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CHIARA POLICARDI

THERIOCEPHALIC *YOGINĪS* IN ŚAIVA TANTRIC
TRADITIONS: AN ANIMAL MASK?

Summary: The *yoginīs*, goddesses or divinised figures closely associated with the tantric phenomenon, are often represented with seductive feminine bodies but animal faces in various Śaiva tantric texts belonging to Vidyāpīṭha and Kaula traditions, and such a composite anatomy is mirrored in several animal-faced *yoginī* sculptures enshrined in the mediaeval circular temples dedicated to these deities.

Such a therianthropic representation raises several questions. Why are these figures often conceived and represented with animal traits? How does this composite form relate to their functions? What meanings and implications lie behind these portrayals?

Among the possible implications, the iconographic depictions of *yoginīs* strongly suggest the form and the concept of an animal mask. The analysis of the sculptures of *yoginīs* reveals that in some instances the head is wholly theriomorphic, but in several cases an animal face is combined with other components of the head, such as the hair and the ears, that are clearly human. In other words, only the outer surface of the head is depicted as animal-like.

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

Relying on relevant literary and sculptural evidence, the present paper investigates the unexplored hypothesis of an animal mask of the *yoginīs*.

Introduction

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

As a premise, the semantic breadth of the term “*yoginī*” should be taken into account. In the history of Indian religions, the lexeme appears in different socio-historical contexts, conveying distinct meanings. It is used to designate a spectrum of female figures. Already Dehejia in her pioneering work (1986: 11-35) identifies at least eleven distinct meanings for the term, which in extreme synthesis can be recapitulated as follows: *yoginī* as an adept in yoga; *yoginī* as a partner in *cakra-pūjā*; *yoginī* as a sorceress; *yoginī* as an astrological concept; *yoginīs* as presiding deities of the internal *cakras*; *yoginīs* as deities of the Śrīcakra; *yoginī* as the great goddess; *yoginīs* as aspects of Devī; *yoginīs* as attendant deities of the great goddess; *yoginīs* as acolytes of the great goddess, corresponding to the *mātrīs*; and *yoginīs* as patron goddesses of the Kaulas. As noted by Keul (2013: 12-14), we are not dealing with a case of homonymy – where terms accidentally have the same form but no semantic relation between their meanings –, but with a case of polysemy: the different meanings are interconnected, at different levels.

In the present paper, I will refer to *yoginīs* affiliated to the Śaiva tantric tradition. They are divine or divinised figures possessing command of yoga, understanding “yoga” as a

dimension of numinous power. In this domain (but also in others) it is possible, I believe, to intend *yoginīs* as “the potent ones”. They are perceived as sources of immense power, but at the same time of great danger. This is to say that they are highly ambivalent beings: on the one hand, they are harmful and can be fatal, but on the other hand, in certain circumstances, they can bestow the highest spiritual realisation upon the adept and grant him all desires within a very brief period of time. In fact, *yoginīs* possess different kinds of supernatural powers (*siddhis* – including the power to change their shape at will) and can bestow these on their devotees. Among these extraordinary abilities, the foremost is considered the power of flight (*khecaratā*).

In Śaiva tantras, the term *yoginī* is used to designate both powerful goddesses and female adepts who ritually embody the deities. The two levels, divine and human, do not present clearly fixed boundaries between each other, posing an interpretative dilemma to scholars – are these figures deities, semi-deities, or human women? Actually, the divinising of women as goddesses represents a distinctive trait of the tantric *yoginī* cult.

Also, the relevant texts present us with other and more elaborate taxonomies, which complicate the picture even further. Depending on the given scripture, the *yoginīs* are classified into different types. For example, in an eleventh-century Kaula text, the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya*, the *yoginīs* are grouped into *khecarī*, *bhūcarī* and *gocarī* (KJN 9.2), and the first type, the Sky-traveller *yoginī*, is described as the overall mother of all *siddhiyoginīs* (*sarvasiddhiyoginīnām khecarīm sarvamātarīm*, 9.2ab). Such a prominence given to the *khecarīyoginī* is a recurrent theme in Śaiva sources, in front of the variability of the other typologies.

Historically, the Śaiva cult of *yoginīs* flourished to the greatest extent from the eighth to the twelfth centuries CE. Although tantric practices connected to these sacred figures are attested both before and beyond this period, it was in these centuries that the primary scriptures related to *yoginīs* were composed.

Originally pertaining to strictly esoteric cultic contexts, the phenomenon of *yoginīs* subsequently became widespread and achieved prominence in the broader Indian religious landscape. Two different kinds of evidence prove this process: on the one hand, the *yoginīs* were admitted to the purāṇic literature, a sign of the attempt to incorporate the cult into the “orthodox” tradition, while, on the other, they received royal patronage (Hatley 2014).

These mediaeval centuries witnessing the ascent of the cult represent a period of extreme political instability, in which states quickly rose and died and tribal kingdoms tried to elevate themselves on the fluid political map – its borders continuously re-defined by ongoing regional warfare. This climate of fraught uncertainty has been a factor for exponents of royal families to turn their devotion to *yoginīs*. They addressed these potent goddesses for protection, success in military actions, and achievement of political stability, thus contributing to no small extent to the blossoming of the *yoginī* cult. It was thanks to royal patronage, indeed, that from the end of the ninth through to perhaps the thirteenth century monumental stone temples dedicated to *yoginīs* were erected over the entire Indian subcontinent (Dehejia 1986: 67-186, Hatley 2014: 196-204).

These shrines stand out as unique structures in the architectural panorama of mediaeval India: hypaethral and circular-shaped, their entire internal perimeter is sectioned by a series of niches that house the goddesses’ images. These sculptures usually present sensuous feminine bodies, but, whereas some of them have finely delineated, gentle faces that complete their beauty, others show terrifying expressions, and several others feature clearly non-human, animal faces (Figures 1a, 1b, 3a, 3b, and from 5 to 12).

