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OSCAR FIGUEROA

THE SECULAR AND THE RELIGIOUS IN
KṢEMENDRA'S *SAMAYAMĀTRKĀ**

0. Introduction

Composed by the eleventh-century Kashmiri polymath Kṣemendra, *Samayamātrkā* is an illuminating text to reflect upon the interaction between secular and religious life in medieval India. Constructed as a brothel story, with a sinister bawd as model of success, the text is a satirical meditation upon religious hypocrisy and more generally upon human bent to pleasure. Tantric religion is the main target of the work's rhetoric of irony. Yet, there is still a lack of understanding of this presence in the light of the work's tone and style. This article argues that in the act of parodying Tantra as a cult of pleasure, Kṣemendra puts into question the religious establishment, underscoring the difficulties to follow a truly pious life in a world characterized by delusion and desire. Seen in this light, the text seems to advocate an ethical stance, wherein satire bears a ludic, non-sectarian, and at times even universal significance.

* This article was written with the kind support of the Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Studi Interculturali of the Università degli Studi di Firenze as part of a research stay in the Spring of 2018. In Italy, Prof. Fabrizia Baldissera, an authority in the work of Kṣemendra, acted as my adviser, discussed with me some of the ideas here presented and made a number of precious remarks, for which I am deeply grateful. I also thank the comments received during the 17th World Sanskrit Conference in Vancouver (July 2018), where I read an earlier and much shorter version of this article. In particular, I am grateful to Iris Iran Farkhondeh for the interchange of ideas. Needless to say, any errors in form and content remain mine.

1. Much more than a brothel plot

Of all the satirical works written by the eleventh-century C.E. Kashmiri polymath Kṣemendra, his *Samayamātrkā* (SM) has been the less studied to date. In line with previous works focused on ordinary and sometimes socially controversial characters as a way to explore the conflict between orthodox ideals and values, on the one hand, and the forces of everyday life, on the other, SM offers a mordant portrait of the evils of medieval Indian society seen from the point of view of a sinister bawd, Kaṅkāli, and her young apprentice, Kalāvati, presented as models of success.

SM's plot can be summarized as follows: Distressed due to her "mother's" recent death, Kalāvati receives the visit of an old friend, the barber Kaṅka, who recommends to adopt a new "mother": the famous Kaṅkāli, "all skin and bones ... and a deathly pale face like a ghost".¹ In order to convince Kalāvati, Kaṅka recounts Kaṅkāli's adventures from childhood to old age, a life made of many identity changes always in pursuit of money. After this, comes the encounter between the protagonists. Seeing in Kalāvati an opportunity to make a living, Kaṅkāli becomes her new mother and starts teaching the trade. The training includes the well-known lessons to catch rich men, win their hearts, rip them off, and kick them out.² Kalāvati puts all this into practice at the expense of Paṅka, the innocent son of a rich merchant.

Now, interspersed within this amusing plot, the reader meets with constant jokes at religious figures. Some scholars have correctly pointed out that Śaiva Tantra is the main target.³

¹ SM 4.2. All translations from the Sanskrit are mine. The verses from SM here presented reproduce my rendering of the whole text into Spanish (Trotta, Madrid, 2019) on the basis of P. Durgāprasād's edition (Nirṇaya Sāgar Press, Bombay, 1925), this latter based in turn on the manuscript discovered by G. Bühler in the 19th century and today kept in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (number 201/1875-76), and to which I also had access.

² See for instance Vatsyāyana, *Kāmasūtra* 6.3.39-44.

