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ABHINAVAGUPTA'S PRESENTATION
OF THE KULA RITUAL IN *TANTRĀLOKA* 29

The name of Abhinavagupta has always been known in the field of Indian thought, at least for his work on poetics, but only since the publication from the 1920's onwards of the texts of Kashmir Śaivism has his status been fully realized. Writing at length in the fields of philosophy and poetics and tantric ritual, he is now acknowledged as the leading light of the golden age of Kashmir.

At the start of his longest work, the *Tantrāloka*, he acknowledges the tradition of which he is the heir and gives the sage Śambhunātha the most frequent mention whilst at the end of the same work the same master is mentioned as the chief luminary amongst Abhinava's many teachers. Indeed,

'The omniscient Śambhunātha, 'son' of Somadeva, like the full moon over the sea, expounded [for me] the so-called 'Fourth Tradition.'¹

which is the Kula tradition.

The Kula tradition, or at least Abhinava's rendering of that tradition, is expounded in *Tantrāloka* 29 and draws on elements taken from every chapter of that vast work. Even though the Kula tradition is the most extreme of the tantric ritual traditions,² it is, according to the

1. *TĀ* 37.61b. See also *Tantrasāra* p. 204.

2. Alexis Sanderson, 'Meaning in tantric ritual', in A.-M. Blondeau and K.

thirteenth century commentator Jayaratha, Abhinava's preferred ritual:

'... he esteems more highly the guru who follows the Kula ritual procedure (*kulaprakriyā*) - because of [its] restfulness - in comparison with the guru who is devoted to tantric ritual procedure (*tantraprakriyā*).'³

In fact, Abhinava always places the Kula ritual near the top in his listings of the various schools and traditions.⁴ These are, in ascending order: the Veda, Siddhānta, Left, Right, Mata, Kula, Kaula, Trika. The Kula and the Kaula are thus evidently to be distinguished but it is not clear how. At the apex stands the Trika,⁵ i.e. the *mantra* of three phonemes SAUH⁶ which embodies the whole of reality in all its aspects and which is in fact conscious-ness itself in its state of fullest expansion.

The Kula ritual is set out in *Tantrāloka* 29. A first reading is bewildering. What are to make a of a paragraph such as:

'She brings pressure to bear on the seed in order to separate the oil from the husk, she who, in the [midst of these wives], is Kuṇḍalinī. As mistress of the 'three-and-a-half-tradition', she, while standing on the 'bulb', circulates everywhere. After [the practitioner] has made sacrifice to the arising of the circle ... Kuleśvarī is to be worshipped during the middle [stage of the contraction of the circle]. At the final end of the [contraction of the circle], Saṅkarṣiṇī, she who reabsorbs and produces growth, [is to be worshipped] either as a single heroine accompanied by the circle [of deities] or even paired [with a consort] within the circle.' TĀ 29.68-70a.

What are the seed and husk? The wheels turn and yet expand and contract. What are these goddesses? Such things make sense when the

Schipper, eds. *Essais sur le rituel III: Colloque du centenaire de la section des sciences religieuses de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*. Louvain-Paris, Peeters, 1995, Vol. 3, pp. 15-95.

3. *Tantrāloka* vol. 2, p. 31 lines 12-13.

4. TĀ 13.300b-301a. TĀ 13.319b. TĀ 15.319-320. TĀ 37.25b-27a. *Parātrimśikāvivarana* p. 217 lines 24-25 and *ibid.* p. 217 lines 5-6. *Parātriśkālaghuvṛtti* p. 56.

5. In Raniero Gnoli, *Il commento di Abhinavagupta alla Parātrimśikā*, Roma, Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1985, p. 217 line 22, Abhinava quotes the phrase "The Trika is higher than the Kula." *kulāt paratarāṇ trikam*.

6. K. C. Pandey, *Abhinavagupta: an historical and philosophical study*. 2nd. Edn. Varanasi, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1963. p. 601.

paragraph is understood to describe the progression of consciousness from the external world through the means of knowledge to the supreme knowing subject. That, however, is a gross simplification which does not take into account the rich symbolism and the many levels of meaning. We will not return to this text.

