet quite correct in its own context.”² As noted by István Keul, we are not dealing with a case of homonymy – where terms accidentally have the same form but no semantic relation between their meanings – but with a case of polysemy: the different meanings are interconnected, at different levels.³ Reviewing in detail the semantic spectrum of the lexeme would exceed the scope of this present work, however focusing on a main distinction is important.

The texts themselves distinguish between human yoginīs and divine yoginīs:

SYM 22.5: “Yoginīs are taught to be divided into two groups: those born in a lineage (*kulajā*), and deities (*devatā*). Those born in a lineage are taught to be human (*mānuṣya*); listen to their family line. [These] Heroines are born in Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, or Śūdra families ...”⁴

In fact the panorama is more varied, since from the divine to human yoginī there is a range of nuances, which in some

² Dehejia 1986: 11. The polyvalence of the term already emerged in this work, the first extensive study dedicated to the yoginī phenomenon, Dehejia 1986: 11-35. See also Donaldson 2002, vol. 2. n. 633; Hatley 2007: 9-17; Hatley 2013; Törzsök 2009: 77-78; Törzsök 2014b: 347-353; Keul 2013: 1-3 and 12-14; Serbaeva 2013: 198; Serbaeva 2015: 245-247.

³ Keul 2013: 12-14.

⁴ *dvividhā yoginīḥ proktāḥ kulajā devatās tathā | mānuṣyāḥ kulajāḥ proktās teṣāṃ śṛṇu kulodgatim | dvijakṣatriyaviṣṭūdrakuloṭpannās tu nāyikāḥ* ||. Edition and translation by Törzsök 1999: 50, 171.

contexts blend into a single figure with multiple functions. It is useful to point out three levels:⁵

1. Divine yoginīs, often having mantric identities or worshipped in symbolic forms arranged in *maṇḍalas*; they can also preside over the energy centres of the body. Under the section “divine” we can also place the yoginīs conceived as cosmic principles⁶ and “yoginī” as a name and a quality of the absolute in the traditions of Trika and Kālīkula.⁷
2. Semi-divine yoginīs, possessing spirits of wild and ambiguous nature, often characterized by therianthropism, shapeshifting and flight. They manifest themselves to the adept after transgressive practices.
3. Human yoginīs, belonging to clans (*kula*, *gotra*) named after the seven or eight Matr̥s. The clans shape the yoginīs’ distinctive features, which allow the practitioner to recognize them. He should address them with a special secret code (*chommā*),⁸ then worship them on certain lunar days, so he can obtain impure substances for the *caru* offering.

It could seem that human yoginīs are simply a means to accomplish the tantric ritual, since they play the role of the female ritual partner – a passive role. On the contrary, in the relationship with the divine or semi-divine yoginīs “the human actor is passive [...], it is the ‘deity’ that operates the

⁵ The distinction in three subcategories of yoginīs has been illustrated by Törzsök (2009: 77-78 and 2014b: 348). A polythetic approach to the concept of yoginī is also possible, as chosen by Serbaeva 2006: 7-9; 184-187 and Hatley 2013.

⁶ Cfr. *Tantrasadbhāva* 16.47cd-48: *tattvarūpās tu yoginyo jñātavyāś ca varānane || śivecchānuvidhāyinyo manovegā mahābalāḥ | vicaranti samastāś ca brahmaviṣṇvindrabhūmiṣu* || “The Yoginīs should be known as having the forms of the [cosmic] principles, o fair woman. Fulfilling the will of Śiva, as fast as thought and powerful, they all traverse the worlds of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Indra”.

⁷ See Serbaeva 2015: 246.