³ See Wojtilla, G., "Notes on Popular Śaivism and Tantra in Eleventh Century Kashmir: A Study on Kṣemendra's *Samayamātrkā*", in Ligeti L. (ed.), *Tibetan and Buddhist Studies Commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös*,

Others have called attention to the attacks on Buddhism and orthodox Brahmanism as well.⁴ Yet, most scholars have treated this aspect as secondary compared with Kṣemendra's supposed primary interest – writing a brothel story for didactic purposes, preventing good and pious men from tangling with bad women. Thanks to the progress in the study of Kṣemendra's other satires and to the advancement of our knowledge of religious diversity in medieval Kashmir, we have today more information to explore the text in its complexity. Thus, this article reflects upon the interplay between religious and secular motifs in SM. In this context, it is argued that in the very act of satirically condemning Tantra as a cult of pleasure, the work puts into question the religious establishment, underscoring the difficulties to follow a truly pious life in a world characterized by delusion and desire.

In order to appreciate fully this aspect of the text, I propose a reversal of priority as the key to go deeper into its meaning in connection with the mockery of Tantric religion. SM can be read as a satirical meditation on religious hypocrisy constructed upon or disguised as a brothel story. Scholarly opinion has identified another brothel-poem from Kashmir, Dāmodara's *Kuṭṭanāmata* (eight century C.E.), as the main influence behind SM. The change of emphasis I propose here underscores other influences: SM can be read as being also influenced by previous works concerned with religious hypocrisy (*dambha*) and especially with Tantric-inspired hypocrisy – a motif absent in the *Kuṭṭanāmata*.

In the sphere of drama, we have the farcical genre (*prahasana*), defined in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* precisely as focused on “ridiculing holy men, ascetics, Brahmins and other [religious

Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1984: 381-389; and more recent and informed Baldissera, F., “The Satire of Tantric Figures in Some Works of Kṣemendra”, in Torella, R. (ed.), *Le parole e i marmi. Studi in onore di Raniero Gnoli*, Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, Rome, vol. 1, 2001: 13-35.

⁴ See respectively Boccali, G., “In margine a un testo di Kṣemendra”, in Bolognesi, G. and Pisani, V. (eds.), *Linguistica e filologia. Atti del VII Convegno Internazionale di Linguisti*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia, 1987: 207-209, and Siegel, L., *Laughing Matters. Comic Tradition of India*, The University of Chicago, Chicago, 1987: 110.

figures]”.⁵ The image of the Śaiva Tantric initiate as a hedonist occurs already in one of the earliest *prahasanas*: Mahendravarman’s *Mattavilāsa*, from the seventh century C.E. Also in the sphere of drama and using the brothel as ideal setting, the repeated allusions to religious hypocrisy – here mainly of the Brahmanical type – found in the four satirical Monologue-Plays (*Caturbhāṇī*) (ca. sixth century C.E.) constitute an undeniable influence.⁶ Other important influences in this regard appear to be the “Tantric episodes” in Bhavabhūti’s drama *Mālatīmādhava* and Bāṇabhaṭṭa’s prose romance *Kādambarī*, both from the seventh or eight centuries C.E. The resemblance with these two works sometimes goes beyond the evocation of a common atmosphere. For instance, the praises to the Tantric goddess Cāmuṇḍā in *Mālatīmādhava* 5.22-23 are very similar to some of the verses in SM where Kṣemendra associates satirically his protagonist Kaṅkāli with the Tantric goddess. I will come back to this later. As for the *Kādambarī*, the influence is beyond doubt, for we know that Kṣemendra wrote a recreation, the *Padyakādambarī*, which unfortunately has not come to us.

My opinion is that Kṣemendra’s SM should be read more properly upon this line of influence, and that it is upon such line that he innovates. Perhaps the most important innovation has to do with Kaṅkāli’s leading role, an aspect that take us directly to the work’s Tantric background. As I will show, the construction of the text subtly, but thoroughly, embraces the Tantric milieu of Kashmir during Kṣemendra’s time.

2. The Tantric background

Kaṅkāli gives new life to the satirical image of the Tantric initiate built upon a double identity, sacred and profane, in previous literary works. Kṣemendra does so combining the

⁵ *Nāṭyaśāstra* 18.103-104. Of course, this possible influence would suggest the presence of a theatrical element in SM.