This theriocephalic representation of *yoginīs* finds attestation in textual sources as well. Tantric Śaiva texts related to *yoginīs* belong to two main corpora: that of the Vidyāpīṭha (“Female Mantra-deities Corpus”) and that of the Kaula (“[Tradition] of the [Goddess] Clans”). The tantras of the Vidyāpīṭha, dating from the eighth-ninth centuries, predate the *yoginī* temples by at least two centuries, while several Kaula scriptures, post tenth-

century, belong to the period of major *yoginī* temples.¹ In both these traditions, the figures of *yoginīs* are frequently conceived and depicted as partly anthropomorphic and partly theriomorphic in form, as an anatomical combination of human and animal traits or, more rarely, with complete animal appearances.

Thus, *yoginīs* are often endowed with a dual nature, human and non-human, feminine and animal, at the same time. This coexistence of two natures, this very conception and the mode of representing it, has not been given sufficient scholarly attention in its own right.

The therianthropic² form of *yoginīs* poses to the modern reader and observer several and manifold questions. The question that is both the most immediate and, so to speak, the ultimate question pertains to a why, as often happens in research: why are the *yoginīs* often imagined and represented with animal traits in texts and images? Or, in other words, why are these figures so closely intertwined with animals? Furthermore, how does this composite form relate to their functions? Is it meaningful to find as a rule a key body part such as the face occurring in animal form? What meanings and implications lie behind these portrayals? These questions, which could be ramified and multiplied, frame complex and wide-ranging issues.

In the present paper, relying on relevant literary and sculptural evidence, I will focus on one of the possible interpretations of this form, investigating the so far unexplored hypothesis of an animal mask of the *yoginīs*.

¹ The structure and development of Tantric Śaivism, in its different systems, has been masterfully illustrated by Sanderson in a 1988 essay, which remains indispensable. On *yoginī*-related scriptures see Hatley 2007: 133-189 and Serbaeva 2009: 314-337.

² In the narrower sense, the term therianthropism merely designates the anatomical combination of human and animal traits, but scholars have also included under its rubric deities who, mostly depicted as anthropomorphic, are however able to transform themselves into animals, such as Zeus and Dionysus (Walens 2005). While hybrid appearances may sometimes reflect metamorphic abilities (and in several instances this applies to *yoginīs* as well), here I will employ the term therianthropism solely to refer to composite animal-human figures (and, as a subcategory, theriocephalism to define animal-headed or animal-faced beings), and theriomorphism for purely animal forms.

On significance and meanings of therianthropism in the Śaiva *yoginī* cult

Yoginīs' therianthropism consists mostly in an animal-human combination in which both ingredients are physically and externally apparent within a single anatomy. In a minor number of cases such coexistence is expressed in the shapeshifting ability from anthropomorphic appearance to theriomorphic and back.³ Thus, it is not only the animality of the figure that is relevant, but above all its dual nature, its ambiguity that simultaneously contrasts and compounds two different categories of beings. In this way, also opposite conceptual categories are made contiguous, such as nature-culture, wild-domesticated, irrational-rational, and the like (Walens 2005).

Therianthropic *yoginīs* cross the borders between different realms of the living in their own morphology, in a combination of two states that is impossible or unacceptable in real life. This may express the idea of exploring territories normally precluded to humans. In general, therianthropic deities are often surrounded by a condition of tense ambivalence. In different religious contexts, animal-human figures, as a typology of beings whose elements are neither separate nor unified, are frequently connected with rituals "of transition and liminality" (Walens 2005: 9155), as for instance initiation rites.

In the case of *yoginīs*, a significant question pertains to the way in which animal and anthropomorphic parts are combined: is it meaningful to find as a rule a key body part such as the face occurring in animal form? In other words, is there a hierarchy between animal and human parts? The face is usually conceived as the most important anatomical part, and the foremost signifier – it is "the personality's most immediate *mis-en-scène*" (Tonkin

³ For instance, in KJN 23 the *yoginīs* are said to wander the earth in the form of various animals, and we can assume that these appearances are the result of a transformation: the text explicitly states that the *yoginīs* take (*saṃgrah-*, KJN 23.5c) these different forms. For an analysis of KJN 23 and, more specifically, of this point, see Policardi 2016: 137-143.

1979: 241). Hence, an animal face in a composite being presumably indicates a largely animal identity.⁴

Also several major and minor Hindu deities present human or mostly human body and limbs crowned with the head of an animal. Examples are two of the still most popular Hindu gods, the elephant-headed Gaṇeśa and the monkey-god Hanumān, and three figures among Viṣṇu's *avatāras*, namely the boar-headed Varāha,⁵ the lion-headed Narasiṃha – the third and fourth manifestations –, and the horse-headed Hayagrīva or Hayaśiras, who, depending on the single tradition or the single text, is considered alternatively as a demon – in some purāṇic myths killed by Viṣṇu in the form of one of his *avatāras* –, or as an incarnation of Viṣṇu himself and included in non-canonical lists of *avatāras*.⁶ Among the therianthropic gods that maintain a minor or sectarian relevance, the goat-headed Naigameṣa might be mentioned.⁷ Thus, it seems that in Hindu religious and mythological panorama, with few notable exceptions (among others, the *nāgas* and the goddess Manasā), the privileged way to imagine animal-human deities is as theriocephalic beings. While some patterns emerge as to the values attributed to this form, the divine functions of theriocephalic deities are as various as the significance of their physical form.

Concerning the animal aspect of *yoginīs*, the textual and iconographic material is very elusive, and does not lend itself to a straightforward interpretation. In an attempt to plumb the conceptual world that has generated these richly expressive therianthropic forms, as to the meaning and significance of the animal-human form of *yoginīs* it is possible, in my view, to

⁴ Another facet of interest concerns the species of animals most commonly associated with *yoginīs*: is there a significance of species, which allows us to understand the choice of the kinds of animals appearing as *yoginīs*' faces or as *yoginīs*? Due to reasons of space, it is not possible to answer here to this question. Indeed, in both textual and iconographic sources, the representations of *yoginīs* form bestiaries variegated enough to contain, side by side, domesticated animals and wild animals, birds, mammals, and reptiles – different species that present us with a rich range of symbolic possibilities.