⁸ The subject of *chommā* – the secret verbal and nonverbal codes used to communicate between adepts and yoginīs, or between initiates reciprocally – is typical in Vidyāpīṭha sources; it is treated, for instance, in chapters LV and LXXIII of the *BraYā*. See Hatley 2007: 316-333; 378-418.

transformation.”⁹ Although this may be true, in reality the boundaries between the two categories human yoginīs-divine yoginīs are blurred, because mortal yoginīs may embody the deities and female divinization represents an important trait of this tantric cult.¹⁰ If on one side it is true that human yoginīs are described in textual sources as a separate class, on the other side they are endowed with supernatural powers and are said to bestow *siddhis* and especially the power of flight to the practitioner, just as the divine or semi-divine yoginīs do.¹¹

The earliest and most esoteric period of the yoginī cult is inscribed in the Vidyāpīṭha (“Wisdom-Mantra Corpus”) tradition, a branch of the Bhairavatantras corpus, characterized by predominantly feminine pantheons. Vidyāpīṭha texts prescribe antinomian rituals to be performed in isolated areas, especially in cremation grounds – which shows the influence of the *kāpālika* tradition.¹²

Important transformations transpire in the yoginī cult after the eighth/ninth century, with the emerging of the Kaula school. Developing from within the Vidyāpīṭha and maintaining a substantial connection with it, the Kaula movement introduces some fundamental changes. The radical mortuary component is softened: the principal ritual venue moves from the charnel

⁹ Serbaeva 2006: 199.

¹⁰ Hatley 2013: 24.

¹¹ According to Törzsök (2014b), in early śākta tantric texts the term yoginī is used to indicate three kinds of women: the female ritual partner, most commonly called *dūtī* (“female messenger”) or *śakti*, but sometimes designated yoginī; women endowed with supernatural powers, proper human yoginīs; and the female equivalent of the *sādhaka*, that occurs far less frequently than the other types and is called *sādhakī*, *bhaginī*, *strī*, but also yoginī. Concerning yoginīs as female ascetic practitioners of yoga, as stated by Serbaeva (2015), they are absent from the *Yogasūtra* (just like feminine figures in general) and from the other early texts about “classical” yoga. Yoginīs appear in later texts on yoga, probably due to the influence of early texts of Trika and/or of Kālīkula. The terms yoga and yoginīs were most likely not connected by origin: these beings, called *ḍākinī*, *śākinī*, and with about forty other names, were probably “re-conceptualised and classified under one term, that of yoginī, in its new, śaiva meaning, [...] at the time when the aims of yogic practice shifted from liberation to the seeking of superpowers and from Atimārga to Mantramārga” (Serbaeva 2015: 255).

¹² The first detailed description of the Vidyāpīṭha tradition is in Sanderson 1988: 670-679. See also Hatley 2007: 153-157. For a comprehensive, updated survey of the Vidyāpīṭha literature see Sanderson 2014: 35-44.

ground to the body and the inner self, that is to say the ritual processes are aestheticised and interiorized, while conceptions of divine energies within the human gradually establish themselves. The focus shifts from antinomian practices, often involving the manipulation of “impure” substances, to yogic and erotic rituals aimed at ecstatic experiences. The cult of the yoginīs remains crucially important in Kaula texts: if the earliest sources on yoginīs belong to the Vidyāpīṭha, the majority of the extant śaiva literature related to yoginīs is inscribed in various Kaula traditions, where the yoginīs become mainly associated with the number sixty-four.¹³

Built between the tenth and thirteenth century over a wide area – from Orissa to Madhya Pradesh-Rajasthan border, and with attestations in Tamilnadu – most of the temples dedicated to yoginīs enshrine sixty-four yoginī sculptures. Hypethral and circular-shaped, these temples are extremely unique in the Indian architectural panorama. Their entire internal perimeter is sectioned by a series of niches that host the goddesses’ images, which are usually representations of women with beautiful bodies, but, while some of them have finely delineated, benevolent faces to correspond with their feminine bodies, others have terrifying expressions and several others have clearly non-human, animal heads.¹⁴

Textual sources allow us to establish that the yoginīs were originally venerated through *cakras*, *maṇḍalas* and *yantras* painted on cloth or paper or drawn on the ground with coloured powders, in strictly esoteric cultic environments. Subsequently, the cult became widespread and achieved success in the wider Hindu religious landscape. Two different kinds of evidence prove this process: on the one hand, the yoginīs received royal patronage, a privilege that enabled the building of stone temples, while, on the other, they were admitted to the purāṇic

¹³ See Sanderson 1988: 679-690, Sanderson 2014: 57-68 and Hatley 2007: 153-162.