⁶ See Loman, J.R., “Types of Kashmirian Society in Kṣemendra’s *Deśopadeśa*”, *Brahmavidya. The Adyar Library Bulletin* 31-32, 1968: 176-177.

figure of the nun who acts as go-between, present in many literary works,⁷ and the figure of the religious student who uses Tantra to dissimulate his bent to pleasure. But Kṣemendra goes even further, for he associates the figure of the nun who acts as go-between not only with a Tantric devotee but with the Tantric goddess. Fierce, Tantric goddesses in previous dramas and poems are not “characters” as such; rather, their presence is scenographic, dependent on the true characters, among them their devotees. The best example is, again, the goddess Cāmuṇḍā-Karālā in Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava* and Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Kādambarī*. For his part, playing on words and using puns, Kṣemendra creates a link between the old whore Kaṅkāli and the fierce Tantric goddess. Put differently, from a religious perspective, Kaṅkāli's leading role calls for a satirical identification not with the Tantric devotee – that is the role of her apprentice Kalāvati – but with the goddess herself.

This underlies the very title of the work, formed by the words *samaya* and *mātrkā*. The latter means “mother”. Instead, *samaya* has a clear polysemic value. Starting from the basic meaning of “coming together”, in political and commercial contexts *samaya* is the union of wills by means of an alliance or contract. When such agreement gains authority, *samaya* means habit, precept, doctrine. In time-space terms, *samaya* is the coming together of auspicious circumstances, and therefore opportunity. Finally, in the private sphere, *samaya* means erotic encounter, sexual union. All these meanings are implied in the title of the work, and therefore more than one translation is possible: mother by contract, mother for convenience, an opportunist mother, etc. Of course, as noted long time ago by M. Winternitz and G. Boccali, *samayamātrkā* ends up being an euphemism for “bawd”.⁸

⁷ See for instance Daṇḍin, *Daśakumāracarita* 2.2 and 2.3; also Bhavabhūti, *Mālatīmādhava*, first act, about the Buddhist nun Kāmandakī. On this topic, see Bloomfield, M., “On False Ascetics and Nuns in Hindu Fiction”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 44, 1924: 236-242.

⁸ Respectively in *History of Indian Literature*, vol. 3, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1963: 169, and “Appunti per la traduzione della *Samayamātrkā* di Kṣemendra”, *Paideia, rivista*

But to all these meanings one needs to add a specific religious meaning, related to the work's Tantric background, and which the options "contract", "convenience", and so on do not convey. Based on the ideas of alliance and opportunity, in many Tantric sources, either Śaiva, Śākta or Buddhist, the word is used in connection with the ordinances the initiate follows under oath. The initiate renounces his ordinary identity (family, caste, etc.) and creates a bond (a coming together) with his guru, the deities and other supernatural creatures, thus becoming a *samayin*. This bond implies a "commitment" or "pledge" to follow certain doctrines and practices. *Samaya* is both the observances to be followed by the initiate, as well as the pledge to follow them.⁹

An illuminating hint concerning the Tantric meaning of *samaya* in SM can be obtained from another of Kṣemendra's satirical works, his *Narmamālā*. There, in an important section of the second chapter, a group of parasites (*viṭa*) devises how to seduce the conceited wife of the protagonist, a corrupt officer (*kāyastha*). In accordance with the literary stereotype I just mentioned, the parasites conclude that the help of an old Buddhist nun is necessary, for everyone knows that in reality she is a go-between.¹⁰ To this double identity, religious and secular, the text adds a third ingredient: the nun is a Tantric adherent as can be inferred from her name, Vajrayoginī. This piece of information intensifies the parody and frames the description of Vajrayoginī as the "mother of the yogas to bewitch", as the "divine go-between to adulterers", and more importantly as the "women's *samaya-devatā* in the initiation ceremonies to catch men".¹¹ She is the "deity" (*devatā*) with whom women seal an "alliance" (*samaya*), in the religious sense

letteraria di informazione bibliografica 34, 1984: 49-53. Evidently, bawds are called "mothers" due to the matrilineal and hereditary nature of prostitution in India.