⁵ With the exception of few Varāha depictions wholly as a boar, see e.g. van der Geer 2008: 401-408.

⁶ On Hayagrīva see e.g. Nayar 2004 and van der Geer 2008: 237.

⁷ See e.g. van der Geer 2008: 172-173.

identify three interpretation lines, which are to be intended as interlocking and not mutually exclusive. These can be subsumed in few key words and organized in three sets: (1) metamorphosis, *melaka*, and supernatural powers; (2) liminality, wilderness, and otherness; (3) an animal mask?⁸

An Animal Mask?

Among these, the hypothesis of an animal mask has not been investigated in previous scholarship,⁹ and, as we are about to see, it is an interpretation as fascinating and thought-provoking as problematic.¹⁰

The form and the concept of a mask are strongly suggested by iconographic depictions of *yoginīs*. The analysis of the single sculptures reveals that in some instances the head is wholly theriomorphic, but in several cases an animal face is combined with other components of the head, such as the hair and the ears, that appear clearly human. In other words, only the outer surface of the head is depicted as animal-like.¹¹

At Hīrāpur, near Bhuvaneśvar, in Orissa, rises one of the best preserved *yoginī* temples. Dated by Dehejia (1986: 98-100) to the second half of the ninth century, it enshrines exactly sixty-four *yoginīs*. While the enclosing walls consist of coarse

⁸ For an extensive discussion of these three interpretation lines, see Policardi 2017, chapters 5 and 6.

⁹ A partial exception is a recent work by an Indian scholar, Roy 2015, which, entirely dedicated to the “sixty-four *yoginīs*”, devotes a few pages to the idea of an animal mask of the *yoginīs* (pp. 44-48). While interestingly proposing the idea, Roy, however, does not elaborate it, so that the treatment appears somewhat cursory and unsystematic; moreover, she takes for granted information and analyses found in not always reliable secondary literature.

¹⁰ On the functions, forms and typologies of masks and masking in South Asia see, among others, Emigh 1984, Emigh 1996, the essays collected in Malik 2001 (which includes also papers concerning other cultural contexts), and Shulman-Thiagarajan 2006. The general secondary literature on the phenomena of masks and masking and, in particular, on animal masks is obviously immense, and due to reasons of space and thematic coherence a brief study such as the present one cannot pretend to mention but a few studies, relevant to this specific discussion (see in particular Tonkin 1979, Pollock 1995 and Pernet 2005).

¹¹ In what follows, for both iconographic and textual sources, I will adduce illustrative rather than exhaustive evidence.

sandstone, the sculptures are carved from fine-grained dark chlorite, which allows a high degree of artistic refinement. Indeed, the elegant figures of Hīrāpur *yoginīs* display an exquisite attention to detail. Represented in standing postures, they form a variegated symphony, which varies from joyful and dancing notes to warrior and fearsome tones.

Special mastery is exhibited in the varying styles of coiffure. Also a number of *yoginīs* with animal faces present elaborate hairstyles, and in some cases bejeweled human ears complete the composition. Particularly striking is the case of the animal-faced *yoginī* No. 28 (Figure 1a), whose lineaments, in my view and according to van der Geer,¹² reminds closely the muzzle of the Indian hawk eagle. Peculiarly, her curly upright hair appears to have been fashioned to resemble the upright crown feathers of this bird of prey (cfr. Figures 1b and 2). Instead, the *yoginī* No. 25 (Figure 3a), sloth bear-faced, presents a multitude of fine hairs arranged around the head, which may be interpreted both as an unusual human hairstyle, perhaps intended to resemble a thick fur, or as a voluminous fur *tout court*. Probably the ambiguity is deliberate (cfr. Figures 3b and 4).

¹² I am sincerely grateful to Alexandra van der Geer – whose area of expertise encompasses paleontology, biogeography, and Indology – for having enthusiastically discussed with me several animal-faced *yoginī* sculptures between March and April 2017, providing valuable and compelling remarks based upon zoological analyses and comparisons.



Figure 1a: *Yoginī* No. 28, probably hawk eagle-faced, Hīrāpur temple.
Photo: G. Pistilli.



Figure 1b: Detail of *yoginī* No. 28. Photo: G. Pistilli.



Figure 2: Changeable hawk eagle (*Nisaetus cirrhatus*), Tadoba National Park, Maharashtra. Photo: A. Shah for National Geographic.



Figure 3a: *Yoginī* No. 25, sloth bear-faced, Hīrāpur temple.
Photo: S. Dupuis.



Figure 3b: Detail of *yoginī* No. 25. Photo: S. Dupuis



Figure 4: Sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*), Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh. Photo: A. Gilson.

At Bherāghāṭ, near Jabalpur, in Madhya Pradesh, on the top of an isolated hill overlooking the river Narmadā, stands the largest and most imposing *yoginī* temple, which enshrined eighty-one sculptures of *yoginīs*. According to Dehejia (1986: 125, 129), the worship of eighty-one *yoginīs* was especially intended for exponents of royal families; the shrine was probably built by a sovereign of the Kalacuri dynasty in the last decades of the tenth century.

The Bherāghāṭ *yoginīs* differ from the slender damsels of Hīrāpur: slightly larger than life-size in dimension, they are

characterised by sensuous bodies and assured elegance, evoking a mature beauty. Moreover, each *yoginī*, richly carved in elaborate details, has a halo and a number of arms which ranges from four to eighteen, indicating her divine status. Nonetheless, even here, where the sculptural style becomes more sophisticated and exuberant, the animal-faced iconographic type is not dismissed.