¹⁴ As demonstrated by Dehejia 1986, Hatley 2007: 110-130 and Hatley 2014: 196-204, the art-history perspective plays a crucial role to delineate the yoginī fresco in its entirety and in all its facets. I enclose a few pictures to give the reader an idea of the peculiar archaeological and iconographical evidence. See figures 1, 2, 3, 4.

literature, in an attempt to incorporate the cult into the “orthodox” tradition.

It is likely that, in the beginning, sets of sculpted yoginīs were installed in outdoor *maṇḍalas* on special ritual occasions, such as initiation. These then developed into shrines made from perishable materials. At a later stage, thanks to elite patrons, these were translated into circular stone structures, thus showing us the popularity of the yoginī cult with tangible evidence.¹⁵

Approximately fifteen yoginī temple sites and sculptural collections no longer *in situ* have been documented by Vidya Dehejia (1986).¹⁶ The pioneering research brought her to conclude that the temples functioned as ritual places for the tantric Kaula tradition, in particular for the *pañcamakāra* practices.¹⁷ However, as argued by Hatley (2014), the temples were probably not exclusively used by initiated Kaula specialists, since, when the monumental structures were built, the yoginīs were widely regarded as potent divinities. More than likely rites mainly purāṇic in character – “with worship, fire ritual (*homa*), night vigils, and animal sacrifice”¹⁸ – were performed, but at the same time the esoteric worship of yoginīs, aimed at gaining *siddhis* and at transforming the adept, was reconfigured into temple rites, which still involved the participation of the practitioner as a tantric *vīra*, a hero.¹⁹

¹⁵ Therefore the esoteric worship of the yoginīs, attested in śaiva Bhairavatantras, as well as in buddhist Yoginītantras, seems to predate the temples by at least two centuries. See Dehejia 1986: 2, 85, 186; Hatley 2014: 204, 207, 216-217.

¹⁶ After Dehejia’s fundamental work, concerning archaeological and iconographical material few relevant contributions have appeared: Donaldson 2002 (2. 661-674) and Kaimal 2012.

¹⁷ Dehejia 1986: 186. Davidson (2002: 180-181) rejects Dehejia’s thesis, contesting the tantric śaiva affiliation of the temples and arguing that the sanguinary rites were probably the principal activity practiced. This stance seems untenable, since the mortuary symbology, deriving from the *kāpālīka* tradition, is neither the unique one nor the most important component of the yoginī figures. Right from the iconographical point of view the yoginīs compose manifold groups, which vary from macabre notes to martial tones, from playful poses to sensual movements, to arresting effects due to the animal faces.

¹⁸ Hatley 2014: 216.

¹⁹ Identifying correlations between archaeological, iconographical evidence and texts represents a remarkable challenge for scholars. Indeed, the extant textual sources do not offer enough material to retrace the construction of yoginī temples, the consecration of their images and the temple rituals in detail. See Hatley 2014: 195; 204-217.

2.2. The *vīra*, hero

anena vidhinā devī yoginyaḥ paśyate dhruvam |
ādiṣṭas tābhyataḥ kuryāt siddhiyāgaṃ tu sādhaḥ ||
taṃ kṛtvā sidhyate mantrī sampradāyañ ca vindati |
khecaratvaṃ bhavet tasya vīro bhāvati śāśvataḥ ||
 BraYā XLIV. 304 -305

Through this ritual process, O goddess, one certainly sees the yoginīs. Instructed by them, a *sādhaka* will perform the *yāga* for [the attainment of] *siddhi*. Having done this, the *mantrin* achieves *siddhi*, and he obtains the *sampradāya*. He will attain the state of being a Sky-traveller, and becomes an eternal [i.e. undying?] hero.²⁰

In the Vidyāpīṭha tradition, the *vīra* is he who is able to obtain and sustain encounters with the yoginīs – direct confrontations where these figures fully show their ambivalence. While fatal to weak spirits, the yoginīs becomes fully beneficial to the adept who demonstrates a fearless, heroic attitude. As stated in BraYā XCIX 6-8a:

“For this person, in whom the heroic spirit (*vīratattva*) has arisen, [the yoginīs] become visible. But never otherwise, Great Goddess, even for one fatigued [by toil]. This is the Pledge of yoginīs: to [a mortal] of weak spirit, [there shall be] no giving *darśana*, no speaking, no being affectionate, and no appearing externally; giving up those low with respect to birth and bound souls (*paśu*).”²¹

The yoginīs represent a polluting, dangerous “otherness”, but, when faced – as we shall see –, they open up the possibility for the initiate to gain a new identity in the quickest way, turning their impurity and danger into a highly positive means

²⁰ Edition and translation by Hatley 2007: 415, n. 20.