The Kula ritual also scandalizes. It proposes transgression, especially in the use of the three M's, *madya*, *mamsa* and *maithuna*, i.e. alcohol, meat and intercourse with women of any caste. (Notice that the transgression in this last case consists in crossing the boundary of caste.) Jayaratha is quite aware of the scandalous nature of the three M's and quotes a text which summarises the reactions:

'This lineage [of the Perfected Beings] is to be worshipped with ingredients that are both hated by people and forbidden by the scriptures, that are both disgusting and despised.'⁷

Yet the work of Abhinava shows him to be a man of intelligence and sensitivity, a poet devoted to Maheśvara. The question arises, therefore, how can chapter 29 be understood without either softening its transgressive element or dismissing it as a momentary aberration?

In this presentation of a rich and diverse text I propose to tackle just three elements which revolve around the theme of *maithuna* which is at the heart of the Kula ritual. Note that transgression is not at the heart of the ritual.

1.

Tantrāloka 29 is divided into two sections. The first section consists of rituals for the initiate while the second comprises the rituals of initiation. The overall structure of *Tantrāloka* 29 is as follows:

śl. 1-17 Introduction

śl. 18-186a Part I: The rituals for the initiate

7. *Tantrāloka* vol. 7, p. 3298 lines 2-3.

Sacrifice 1 external	(<i>bahih</i>)
Sacrifice 2 based on the <i>sakti</i>	(<i>sakti</i>)
Sacrifice 3 based on the pair	(<i>yamala</i>)
Sacrifice 4 based on the body	(<i>deha</i>)
Sacrifice 5 based on the subtle-breath	(<i>prāṇa</i>)
Sacrifice 6 based on the mind	(<i>mati</i>)

śl. 186b-281 Part II: The rituals of initiation

‘initiation’	(<i>dīkṣā</i>)
‘consecration’	(<i>abhiṣeka</i>)
‘penetration’	(<i>vedha</i>)

śl. 282-292a Concluding rites

The first part, the rituals for the initiate, consists of 6 sacrifices or groups of rituals. I propose to look more closely at the third of these rituals, performed with an external *sakti*. Abhinava esteems it above the rest, quoting it in extenso in his *Tantrasāra*, a summary of the *Tantrāloka*, and quoting it again to a significant degree in his even shorter summary called the *Tantroccaya*.

The third sacrifice is structured as follows:

The First Emission: Emanation (*sr̥ṣṭi*)

Trajectory 1.	Emphasis on action
Trajectory 2.	Emphasis on knowledge
Trajectory 3.	Emphasis on the <i>sakti</i>

The Second Emission: Reabsorption (*saṃhāra*)

The Third Emission: Union (*saṃghatṭa*)

It comprises a whole series of sub-rituals which express three emissions: the emanation of the universe (*sr̥ṣti*), its reabsorption (*saṃhāra*) and the font from which the universe proceeds and into which it is absorbed, namely the union (*saṃghatṭa*) of Śiva and *sakti*, in other words consciousness itself. The first emission consists of

three trajectories, that of action where the focus is on what the couple do in their love-making; the second is that of knowledge where the participants dwell on their experience and its symbolic meaning; the third focuses on the *śakti* and her reactions and caters for different classes of persons.

Although this presentation is sketchy in the extreme, it will perhaps begin to show that the text of *Tantrāloka* 29 is not a grab bag of ideas but is highly structured with all the complexity and harmony of an Indian temple, so that one section becomes a commentary on another. Without an idea of the structure the text remains unintelligible.

I would like to examine the third 'emission', namely union, which is structured as follows:

1. the 'mantra', i.e. the practitioner alone
 - śl. 142b-146a
 - a. i. the coupling of all diversity
 - ii. constant perception
 - iii. arising of creative awareness
(parāmarśa)
 - śl. 146b-147a
 - śl. 147b-149a
 - śl. 149b-150a
 - b. recitation
2. the six rayed *mudrā*, i.e. intercourse:
 - śl. 150b-153a
 - a. i. intercourse
 - ii. stability
 - iii. the appearance of awareness
(vimarśa)
 - śl. 153b-154a
 - śl. 154b-156a
 - śl. 156b-157a
 - b. the natural recitation:
enunciation
examination:
 - i. the 8 circles (*cakra*)
 - ii. the 8 phases (*uccāra*)
 - iii. the 8 *bhairavas* (*unmanā*)
 - śl. 157b-158a
 - śl. 158b-160a
 - śl. 160b-161a