Interestingly, in this shrine, most of the theriocephalic *yoginī* sculptures exhibit two pairs of ears: a theriomorphic pair in the upper part of the head and a human pair, with earrings, in the lower part of the head. This peculiar feature is particularly clearly visible in three cases: in the horse-faced *yoginī* labeled as Śrī Eruḍi, the No. 8 (Figure 5; the simultaneous presence of human and animal traits is highlighted in Figure 6); in the sow-faced *yoginī* by name Śrī Vārāhī, the No. 11 (Figures 7 and 8); and in the possibly bear-faced *yoginī* called Śrī Jāmvavī, the No. 16 (Figures 9 and 10). All the regal figures of animal-faced Bherāghāt *yoginīs*, moreover, present plainly human hair, arranged over their heads in a *jaṭāmukuta* or similar elaborate hairstyle.

Other examples of juxtapositions of human and animal features in one and the same head are found among the statuary of *yoginīs* recovered near the small village of Lokhari, in Uttar Pradesh. The most interesting case is represented by the hare-faced *yoginī* (Figure 11): while at first sight her head could appear as completely theriomorphic, she is clearly holding a strand of her human hair in her right hand. This gesture is probably intended to draw attention to her human hair, in a conscious pose that perhaps implies a slight nuance of playfulness.

On the other hand, a pattern that recurs in the different temples concerns the *yoginī* with snake traits. This figure invariably presents a wholly cobra head, with a more or less extended cobra-hood (see e.g. Figure 12). Thus, no human hair or particular coiffure is found in these cases; the cobra-hood substitutes the hair and the entire head appears as theriomorphic.



Figure 5: Śrī Eruḍi, No. 8, horse-faced, Bherāghāṭ temple.
Photo: C. Policardi.

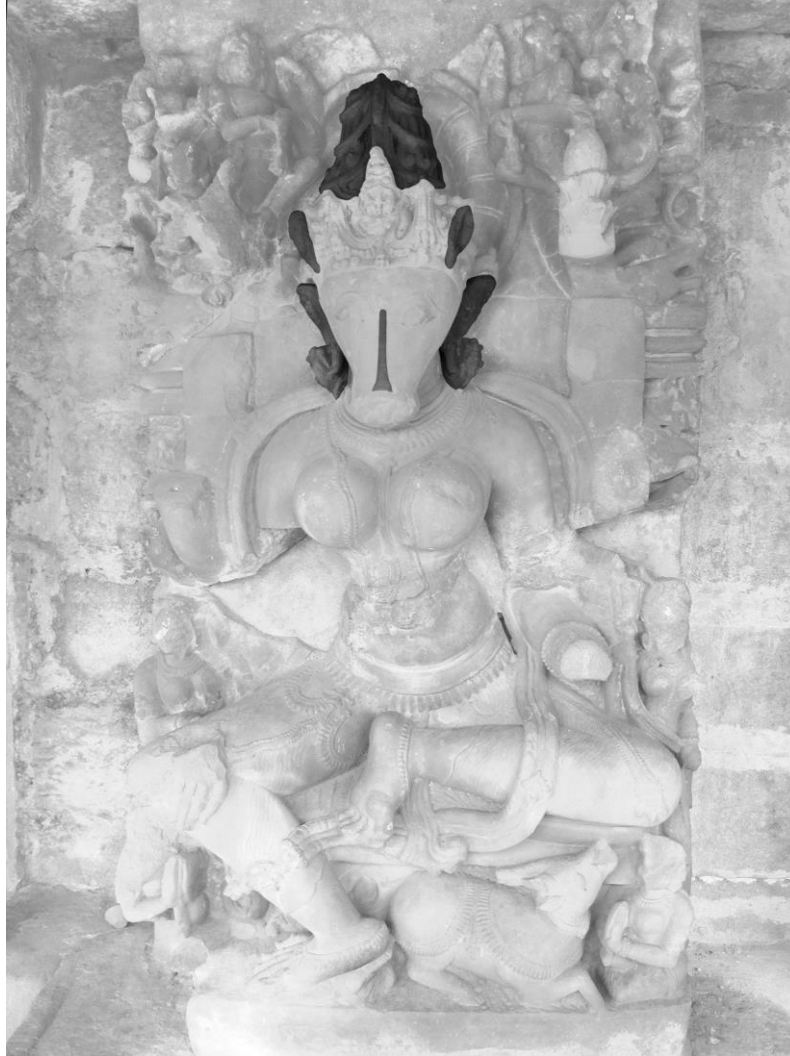


Figure 6: Śrī Eruḍi. Graphic design by D. Danielli. From above: (a) human hair arranged in a *jaṭāmukūṭa*; (b) animal ears; (c) human ears with wheel-like earrings; (d) vertical relief strip probably representing the white blaze on the nose of some horse breeds.



Figure 7: Śrī Vārāhī, No. 11, sow-faced, Bherāghāṭ temple. Photo: C. Policardi.



Figure 8: Śrī Vārāhī. Graphic design by D. Danielli. From above: (a) human hair; (b) animal ears; (c) human ears with circular earrings; (d) *vāhana*'s ears resembling the *yoginī*'s animal ears in shape.



Figure 9: Śrī Jāmvavī, No. 16, bear-faced?, Bherāghāṭ temple. Photo: C. Policardi.



Figure 10: Śrī Jāmvavī. Graphic design by D. Danielli. From above: (a) human hair arranged in a high *jaṭāmukuta*; (b) animal ears; (c) human ears.