²¹ Edition and translation by Hatley 2007: 334-335; 420. Hatley gives two possible translations for 8a (Hatley 2007: 420-421, n. 12), I have chosen the one he reports in note 12.

of transformation.²² The practitioner who has performed the transgressive rituals and who has successfully sustained an encounter with the yoginīs passes from the *paśu* condition to the *vīra* condition in a very short time, becoming the “darling of the Yoginīs” (BraYā 76.120d *Yoginīvallabho bhavet*).²³ Hence, the *vīra* is he who has challenged, directly confronted and mastered himself and his own fears, to the point that he is able to identify himself with Bhairava, the terrifying and overwhelming form of Śiva. In BraYā LVIII.108:

sarvādhvani mahādevī vatsaraikaṇiṣevanāt |
prāptamelāpako bhūtvā krīdate bhairavo yathā ||
 After one year of observances, O Mahadevī, he, being
 one who has obtained *melāpa* [encounter with the
 goddesses], plays through the entire universe like
 Bhairava.

Bhairava (or Śiva) stands in the central shrine in the courtyard of the extant circular yoginī temples, as well as occupying the centre of the yoginī circle in the textual descriptions.²⁴ Similarly, the successful *sādhaka* can assume the role of Bhairava in the midst of the yoginīs. Thanks to the goddesses, he obtains the power of flight and becomes a ‘Sky-traveller’, “ascending with them into the sky as the leader of their band.”²⁵

The power of flight (*khecara*) is the most important among the *siddhis* sought after by the initiate. In this respect, the yoginīs inherit one of the fundamental traits of the *vidyādhara*s

²² See Serbaeva 2006: 184-185.

²³ See Hatley 2008: 1 of handout. I am grateful to the Author for providing me with the unpublished text and handout of this presentation about *yoginīmelaka*.

²⁴ For instance, in the *Tantrasadbhāva* (13.56 ff) the central Bhairava is surrounded by sixty-four yoginīs arranged in lotuses of octads according to the clans of the Eight Mothers. This might be the earliest reference to sixty-four yoginīs. See Serbaeva 2006: 115-116; Hatley 2007: 121.

²⁵ Sanderson 1988: 680. As noted by Törzsök (2014b: 354): “Just as yoginī is an ambiguous term, so too *vīra* can also denote a type of male deity, otherwise often named Rudra, who accompanies goddess yoginīs, for instance on a *maṇḍala* or a *cakra*.” The designation of the tantric adept with the same term doesn’t seem casual: through ritual perfection the practitioner becomes deified, acquiring the state of Bhairava/Rudra/Vīra.

and *vidyādhārīs*, the semi-divine flying sorcerers of early Indic myth.²⁶ Whether the flight of the *vīra* with the yoginīs represents a mystic ascension, that is a visionary experience (as interpreted by Sanderson 1988: 680), or a “shamanic” flight, that is an out of body experience, (as argued by White 2003: 187-218) remains an open question.²⁷

In the Vidyāpīṭha tradition, the *vīra* was therefore an ascetic removed from conventional society. The cult of the yoginīs would probably have remained a fringe phenomenon if it wasn’t for the Kaula movement. The Kaula opened up new possibilities for the practitioner to maintain a social identity and family relations. The Kaula adepts presumably came to assume different personalities, as several Tantras cite, with slight variations, a famous aphorism: “secretly Kaula, outwardly śaiva, and vaiṣṇava among men.”²⁸

In KT (XVII, 25) is thus defined the *vīra*:

vītarāgamadakleśakopamātsaryamohataḥ |
rajastamovidūrātvād vīra ity abhidhīyate ||
 Because he is free from passion, intoxication, affliction,
 anger, jealousy, delusion, because he is far away from
rajas and *tamas*, he is called *vīra*.