After a few words of introduction, Abhinava presents the ritual of union in two parts. The first concerns the male practitioner alone, who is called 'mantra'. He harmonises or couples all the different aspects of his person, all the opposing currents. In the resultant state of harmony he notices arising in himself an expansion of consciousness or

parāmarśa which is the context for his practice of recitation. This first stage of the ritual leads naturally to the second stage, that of intercourse which is symbolized as a *mudrā* or shape of six rays, i.e. a union of the generative organs. The practitioner and his partner reach a level of awareness (*vimarśa*) which is experienced as sound.

'The inarticulate [sound, *viz.* HĀ-HĀ] which comes from the region of the heart between the breasts and ends at the lips, is [uttered] in the throat. After hearing [the inarticulate sound] between the two circles [*viz.* in the throat] ... when the agitation ceases, at that moment [all the audible forms of sound] vanish. And at that point, Bhairava as sound [appears], which is divided into eight [phases] ... It is supreme. ... It is said to be the supreme pervasion of the *mantra*.'

TĀ 29.158b-160a.

In other words, the experience of bliss makes the *śakti* cry out. The sound arises spontaneously without her choosing to do so. It arises from the heart when she experiences the supreme bliss which is at the very origin of the universe. Her cry of delight is expressed in the throat and dies away on the lips, but the sound continues in an unmanifest or inaudible form, going through eight stages to reach the supreme level of sound, the supreme word, *paravāc*, of which all other sounds are the limited manifestation. The practitioner is attentive to her cry and is led even by its silent forms to the transcendent level of consciousness (*unmanā*), i.e. to Bhairava as sound so that he acquires the consciousness from which all proceeds and which permeates all things as the oil permeates the sesame seed. In this way the *śakti* leads him into consciousness.

While the text under consideration refers to sound, other texts from the same chapter refer to the fluids which also arise in bliss. And again, while the experience is described in the context of sexual union it is found in any moment of bliss. Thus the pleasure which is felt on hearing beautiful music or whilst becoming engrossed in a spectacle similarly leads a person to ultimate consciousness so that every situation of bliss is a form of worship.

2.

The *śakti* utters her cry. It is also an expression. What does it mean? In Kashmir Śaivism, as in many Indian systems of thought, sound

stands at the origin of the universe so that all external reality is a manifestation of that primordial sound. In a striking manner the series of phonemes of the Sanskrit alphabet is understood to mirror the process of consciousness so that the study of the phonemes is a study of revelation.

The rules of *sandhi* hold that two instances of the phoneme *A* can coalesce to form either a short *A* or a long Ā. Thus the phoneme *A*, the first phoneme of the Sanskrit alphabet, can refer to Śiva alone since Śiva is the source of all. If Śiva is understood more especially to be the void, then the first phoneme, *A*, can also refer to śakti who emanates from the silent void. Furthermore, the same phoneme understood either as the union of silence and *A* or as the union of two cases of the phoneme *A* can also refer to the identity of Śiva and śakti. The phoneme *A* can refer to the goddess herself or again to the union of Śiva and śakti or even to their bliss (*ānanda*). From them, in the bliss of their union, all reality, i.e. all the other phonemes of the alphabet proceed. This plurality of meanings gives an immense richness to a very simple sound.

If consciousness itself is fundamentally sound, the human voice becomes one of the most powerful ways by which a person may attain that consciousness. The śakti in her experience of bliss spontaneously utters the phoneme *A* and reinterprets reality so that her partner is taken by her into consciousness.

The other phonemes, the numbers, the deities, the shapes, the instruments of ritual all have an exoteric meaning which must be understood to appreciate the Kula ritual.

3.

Who is the śakti?