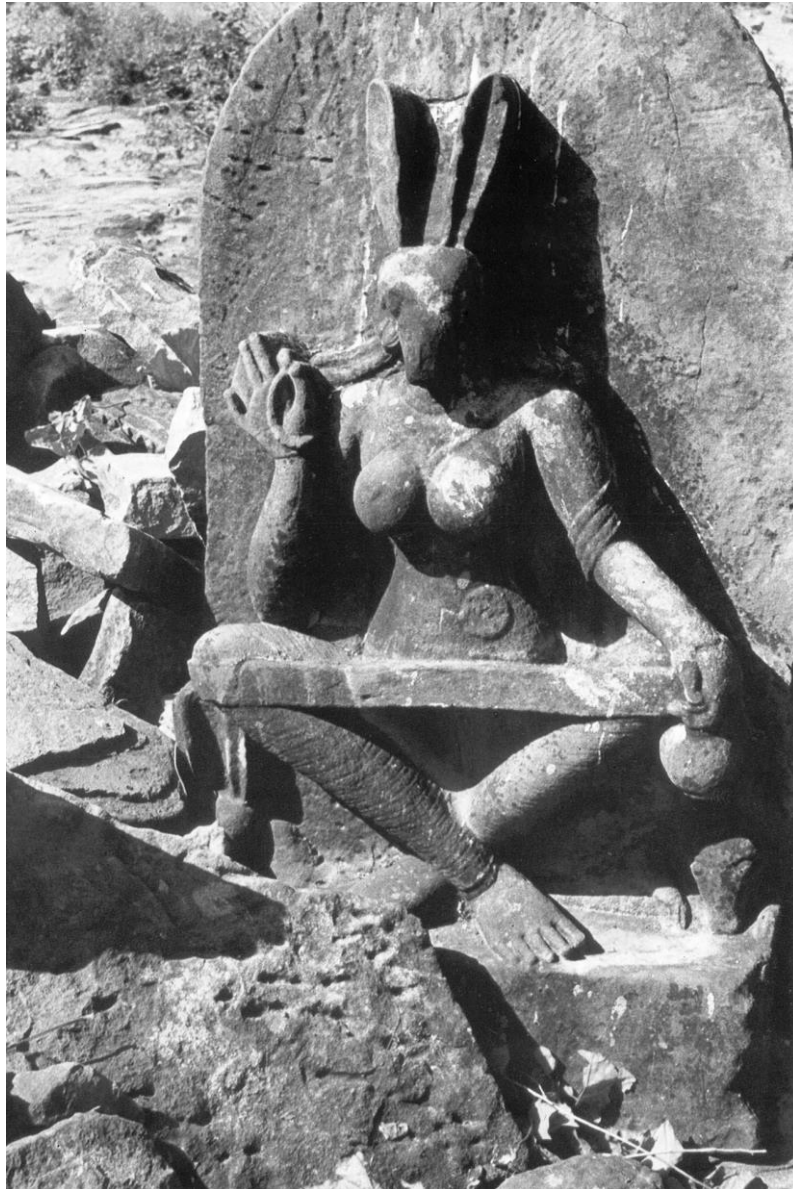


Figure 11: Hare-faced *yoginī* from Lokhari. Photo: after Dehejia 1986, 157.



Figure 12: Cobra-headed *yoginī* from Lokhari. Photo: after Dehejia 1986, 158.

Yoginī-related texts do not appear to offer decisive evidence to unravel the issue. In descriptions of *yoginīs* and in names of *yoginīs*, the indication of the type of animal is usually followed by terms designating the face, such as *ānana*, *vaktra*, *mukha*, *vadana*, while much more rarely words denoting the entire head, such as *śīrṣa* and the like, are used.

The earliest attested texts on Śaiva *yoginīs* belong to the Vidyāpīṭha tradition, a division of the Bhairavatantras characterised by predominantly female pantheons. This literature – some texts of which may have circulated in the seventh century – appears to survive in four principal exemplars, namely the *Brahmayāmala*, *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, *Tantrasadbhāva* and *Jayadrathayāmala*.¹³

Mentions or descriptions of animal-faced *yoginīs* are found in different passages of the *Brahmayāmala* (BraYā). The main initiation *maṇḍala* delineated by chapter 3 features various therianthropic *yoginīs*, among whom explicitly named as animal-faced are Siṃhānanā (3.60a), ‘Lion-faced’, who belongs to a group of twenty-four *yoginīs*, and Kharānanā, ‘Donkey-faced’ (3.82d), who is part of a set of six *yoginīs* placed in Virajā *śmaśāna*, one of the lotuses surrounding the core of the *maṇḍala*. While other *yoginī* names enclosed in this *maṇḍala* present the theriomorphic ingredient, in the absence of a term denoting the face, it is not possible to infer from their names whether these figures are meant to be interpreted as animal-faced or whether as completely theriomorphic.¹⁴

The sixth chapter of BraYā provides instructions on representing images of goddesses related to nine household

¹³ Even if there is a large amount of work in progress, none of these four texts has yet been converted into a complete critical edition. The majority of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* has been edited by Törzsök (1999), in a currently unpublished doctoral thesis, which is likely to appear as a print edition in the near future. Kiss (2015) and Hatley (2018) have recently published an edition and translation of several *Brahmayāmala* chapters (3, 21, and 45 in Kiss 2015; 1-2, 39-40, 83 in Hatley 2018), while some other chapters of this text are edited and translated in Hatley’s doctoral thesis (2007).

¹⁴ E.g., in the group of twenty-four *yoginīs* mentioned above (BraYā 3.57cd-3.61ab), according to the names, there are *yoginīs* with the appearances of a horse (Hayavegā), a monkey (Vānarī), a jackal (Kroṣṭukī), a tiger (Vyāghrī), an antelope (Hariṇī), and a cat (Mārjārī).

items, in which the deities dwell or on which they should be visualised.¹⁵ In two cases the *devīs* are transparently described as animal-faced (namely, *kharānanāḥ*, 6.1c, ‘donkey-faced’ and *uṣṭravaktrāḥ*, 6.4b, ‘camel-faced’). In other cases the goddesses are defined by compounds having the term for the type of animal followed by °*rūpa-* as the second member: while *rūpa* usually denotes the general appearance, it does not categorically exclude the possibility of an animal face, given the importance of the face, and especially of an animal face in a therianthropic being, in connoting the general form and in denoting identity.