For a *vīra* the sensorial experience ceases to be a bond and becomes a means of achieving liberation. He is able to master existential bonds, overthrowing the passive relationship that the common man experiences with forms of fruition. For the *vīra* the *pañcamakāras* are five substances of power, and perfection is attained by those things which commonly lead man to fall.²⁹ The hero overcomes the mainstream brahmanical dichotomy

²⁶ See Hatley 2008: 4 and Hatley 2013: 25-26.

²⁷ I use the adjective ‘shamanic’ while fully aware that ‘shamanism’ is a category created and used by Religious Studies. See Ambasciano 2014.

²⁸ KT 11.83; a slightly different version is quoted in *Tantrāloka* 4.24b-25, 4.251a: “Outwardly vedic, a śaiva at home, secretly a śākta.”

²⁹ See KT V, 48. KT V, 82: “A *vīra* without hesitation, fearlessly, shamelessly, without desire, backed by Vedas and Śāstras, drinks the boon-providing Vāruṇī.” Mastering impure, forbidden substances is the topic dealt with in KT V, 29-124.

between pure and impure, embracing a non-dualistic behaviour, as is stated in KJN XX, 22:

*jñānavijñānasampannaḥ advaitācārabhāvitaḥ |
kulakaulāgame bhaktā īdrśaṃ vīralakṣaṇam ||*

Having knowledge and full consciousness, being pervaded by the practice of non-duality and having devotion to the Kula and Kaula tradition are the characteristics of a hero.

The compound *advaitācāra* defines the practice of seeing and using pure and impure substances and behaviours in ritual without differentiating between them. By ritually partaking of the forbidden, the *vīra* controls, masters and triumphs over it.³⁰

From the Kaula point of view the dualistic way belongs to the ordinary man, called *paśu* (KT II, 101):

*paśuvratādiniratāḥ sulabhā dāmbhikā bhūvi |
ye kaulam eva sevante te mahānto 'tidurlabhāḥ ||*

Those who, hypocrites, are involved in the observances of the *paśus* are easy to find in the world, whereas those who serve the Kaula are very rare.

A *paśu* is fettered by his own instincts and by existential bonds (*pāśa*); he needs an exterior moral system to regulate his behaviour. The *paśu* is forbidden from using the *pañcamakāras*: dangerous experiences for him, these must be replaced by innocuous ingredients.³¹ The term *paśu* commonly denotes the sacrificial victim: in the same vein the tantric meaning of the term defines he who should be sacrificed – made sacred -, that is to say he should be initiated and made similar to a deity through ritual perfection.

³⁰ The term “*advaita*” in early śākta Tantras denotes only a ritual and behavioural nondualism, not an ontological one. Indeed, defining a coherent ontological doctrine was not among the main concerns of most early Tantras. For an accurate inquiry about the meaning of the term *advaita* in early śākta Tantras, see Törzsök 2014a. For an insight into ontological and epistemological nondualism in medieval Kashmir see Torella forthcoming.

³¹ See KT VIII, 9; XI, 12; XI, 36-37; XI, 49; XIV, 83; XIV, 86; KJN III, 17-18; VI, 26-27.

Whereas the concepts of *paśu* and *vīra* have been present since the oldest Tantras, in later sources a three-fold classification arises. Three dispositions or temperaments of the adept (*bhāvatraya*) are hierarchically arranged: *paśubhāva*, *vīrabhāva*, *divyabhāva*.³² These three attitudes clearly correspond to the three *gunas*: as noted by Bharati, “it is probable that the famous triadic elaboration of types of behaviour and action in the eighteenth chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā* provided a powerful precedent for the tantric triads.”³³ However, the distinction between *vīra* and *divya* appears weak: similar criteria and epithets are equally used to define both of these, but they are not applied to the *paśu*;³⁴ a kind of ontological gap remains between *paśu* and *vīra*.