I would like now to examine what is perhaps the most misunderstood element of the third Sacrifice. Verses 101 and 102 read:

'In the teaching of the guru [the śakti] is said to be three-fold. She is 'caused' (*kārya*), 'cause' (*hetu*) and 'co-caused' (*sahotthā*). This is because she has an excellence which derives from her identity [with him who possesses her, an identity] which surpasses the dualistic association of worldly and non-worldly. She is like that [viz. 'caused', 'cause' and 'co-caused'] directly (*sākṣāt*) as well as indirectly (*paramparāyogāt*). Thus she is threefold in two ways.'

This paragraph has been variously interpreted. One interpretation is literal. Pandey states that the sexual partner, the *dūtī* could be mother, sister, daughter, grandmother, sister's daughter or daughter's daughter.⁸ Many others repeat his interpretation.⁹ A second sort of interpretation is echoed in the *Hevajra Tantra* II.5.58-59 which interprets the words as codes.¹⁰ Thus the term 'mother' refers to the Master's consort and the term 'daughter' refers to the Master's female disciple.¹¹ Thirdly, Silburn holds that the 'mother' is a sexual partner who inspires the practitioner; the 'daughter' is a partner who is inspired by the practitioner; the 'sister' is the *dūtī* equal to the practitioner: they inspire each other.¹² I propose that the phrase in question refers to one woman in her various aspects.

Tantrāloka 28.194 ff. describes the *guru* and his family as a group but the basis of their union is not so much the family bond as a common tradition (*vidyā*). They form a sort of dualistic association or 'worldly' and 'unworldly', which terms refer to blood-line and knowledge respectively. Abhinava goes on to explain that the *guru* communicates his knowledge by having his consciousness enter the very self of the disciple.¹³ In this process, there is the 'cause' (*kārana*), the 'assistant cause' (*sahakāri*) and the 'co-caused' (*ekakāraṇakārya*).¹⁴ The *guru* is the 'cause' and his wife is the 'assistant cause'.¹⁵ The fellow disciples are called 'brothers'¹⁶ while a person who is associated

8. K.C. Pandey, *Abhinavagupta*, p. 618.

9. J.L. Masson and M.V. Patwardhan, *Śāntarasa and Abhinavagupta's philosophy of aesthetics*, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969, p. 43. Raniero Gnoli, *Luce delle sacre scritture*, (*Tantrāloka*). Torino, Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1972, p. 692 footnote 61. Sanderson, 'Meaning', p. 83.

10. D.L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra*, London, Oxford University Press, 1959, vol. 1, p. 113.

11. G.W. Farrow and I. Menon, *The Concealed Essence of the Hevajra Tantra, with the commentary Yogaratnamālā*, Delhi, Motilal BanarsiDass, 1992, p. 257.

12. L. Silburn, *La kundalinī, l'énergie des profondeurs*, Paris, Les Deux Oceans, 1983, p. 212.

13. *TĀ* 28.204a.

14. *TĀ* 28.208b-209a.

15. *TĀ* 28.209b. In *TĀ* 28.210a, Abhinava emphasizes the point by stating that normally the *guru* is without qualification for this sacrifice if he is without a *śakti* (*nihilśaktikasya*).

16. *TĀ* 28.211b.

with a disciple is also considered to form part, indirectly (*paramparāyogāt*), of the *guru*'s family.'¹⁷

Chapter 29 is built on chapter 28 and adapts it according to the Kula tradition in which the daughter of Tryambaka and not his son communicates consciousness. In *Tantrāloka* 29.123b, in order to sum up all that has been said about the *śakti*, Abhinava quotes the saying of Kallata:

'[The *guru*] should ritually prepare (*bhāvitām*) [the *śakti*] because by her very being (*sva-bhāva*) she is superior to his own body.'

TĀ 29.123b.

This quotation gives the clue to what is happening. The *śakti* is female by her very nature (*sva-bhāva*) and for that reason she is ritually prepared (*bhāvitām*) for her role in the sacrifice. On the one hand because by her very nature she brings the practitioner to consciousness, she is the 'cause'. On the other hand she is ritually prepared so that she is 'caused'. Thirdly, because she affects the practitioner and is affected by him they are both 'co-caused'.