Similarly to chapter 6, but in a less systematic way, chapter 8 of BraYā, which deals with magical rituals (*ṣaṭkarman*)¹⁶, features therianthropic goddesses.¹⁷ The *devīs* should be visualised with the faces of lions (16 ab *jvālārūpāḥ sthitā devyaḥ simhavaktrā vicintayet*), of jackals (22cd-23ab *ākrāntaṃ śaktibhiḥ dhyāyec chaktinā hr̥di bheditaṃ | mṛyate nātra sandeho gr̥hītaṃ kroṣṭhukānanaiḥ*)¹⁸, and with the appearance of camels (26 ab *hr̥tpadme saṃsthitā devya uṣṭrarūpaṃ vicintayet*).¹⁹

The *Siddhayogēsvarīmata* (SYM), in subsequent works considered as the foundational work of the Trika (Triad) tradition, in its thirteenth chapter offers a vivid glimpse on animal-faced *yoginīs*. Here, the beginning of a *melaka*, the encounter of the adept with the *yoginīs*, is described. Announced by a typical loud sound, “as if to mark the entrance of the *sādhaka* into a different and special state”,²⁰ the *yoginīs* fall down to the ground and surround the practitioners:

¹⁵ These figures, defined as *siddhi* granting goddesses, can be considered as belonging to the general *yoginī* typology.

¹⁶ In the tantric domain, the *ṣaṭkarman* are six standard actions of magical prowess of an adept.

¹⁷ The electronic transcription of BraYā 8 is kind courtesy of Shaman Hatley.

¹⁸ The masculine °*ānanaiḥ* clearly stands for the feminine; the use of masculine for feminine is a common trait in Aiśa language. On this peculiar register of Sanskrit influenced by Middle-Indic languages spoken at the time, see Törzsök 1999: xxiv-ixx and Kiss 2015: 74-86.

¹⁹ The terms *devī* and *śakti* are clearly used here as interchangeable, and, as in chapter 6, denote female figures of the *yoginī* typology; indeed, these terms are attested in other contexts as synonyms of *yoginī*. See Törzsök 2014: 347-348.

²⁰ Serbaeva 2013: 200.

*k[ā]ścid utphullanayanāḥ k[ā]ścid raktāyatekṣaṇāḥ |
uṣṭravāghrānanāḥ k[ā]ścit k[ā]ścic caiva kharānanā[h]
|| 16 ||*

Some of them have their eyes wide open, others have huge, red eyes, still others are camel- tiger- or donkey-faced.²¹

Yoginīs connoted by animal faces appear again in SYM's chapter 25:

*vikṛtair ānanaiś cāpi rṅavyāghrānanaiś tathā || 74||
gajāsyā rātricārāsyā aśvasūkarakādibhiḥ |
dṛṣṭvā tān tu na hr̥ṣyeta na ca kopam samācaret || 75 ||
They have extraordinary faces such as bear, tiger, elephant, demon, horse, boar and other faces. Seeing them, one should not rejoice, nor should be angry.²²*

In *Tantrasadbhāva* a recurrent figure of *yoginī* is *siṃhavaktrā*, 'lion-faced' (e.g. TS 13.80a, 16.80b, 16.105a, 16.118b).

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 systems, where these figures become mostly associated with the number sixty-four.

An interesting passage featuring therianthropic *yoginīs* is enclosed in the *Ṣaṣṭhasrasaṃhitā* (ṢSS), a tantra belonging to the Western Kaula tradition centred on the cult of the goddess Kubjikā. Closely related to the *Kubjikāmata*, which is the root text of this tradition, the ṢSS is dated approximately from the twelfth century.²³ In its unpublished fifteenth chapter, it offers a detailed iconographic description of the sixty-four *yoginīs*, who should be visualised in eight lotuses (15.100-165).²⁴ Eleven *yoginīs* are described as theriocephalic, namely: Viśālākṣī, boar-

²¹ Edition and translation by Törzsök forthcoming. I am much indebted with Judit Törzsök for providing me with chapters of her forthcoming critical edition.

²² Edition by Törzsök forthcoming, translation mine.

²³ See Schoterman 1982: 5-6.

²⁴ For ṢSS 15 I refer to the text as given in the draft edition by Sanderson, reported in Serbaeva 2006: Appendix 7.6.

faced (*śūkarāsyā*), 15.118; Huṃkāri, fish-faced (*mīnavaktrā*), 15.119; Vaḍavāmukhī, horse-faced, 15.120; Hāhāravā, donkey-faced, 15.121; Mahākrūrā, buffalo-faced (*lulāpākhyā*), 15.122; Hayānanā, horse-faced (*turaṅgāsyā*), 15.130; Pralayāntikā, monkey-faced, 15.145; Piśācī, crow-faced (*kākāsyā*), 15.147; Tapanī, snake-faced (*pannagānanā*), 15.152; Vāmanī, most likely elephant-faced, 15.153; and probably Bīḍālī, described as cat-eyed (*viḍālākṣī*), 15.162.²⁵

Significantly, the SSS is most probably coeval with the construction of the major *yoginī* temples, and these portrayals of *yoginīs* might have been transversal across literary and non-literary domains, that is to say across different media. While it is not possible to establish a biunivocal correspondence between written representations and the extant sculptures, they appear as typologically congruent, reflecting closely related religious visions in mediaeval India, post tenth-century.

Coming back to our main focus, the hypothesis of an animal mask of the *yoginīs*, it should be noted that terms such as *āsyā*, *ānana*, *vaktra* and the like, while commonly denoting the face, may well be used by synecdoche to refer to the whole head, hence it does not appear safe to infer conclusions on *yoginī* representations on the basis of the usage of these terms. Moreover, in texts there are no explicit hints pointing towards the idea of an outer surface that conceals or disguises the face of an entirely human or anthropomorphic being.

On the other hand, as Shulman (2006: 20) remarks, surprisingly, in Sanskrit and other Indic languages a specific term for “mask” is not present:

the concept seems to be missing in India. Even a word for ‘mask’ is lacking. Empirically and analytically, we find

²⁵ The Sanskrit passages describing Hāhāravā and Pralayāntikā have some textual problems which, presumably, conceal the mentions of their animal faces. The latter, however, can be surmised from parallel passages in other texts. In the case of Vāmanī too her animal head can be presumed in the light of further evidence. For a detailed discussion on the iconographic section of SSS 15 and on the remarkable textual parallels present in different purānic sources, see Policardi 2017 § 3.1.2B.

masking and masquerade in abundance all over the subcontinent.