3. The encounter with the yoginīs

In the textual sources, the encounters with the yoginīs are most frequently given the name of *yoginīmelaka* or simply *melaka* or *melāpa*, which means “assembly” or “coming together” with the goddesses.³⁵ These visionary rendez-vous assume great importance in the ritual system of the Vidyāpīṭha tradition, since they represent the way to obtain occult powers or *siddhis*: “the entire edifice of ritual appears oriented at this level of the tradition toward bringing about power-bestowing encounters with the goddesses.”³⁶

³² The three levels appear in *KT* only once and referring to three kinds of drinking (*KT* 7, 94-97): “*Divya*, *vīra* and *paśu* have been said to be the three kinds of drinking. Drinking in front of *Devī* is called *divya*; drinking with *mudrā* and *āsana* is *vīra*; and drinking arbitrarily according to one’s desire is *paśu*.” The three dispositions are described for instance in *Kālivilāsa* (IV 3ab; VI 9d; VI 11cd; VI 21; VI 19c-20d), a later Tantra which establishes connections between Kālikula and vaiṣṇava traditions, see Goudriaan – Gupta 1981: 82-83.

³³ Bharati 1965: 232.

³⁴ See Bharati 1965: 238.

³⁵ Both terms derive from the verbal root *mil-* “to meet, encounter, join” (Monier-Williams); *melāpa* derives from the causative and “might suggest a pedigree in the Prakrit *melāva* or *milāva*, which are well-attested in this sense”, Hatley 2008: 3-4.

³⁶ Hatley 2008: 2. Given the importance of *melaka* in the Vidyāpīṭha tradition, the textual evidence is extensive, but the only study specifically dedicated to the topic is the

The *melaka* is described as the principal outcome of a variety of rituals. It could be the result of a long-time observance of tantric ritual discipline, but it could also transpire as a sudden visionary experience, arising from ritual consumption of gruel (*caru*) made of impure substances, or from mantra recitation. Yoginīs may also appear spontaneously in dreams. All these situations have the altered state of consciousness of the practitioner in common.³⁷

The experience of meeting with the yoginīs poses a potential danger, and the texts underline the need for the adept to be of heroic nature in order to master his fear. According to BraYā 214-218ab:

“The [*sādhaka*] of great spirit should recite the mantra, naked, facing south. After seven nights, the yoginīs come—highly dangerous, with terrifying forms, impure, angry, and lethal. But seeing this, the mantrin of heroic spirit should not fear; after prostrating, he should give them the guest-offering. [They become] pleased towards the *sādhaka* endowed with [heroic] spirit, without a doubt. And touching him, they tell truly the [prognostication of] good and bad. If by mistake a *sādhaka* of weak spirit should tremble, the yoginīs, arrogant with their yoga, devour him that very moment. If he came, not even Rudra himself would be able to save him.”³⁸

Another vivid account of the transactional encounter with the yoginīs occupies a great part of the SYM XIII chapter (11-22). Having fasted for three nights, naked, the “high-souled hero” goes to the cremation ground at night and recites the mantra of the goddess Parāparā until the yoginīs gather around him.

unpublished presentation by Hatley 2008. David Gordon White has widely dealt with the subject in his 2003 monograph *Kiss of the Yoginī*, however he interprets *melaka* only in terms of eroticism and fluid exchange. As demonstrated by Hatley, this represents a “potential but not invariable dimension of the encounter, and often altogether absent” (Hatley 2008: 3).

³⁷ See Hatley 2008: 6; Serbaeva 2006: 185.

³⁸ Edition and translation by Hatley 2013: 28, n. 22.

“Seeing their various frightening forms, he should not be scared [...]. Making a terrible and very fierce, inarticulate noise, they will come down to the Earth [...]. Some of them have their eyes wide open, others have huge, red eyes, still others are camel-tiger-or donkey-faced. Some are naked, with their hair loosened, o Beautiful-Faced One, with heavenly figures.”³⁹ The *vīra* offers them as *argha*⁴⁰ his own blood and in exchange they give him the *siddhi* of his choice.