Someone who is not a member of the group may come to the ritual just as someone might be brought to a club by a friend. Because he is present as an associate of one of the disciples he is considered indirectly (*paramparāyogāt*) to form part of the group. He is not directly involved with the *śakti* but nevertheless she has an effect on him. His presence is a tacit approval or ritual preparation of her so that he too is both 'caused' by her and 'causes' her and so they are both 'co-caused'.

In short, the *guru* of *Tantrāloka* 28 has a 'worldly' or physical relationship with his family but only a so-called 'unworldly' relationship with his disciple, based on consciousness alone. The *śakti* of *Tantrāloka*, by contrast, has a relationship with her male partner based both on physicality and on consciousness and so, by overcoming dualism, she is superior to the *guru* of *Tantrāloka* 28.

Accordingly the *śakti* of verses 101b-102 is not the mother, sister, daughter or wife etc. but is a woman who takes on the position of con-

17. *TĀ* 28.211b-212a.

secrated female *vis-à-vis* the practitioner. The one woman has six aspects just as the divine *sakti* manifests herself in many ways.

The Vedic position is that the man who follows the *dharma* will have as one of his highest duties to join with his wife who is of the same caste as himself and by the emission of seed with its accompanying pleasure (*rīramṣā*) to continue the family line. It is against this particular norm of conduct that Sacrifice 3 inveighs. It proposes just the opposite situation: to join with a woman of whatever case or condition who is not the wife, and to have sexual intercourse with her but without seeking pleasure and without the intent of procreation. The aim is to engage in sexual activity simply in order to arrive at consciousness and to attain the state of being liberated-while-living. Rather than seek the fluctuating mental states of excitement and abatement, the practitioner seeks intimacy with his partner while focusing on their eternal identity as Śiva and *sakti*, joined together in bliss.

It would be an anachronism to interpret Sacrifice 3 of the Kula ritual as ‘sacred prostitution’ since the Western notion of monogamy cannot be applied to mediaeval Kashmir. It would be equally erroneous to try to imitate that ritual in our present age which has an altogether different attitude to women.

How then sum up the Kula mentality?

No attention is paid to caste or social standing which the *Veda* holds as a duty, nor to the ban on wine and meat which are forbidden to the devout Brahmin. Transgression of this sort depends on the distinction between pure and impure which is a merely human view or at best belongs to the lowest level of revelation, namely to the *Veda*. But Śaiva consciousness is beyond dualism. It is free and all encompassing. The Kula practitioner has no fear of impurity and in fact will accept to transgress in order to manifest his inner freedom. Likewise, he will make use of the 3 M’s not in order that these might bring him to a consciousness which he does not yet possess but rather that they might express in an external form the bliss he already knows. The person who has not attained consciousness is a ‘bonded animal’ (*paśu*) and his use of the three *makāras* in order to attain that consciousness

is just folly. Likewise, the use of transgression in order to attain freedom is senseless. The person who has attained consciousness, on the other hand, will want to use the *makāras* only to express his inner bliss and to break down the dualism between inner and outer bliss. By his authentic initiation and above all by the grace of Śiva he has attained the Bhairavic attitude, *bhairava-mudrā*, where the outer and the inner are the same. He does not oppose the external world and the internal world, subject and object, I and you. All is equally the expression of his śakti, the supreme word, *paravāc*.

Each of the six Kula sacrifices leads a person to a different aspect of the mantra and finally to the highest level of consciousness, the experience of *mantra-vyapti*, the pervasion of the *mantra*, so that the Kula ritual leads in fact to its own abandonment. The person who knows the pervasion of the mantra knows that he is Bhairava.

‘Recalling in every action and in every place, the pervasion [of the *mantra*] ..., being every unattached, liberated-while-living, he becomes the supreme Bhairava.’

TĀ 29.161-162.

This supreme *mantra* of consciousness is none other than the mantra *SAUH*, the goddess Parā which expresses both the supreme reality and all manifested reality and which is analysed at length in the *Parātrīṁśikāvivaraṇa*. In this way Abhinava breaks down the dualism between sacred and profane, ritual and ordinary life so that the Kula practitioner is liberated while alive, his every act is worship and his every word is *mantra*.

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