In the *Nāṭyaśāstra* the term *pratiśīrṣa*, “counterhead”, occurs, but it appears to refer to a covering for the whole head, including a crown.²⁶ But, significantly, as Shulman (2006: 20) stresses, the languages of India refer to that part of the guise that primarily concerns the head exactly and simply as “face” (*chehra*, *mukha*, *ānana*, *āsya*, etc.).

Is it, then, possible that behind the designations for animal-faced *yoginīs* there is a reference to a mask? Possibly yes, albeit far from being certain. If masks were employed in *yoginī* cult, would they be more explicitly attested in texts? Not necessarily: Indological studies show that in several cases art-historical or visual records attest facts or usages that do not find evidence in texts, and vice versa.

Thus, texts leave a possibility open, while iconographic sources present striking peculiar features that call for an explanation. The first point to consider is whether this juxtaposition of human and animal traits on the level of the head can be interpreted merely as a stylistic device adopted by sculptors, an artistic convention commonly used to represent animal-faced deities.

Considering the representations of other theriocephalic Hindu deities, we can observe that Vārāhī, for example, is frequently depicted with an elaborate hairstyle or with a conical crown that accents the long diagonal of her face.²⁷ Along the same line, in portraits of Gaṇeśa the elephant head is often adorned with more or less elaborate and towering *jaṭāmukūṭas*.²⁸ Similarly, also Narasiṃha²⁹ and Hanumān³⁰ may present unambiguously human coiffure. In these cases, the elegant

²⁶ *Nāṭyaśāstra* 21.210. On the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s section devoted to the use of “masks”, see Gerow 2006: 208-210.

²⁷ See e.g. some examples of Vārāhī sculptures in van der Geer 2008, figures from 502 to 505.

²⁸ See e.g. the examples in van der Geer 2008, figures from 293 to 295.

²⁹ See e.g. figure 436 in van der Geer 2008.

³⁰ See e.g. figure 382 in van der Geer 2008.

hairstyles are clearly intended to emphasise the distinguished, divine status of the figures; they are part of the overall ornamentation of the deity.

This can be true also for *yoginī* depictions. Thus, the presence of human hairstyle is common to the representations of other animal-faced Hindu deities and cannot be interpreted as a decisive hint for the hypothesis of a mask. However, the human hair is not the only trait at play in *yoginī* portraits. The arrangement of the hair resembling the feathers or the fur of a particular animal in the Hīrāpur sculptures may not be simply ornamental. Moreover, animal-faced Hindu deities do not present, as a rule, two pairs of ears, animal and human: thus, also the presence of a double pair of ears at Bherāghāṭ might be meaningful. Finally, the hare-faced *yoginī* at Lokhari that patently holds a strand of her human hair with one hand cannot be dismissed as an artistic convention: the gesture seems both explicit and purposeful.

Another option might be to consider these elements simply as ways to avoid that the theriomorphic features deprive these images of their charm and femininity, ways to harmonise the animal-faced sculptures with the ensemble of the *yoginī* circle. While this may be true, the cases are striking and numerous enough, I believe, to make the hypothesis of a mask worth investigating. Not only are they striking and numerous, but they are also found at not close geographical locations (Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh) and are attested from slightly distant chronological periods (from ninth century to eleventh century): thus, they are not limited to a single local tradition or related to one specific temple.

Hence, I will assume that the animal mask-like face in *yoginī* depictions is not a mere matter of artistic device, but a meaningful trait. What could be, then, the meaning and function of this form?

Three possible interpretative hypotheses

These composite representations of *yoginīs*' heads, I believe, open up three possible interpretative hypotheses: (1) these sculptures represent deities, with mask-like animal faces; (2) they represent real women wearing an animal mask, presumably for ritual purposes; (3) the distinction between deities and women was not relevant or, better said, women could embody deities, thus these sculptures represent simultaneously women and deities, conceived with animal faces. Each of these three possibilities ramifies in various directions. Leaving aside the case of cobra-headed *yoginīs*, which seems to represent an exception (an exception that proves the rule?), let us now proceed to examine these three hypotheses.

The divine status of *yoginīs* in sculpture is suggested by the multiple arms exhibited in several cases. Thus, it is not rare to find an animal-faced *yoginī* presenting four or more arms. As is well-known, in Indian art the multiplicity of bodily parts is a clear indication of a divine status.³¹ If the animal-faced *yoginī* is a goddess, then, why is she wearing a mask? As a divine being, she does not need a mask to transform herself: she possesses supernatural powers, among which the most conspicuous is the shapeshifting power. In other words, why those who conceived the sculpted images and the sculptors themselves made the effort to imagine and to represent the *yoginīs*' heads with human and animal traits juxtaposed? One answer might be that it was a way to underline the simultaneous presence of the two natures – animal and human – also on the level of the head itself. Hence, the mask-like face would not conceal any human face; it would be simply an anatomical component of a composite being whose head itself is composite. If these are simply deities with animal mask-like faces, it is nonetheless a particularly striking way of rendering figures connoted by the power of transformation and by a shapeshifting nature. This is to say that also if we intend these representations as deities *tout court*, their mask-like

³¹ The extensive study by Srinivasan 1997 remains the main reference on the subject.

qualities do not appear meaningless, but they are probably related to their power to transform both themselves and others.