Alongside the *siddhis*, the *melaka* may allow the practitioner to attain the *saṃpradāya*, as in the above quoted passage of BraYā 44, 304-305. This term more than likely refers to “lineage knowledge”, that is to say esoteric teachings belonging to the clans of the yoginīs.⁴¹ As noted by Hatley, the fact that the *saṃpradāya* is a traditional teaching is indicated, for instance, by a passage in the *Vidyāpīṭhamatasāra: saṃpradāyaṃ ca śāśvatam // yoginī diśate tasya svakīyaṃ nātra saṃśayah*, “without a doubt, the yoginī teaches him her own eternal *saṃpradāya*”.⁴²

In order to obtain *siddhis* and *saṃpradāya* the *sādhaka* should perform radical rituals in isolated places: in jungles, on mountains, by rivers, at the feet of isolated trees, at crossroads and in temples of the Mother-Goddesses – these are as well listed in the sources as the locations where the yoginīs could manifest themselves.⁴³ But *melakas* transpire mostly in two nocturnal scenarios: the sacred spaces termed *pīṭhas* “sacred mounds”, *kṣetras* “sacred fields”, and above all the *śmaśāna*, the cremation ground.⁴⁴

However, with the increasing importance of the Kaula tradition, the cremation-ground rites decreased. The encounters with the yoginīs did remain a relevant concern, but at the same time interiorized conceptions of *melaka* developed, and the

³⁹ Edition and translation by Törzsök 1999: 33-34; 149-150.

⁴⁰ The term *argha* usually denotes an offering to a guest as a sign of respect, often it simply consists of water.

⁴¹ See Hatley 2008: 14.

⁴² Texts and translation of the citation by Hatley 2008: 14.

⁴³ *KT* 10, 118-119. See Sanderson 1985: 201.

⁴⁴ See Hatley 2008: 6.

designated locus for the encounter became the human yogic microcosm. This shift is already noticeable in the *Tantrasadbhāva* (XV, 79-82), a Vidyāpīṭha text postdating the BraYā and SYM:

“The goddesses existing inside the body are [also present] in the external world. The *pīṭhas* have been taught as external [merely] for the sake of worldly appearances (*lokapravṛtti*). When one who is pure sees [them] internally (ꣳ) ...(?), my dear, he then sees the rays [that are yoginīs] externally with subtle forms. They bestow *melaka*, (ꣳ) or they feed [him] the gruel (*caru*) (?); they bestow the [teachings of] the lineage (*sampradāya*), or they indicate a place [for *melaka*?]. If one should wander the [entire] earth with an impure inner state, they will not in any case grant him *darśana*, even mentally.”⁴⁵

4. The transformation

Through contact with the yoginīs, the adept desires to transform himself. In Sanderson’s words, during the encounters with the yoginīs “the initiate moves from the domain of male autonomy and responsibility, idealized by the Mīmāṃsakas, into a visionary world of permeable consciousness dominated by the female and the theriomorphic.”⁴⁶

By confronting the practitioner with their “otherness”, the yoginīs change his ontological status. Various characteristics manifest yoginīs’ alterity: they are feminine; they have theriomorphic or therianthropic features (fig. 2 and 3) and are shapeshifters; they are connected with marginal zones and are evoked by transgressive rituals.

The association of the feminine with impurity and danger is almost a universal phenomenon. As is well known, in Indian culture the feminine is seen as unstable, illogical and as

⁴⁵ Edition and translation by Hatley 2008: 5-6 of handout.

⁴⁶ Sanderson 1985: 201.

inspiring fear, but at the same time as sacred: in both cases it is characterized by its “otherness”.⁴⁷

The animal and all the aspects of the human which are closer to animal instinct escape from control and normalization, therefore they are placed on the other side of the fence.⁴⁸

The places where these deities manifest themselves are liminal in nature. Jungles, mountains, rivers – that is to say, wild nature; the village limits – the boundary between a cultural and natural place; street crossings; the houses where women give birth and the cremation grounds – places connected to birth and death. As noted by Serbaeva,⁴⁹ these are intermediate spaces between culture and nature, order and chaos, life and death and are therefore perceived as zones where extraordinary events may happen. The preserved yoginī temples are precisely situated in isolated areas, on a hilltop or in the surrounding areas of villages and cities.