⁹ See for instance *Brahmayāmalatantra* 61, 85 and 73.47, quoted by Hatley, S., "The Brahmayāmalatantra and Early Śaiva Cults of Yoginīs", PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2007: 33 and 180. Also *Tantrāloka* 15.521-613. For Buddhist sources, see *Guhyasamājatantra* 17.11-25, among many others.

¹⁰ Kṣemendra, *Narmamālā* 2.7-29.

¹¹ SM 2.30.

of making a “vow” or “pledge” (*samayadīkṣā*), in exchange for instruction – here of course erotic instruction.¹² This use of the word *samaya* has an obvious resonance with the title of our text, and the nun Vajrayoginī, although Buddhist, says a lot about Kaṅkāli, the *samaya-devatā*, the secular and religious mother of Kalāvatī.

All this suggests that the second word in the title, the word *mātrkā*, has also a Tantric import. Moreover, its presence in the title is deliberate. Kṣemendra combined *samaya* with *mātrkā*, and not with any other word for “mother”, because only the latter possessed the semantic import he was interested in. This can be substantiated by the mere six occurrences of the word within the text,¹³ three of them simply reiterating the title, whereas a synonym like *jananī* occurs dozens of times. Indeed, the ancient worship of mother goddesses was the substratum for the development of a properly Tantric worship of clans of female divinities, sometimes also called *mātrkā* or *mātr*.¹⁴ From this older substratum, Tantric worship of mother goddesses evolved into a conception of these female creatures as the forces presiding over the various planes of existence, and in a more technical sense as the sonic or mantric womb from which emanates the manifested world. Of course, Kṣemendra's deliberate preference for *mātrkā* in the title confirms in turn the Tantric meaning of *samaya*. Therefore, behind the opportunist mother by contract, there is a sacred mother by pledge. Kalāvatī receives initiation by such a mother, sealing with her an erotic-cum-religious alliance. In sum, a *samayamātrkā* can only be a *samayadevatā*, a Tantric goddess.

Now, the easiest way to confirm Kaṅkāli's Tantric identity would be her name, literally “Skeleton”. Unfortunately, as far as my research goes, I have not been able to find abundant

¹² Similarly, see Kṣemendra, *Deśopadeśa* 8.9, concerning an “honourable wife” (*kulavadhū*), who after being initiated in the arts of a lustful Tantric guru, avoids her husband in bed precisely because of his “lacking of *samaya*”.

¹³ SM 1.3, 1.43, 1.45, 6.5, 8.127 and 8.129.

¹⁴ Hatley, S., “From Mātr to Yoginī: Continuity and Transformation in the South Asian Cults to the Mother Goddesses”, in Keul, I. (ed.), *Transformations and Transfer of Tantra in Asia and Beyond*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2012: 107-117.

unequivocal testimonies. An illuminating exception is found in Somadevabhaṭṭa's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, another text from Kashmir from the same period. There we read the story of a pious Brahmin who sacrifices himself before the "supreme mother" Durgā (also known as Caṇḍī, Ambikā, and Kālī) and in that context he worships her as Kaṅkālinī.¹⁵ Note also that in his *Deśopadeśa*, a didactical poem with a hint of satirical flavour, Kṣemendra describes "bawds" (*kuṭṭanī*) as *kaṅkālākṛti*, "having the form of a skeleton",¹⁶ in connection with the Kāpālikas, literally the Skull Bearers, a group of Śaiva Tantric ascetics mentioned also in SM and to which I will return.