In the second hypothesis, these sculptures would portray human women wearing animal masks, presumably for ritual purposes. In this case, we face two major problems. First, this interpretation does not explain the multiplicity of arms: human figures are not, as a rule, endowed with more than two arms. The second problem concerns recovery of data: in the tantric domain, actual data on historical women and social facts are extremely difficult to recover, as stressed by both Törzsök (2014: 340-341) and Hatley (forthcoming). Nonetheless, we may consider the possibility that these images refer to rituals in which human women identify themselves with animal-faced goddesses, ritually acting like animals and birds, and possibly assuming the guise of the deities they were representing. Some textual references seem to offer glimpses of rituals in which the practitioner imitates the calls and the movements of animals; the most significant passages are found in *Jayadrathayāmala*, at 2.2.90-99 and 3.38.³²

In different religious conceptions, familiarity to and identification with animals is a sign of the initiates' proximity to the realm of the supernatural and divine.³³ In the Śaiva context of the *yoginī* cult, the imitation of animals appears interwoven with the conception of possession. In the earliest sources on *yoginīs*, *āveśa* and cognate terms from *ā-√viś* define an altered state of consciousness, in which the *yoginīs* possess the initiate.³⁴ Such an experience is transitory, usually very brief, and always intense. If such a possession is not controlled by the practitioner, it is of baneful nature, but if the *sādhaka* himself provokes and controls it, he can obtain knowledge and

³² See Serbaeva 2013: 200; 202.

³³ On this theme, see e.g. Thumiger 2014: 388.

³⁴ For the purpose of the present paper, I confine myself to a very brief outline on the theme of *yoginī* possession. An insightful analysis of occurrences and significance of possession (*āveśa* and related terms, *stobha*) in early texts on *yoginīs* is offered by two thorough papers, Törzsök 2013 and Serbaeva 2013. For possession in Śākta traditions see Sanderson 2009: 133-134. For a broader study of possession in South Asia traditions see the monograph by Frederick M. Smith (2006).

supernatural powers in the quickest way. This state of possession manifests itself in various external signs, including the imitation of animals in both the behaviour and the calls. This might indicate that the adept is undergoing a radical change, shifting away from his ordinary identity.

Did these rituals implying possession on the part of the *yoginīs* make use of animal masks? Masking, probably a universal phenomenon, constitutes a prominent dimension in South Asian traditions and religions. While in other cultures it is often possible to make a distinction between masked rituals and performances on the one hand and practices of possession on the other hand, in South Asia these phenomena frequently appear strictly interrelated.³⁵

Masking represents both a mode of concealment and a mode of revelation and transformation. Across the different Indian traditions, the mask, being a means of transitory alteration of physical appearance, allows disengagement from ordinary time and facilitates the entry into a different domain. In ritual contexts, the mask is a privileged way to accompany the transition from one status to another. According to Tonkin (1979: 242-243), masks are used:

to transform events [...] or mediate between structures. That is why they so often appear in rites of passage. In particular they are often conductors, exemplars and operators in those innumerable initiation sequences which enact the death of the old self and the rebirth of a new one. [...] The mask carrier is said to assume power, the aim of a Mask cult is to channel, elicit or transmit power.

We can add a nuance by quoting Shulman (2006: 20):

[in masking], in general, there is a sense of exchanging and expanding, let us say, a human

³⁵ See Shulman 2006: 22-24. For some bibliographical references on South Asian masks and masking see *supra*, note 10.

persona to the point where it assimilates or appropriates a divine (or demonic) existence.

In other words, wearing a mask is equivalent to cross a threshold: masking is one of the most immediate ways to become other than oneself, and thus, often, to pass from Self to Other. Concerning theatrical masks, Emigh (1984: xviii) states: “for the actor, the otherness of the mask becomes both the obstacle and the goal”. This idea can be applied to the ritual actor too.³⁶

In ritual practices connected to *yoginīs*, the otherness of an animal mask might have had the function to trigger a boundary shift. Women might have worn animal masks to assume the identity of animal-faced goddess *yoginīs*. The mask might have been a tool to facilitate transformation, both women’s own transformation and of the male practitioner. In *yoginī* tradition, hence, the animal, presumably – and texts seem to allow for this interpretation – was not seen as a negative “other”, as a threat of loss of human identity, but as an otherness that allows a redefinition and a reconstruction of a new, expanded identity.

Going another step further and developing a strand of this second hypothesis, we might suppose that animal-faced *yoginī* sculptures represent simultaneously deities and women, in a deliberate ambiguity. Indeed, we might ask if the distinction between deities and human women is merely a manifestation of our own need for an unambiguous explanation, a label which was simply not relevant in the tantric thought-world of mediaeval India. In other words, it is possible that imposing a sharp demarcation of the confines between the two categories would fit more the demands of another culture than the one in which these figures have been conceived.

As already remarked, female divinisation quintessentially informs the *yoginī* tradition and, presumably, the categories of human women embodying *yoginīs* and divine *yoginīs* were not

³⁶ I do not need to mention that in several South Asia traditions the boundaries between ritual and theatrical performances are ultimately blurred; on the scholarly debate around this topic see e.g. the recent overview by Ganser 2017.

mutually exclusive units in the minds of mediaeval tantric practitioners. Possibly, *yoginīs*, and also therianthropic *yoginīs*, straddle the real/imagined divide, in a fluid continuum of reality. If we interpreted the sculptures as reflecting an intentional and programmatic overlapping of deities and ritual reality, both the mask-like faces, which appear to suit human figures, and the multiple arms, which are instead appropriate to a deity, would find an explanation.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the peculiar mode of *yoginī* representation that depicts only the outer surface of the head as animal-like and juxtaposes it with human features does not seem meaningless; it suggests the idea of an animal mask. While iconographic sources offer compelling hints in this direction, the concept of an animal mask does not find explicit confirmation in textual evidence. Due to the lack of unequivocal or at least significant textual data, at the present state of research, all the three hypotheses above delineated appear theoretically possible, but remain in the realm of speculation, and the question about the animal mask should remain open.

Nonetheless, in my view, the understanding of theriocephalic *yoginīs* as simultaneous representations of animal-faced deities and women wearing animal masks, mirroring ritual rituality (as above advanced as the third possible hypothesis), while waiting to be more strongly validated by further research, appears as a promising path and as a possible, thought-provoking interpretative solution.

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