Moreover, the moments in time, when, according to the texts, the yoginīs could manifest themselves are characterized by liminality, namely, the passage from one state to another. For example, the transition from day to night or night to day; the darkest moment of the night after which the darkness turns into light, and the darkest night of a lunar cycle, that is to say, the fourteenth night.

In textual sources, the secluded places are indicated as loci where the transgressive rites should be performed. “Transgression is used as a means to break the normal, everyday vision of the world of a person by provoking instability of his mental system, throwing him into the domain of the altered states of consciousness, which are to be mastered. This practice is believed to be effective, although dangerous.”⁵⁰

The yoginīs are especially associated with what, in the universal human scenario, is considered the extreme otherness:

⁴⁷ See Serbaeva 2006: 186.

⁴⁸ The specific topic of Yoginīs’ theriomorphism and therianthropy will be addressed in a future paper.

⁴⁹ See insightful observations about yoginīs and liminal zones in Serbaeva 2006: 140-141.

⁵⁰ Serbaeva 2006: 199.

death. Inheriting the *kāpālika* tradition, the yoginī iconography is characterized by mortuary signs, such as skulls and bone ornaments (fig. 4), and, among the places where they gather, the importance of the *śmaśāna*, the cremation ground, has already been mentioned. It is likely that these elements related to the sphere of death should be interpreted as symbolizing overcoming the ordinary human condition: they express an initiatic death, which preludes a new spiritual life. In textual sources it is explicitly stated that the yoginīs may kill, eat or sacrifice the adept: it is an act through which the goddesses symbolically “activate” the higher state for him.⁵¹

The encounter with the yoginīs then produces a swift, deep, and sometimes violent transformation in the initiate. This results in him achieving supernatural powers (*siddhis*), knowledge (*saṃpradāya*), and, at once, he is elevated to the state of *vīra*. Actually, as seen above (for instance in BraYā XCIX, 6a), the heroic spirit (*vīratattva*) is a prerequisite quality for the “nondual” rituals aimed at encountering the yoginīs. Therefore we could say that the yoginīs fulfill what is potentially already present in the human: “they are the personalized expression of the mechanism of changes of the human consciousness in tantric practice.”⁵²

The fact that the yoginīs appear to the adept in extreme, border situations, their connection with death, their animal features, and the fact that the initiation or the *melaka* may imply possession by them⁵³ raise the question whether there are “shamanic” elements in the phenomenon of the yoginīs, and therefore in the relationship between them and the *vīra* – using the broader sense of the adjective “shamanic”. Whatever may be the answer, an analysis of the phenomenon under this light looks to be of great interest: the question will be the object of further research.

⁵¹ See Serbaeva 2010b: 225.

⁵² Serbaeva 2006: 185.

⁵³ A detailed analysis of the occurrence of possession by yoginīs would have exceeded the limits of this present paper. I refer the reader to the thorough papers by Törzsök (2013) and Serbaeva (2013), specifically dedicated to the topic.

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KJN [*Kaulajñānanirṇaya*]

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4. *E-text of chapters 1-11, with variant readings from ms NAK 3-362, provided by Sh. Hatley.*

KT *Kulārṇavatantra*. Ed. and transl. by R. K. Rai. Varanasi: Prachya Prakashan 1983.

SYM *Siddhayogeśvarīmata. The Doctrine of Magic Female Spirits: a Critical Edition of Selected Chapters of the Siddhayogeśvarīmata(tantra) with Annotated Translation and Analysis*. Ed. by J. Törzsök. Unpublished PhD thesis (supervisor A. Sanderson). University of Oxford 1999.

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Fig. 1. Interior view of Hirapur Yoginī temple, near Bhubaneswar (Orissa), second half of IX century. Photo www.oriyaonline.com.



Fig. 2. View of Yoginīs within cloistered walk, Bheraghat Yoginī temple, near Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh), end of X century circa. Photo Chiara Policardi.



Fig. 3. *Yoginī Sarpāsya*, from Lokhari (Uttar Pradesh), beginning of X century circa.
Photo Dehejia 1986: 158.



Fig. 4. *Yoginī drinking from a skull-bowl, Hirapur Yoginī temple, near Bhubaneswar (Orissa), second half of IX century. Photo Gianluca Pistilli.*