In any case, although the word as such does not seem to have a prolific history as a proper name in Tantric sources, the associations with other names and motifs in SM offer relevant information. Kaṅkāli's voracity stands out. She is a "tigress avid of blood and flesh", she is a "sinister man-eater".¹⁷ Physically, this voracity is represented by a gaping mouth. Kaṅkāli sucks out the golden earrings of one lover; she bites and tears off the tongue of another lover.¹⁸ The motif is more explicit some stanzas later: "Her enormous jaws were always open in order to take over the riches of others ... Her long and sharp teeth visibly projected outwards gave her a terrifying look".¹⁹ The same image occurs in SM's chapter six, when a man greets her in the street with these words: "Your pointed teeth look threatening in the abyss of your mouth, a mouth whose awful palate is hell itself; your tongue stretches out twisting like the crest of an ardent fire that devours everything ... Hail to the sublime Caṇḍaghaṇṭā".²⁰

Caṇḍaghaṇṭā is a name of the goddesses Durgā and Kālī with a conspicuous presence in Śaiva and Śākta Tantric sources,

¹⁵ *Kathāsaritsāgara* 12.11.90-92.

¹⁶ *Deśopadeśa* 4.3.

¹⁷ SM 1.40 and 4.14.

¹⁸ SM 2.10 and 2.50.

¹⁹ SM 4.4-6.

²⁰ SM 6.30.

more often as Caṇḍamuṇḍā, Cāmuṇḍā, Caṇḍī, Caṇḍikā, etc.²¹ Significantly, she is the goddess mentioned by both Bāṇabhaṭṭa and Bhavabhūti in the Tantric episodes of their works. In particular, as I said, the praise to Cāmuṇḍā in *Mālatīmādhava* 5.22-23 has a great similarity with this passage in SM. But again, unlike Cāmuṇḍā's scenographic or, at the most, side role in Bāṇabhaṭṭa's and Bhavabhūti's works, in Kṣemendra's brothel poem she is the main character.

Kaṅkāli's association with Cāmuṇḍā explains also the association with Time and Death,²² very common in the case of the goddesses Durgā and Kālī.²³ Kaṅkāli proclaims: "I have lived more than a thousand years".²⁴ She is a living corpse, in that being timeless, she is finitude and death. Moreover, in the invocation of the text Kṣemendra asserts that Kālī's realm is the *samsāra*. In line with this, Kaṅkāli is *samsāra* incarnated, she is the open manifestation of an existence subjected to the forces that consume and kill in the act of enjoying them. Seen in this light, SM's invocation has a further meaning. There, Kṣemendra invokes the goddess Kālī as Karālā, in reference to her gaping mouth. Bhavabhūti's influence emerges again, for in *Mālatīmādhava* we read about a crematory where "Cāmuṇḍā is worshipped under the name Karālā", later depicted as the "mother of all creatures", and at the same time as the gaping mouth to which they all return.²⁵ In reality, an extended presence underlies this resonance. Indirectly identified as Karālā, the protagonist of SM possesses numerous antecedents.²⁶ Significantly, most of them are Tantric. For instance, in the ca. seventh-eight century C.E. *Brahmayāmalatantra*, also known as the *Picumata*, Karālā is

²¹ See for instance *Devīmāhātmya* 7.8-25, which describes the battle of Kālī against Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, whence the name Caṇḍamuṇḍā is derived.

²² See SM 1.50 and 4.44.

²³ See for instance *Mahābhārata* 4.6.25, among many other examples.

²⁴ SM 2.103.

²⁵ Prose after 1.18, 5.3 and 5.22-23. Karālā reappears in the passage in prose after 5.4, also in 5.21, 5.32, and 9.48. For Cāmuṇḍā, see 5.22 and 5.25.

²⁶ For pre-Tantric sources see for instance *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* 1.2.4, where Kālī and Karālī are the names of two of the seven Agni's tongues; also *Mahābhārata* 6.22, where Kālī y Karālā are used as names of Durgā; and *Devīmāhātmya* 7.6 y 7.19, where Kālī is described as the goddess of the gaping mouth (*karālavadanā*, *karālavaktrā*).

part of a clan of feminine creatures (mothers, goddesses, consorts, etc.) venerated in initiations and other ceremonies, a role repeated in later Śaiva ritual manuals from Kashmir.²⁷

In sum, Kṣemendra presents a satirical portrayal of the religious hypocrisy of his time on the basis of the literary image of the Tantric goddess, and more exactly on the basis of the literary stereotype of the Tantric goddess as a devious creature, as the goddess of *samsāra*. To this stereotype he adds specific features and elements taken from the Śaiva and Śākta traditions with which he was familiar. With all this in mind, the Tantric implications of the erotic-cum-religious alliance between Kalāvatī and her mother Kaṅkālī become more visible. The parody of Kalāvatī's initiation, in SM's fourth chapter, includes the formal petition of serving like a loyal daughter and the approval of her new mother. Kalāvatī is now an initiate and as such she becomes the goddess' "receptacle of the teachings".²⁸ Thus, when the word *samaya* reappears at the end of that chapter its double import becomes more evident. Kaṅkālī says:

Having heard such eloquent words, a laudation of riches,	
In an "instant" (<i>samaye</i>)	I assumed that it was
I assumed that it was	the "best of Tantras"
the "essential doctrine"	(<i>sāra-tantra</i>) as to the
(<i>sāra-tantra</i>) for	"sacred pledge"
"explaining human	(<i>samaye</i>) to "deceit this
condition" <i>daśāpadeśa</i>).	era" (<i>daśāpadeśa</i>). ²⁹

²⁷ *Brahmayāmalatantra* 4.890-894, quoted by Hatley, S., "From Mātṛ to Yoginī: Continuity and Transformation in the South Asian Cults to the Mother Goddesses", in Keul, I. (ed.), *Transformations and Transfer of Tantra in Asia and Beyond*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 2012: 109. See also Sanderson, A., "Śaiva Texts", in Jacobsen, K.A. (ed.), *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 6, Brill, Leiden, 2015: 25, and "The Śaiva Exegesis of Kashmir", in Goodall, D. and Padoux, A. (eds.), *Mélanges tantriques à la mémoire d'Hélène Brunner / Tantric Studies in Memory of Hélène Brunner*, Pondicherry: Institut français d'Indologie/École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2007: 237. In *Netratantra* 10.35, the akin form *karālī* is the name of one of the four consorts forming the clan of Bhairava; in *Mālinīvijayottaratantra* 20.44, it is the name of a *yoginī*. See also *Mālinīvijayottaratantra* 7.3 and 7.20-21.

²⁸ SM 4.10-17.

²⁹ SM 4.115.

The word *tantra* rounds up the play on words. This is not any “doctrine” or “book”, the basic meanings of *tantra*, but rather the doctrine of the heterodox cults that today we call Tantra and which Kṣemendra elevates and discredits satirically.

Once the Tantric import of the plot's gist is made visible, many specific passages and motifs acquire a new meaning under the same rationale. Kṣemendra transfers Kaṅkālī's double identity as a secular and sacred mother to other figures and situations. The parody of the goddess is extensible to her circle under the same logic of simulation, where the search for salvation is also a search for pleasure. If the divine mother and her daughter are at the same time cunning prostitutes, then the devotees of this cult, the cult of *saṃsāra*, cannot be but mere hedonists. Again, in accordance with the influence of previous works, the sectarian identity of these libertines is predominantly Tantric, with especial emphasis on Śaiva-Śākta Tantra, as it can be inferred from the mentioning of specific groups like the Mahāvratins and the Kāpālikas. In this way, while introducing new details about specific groups and their ceremonies, Kṣemendra reiterates the stereotype of Tantra as a religion tailor-made to secular life. To shed some light on this point some examples are in order. Virtually all of them passed unnoticed by the three previous translators of SM into European languages – J. Meyer's translation into German, D. Rossella's translation into Italian, and A.N.D. Haksar's free translation into English.³⁰ The first who called attention to SM's passages with a Tantric import and attempted a systematic account were G. Wojtilla, and later and more accurately F. Baldissera.³¹ Together these two scholars identified some 40 stanzas with a Tantric import distributed throughout the text's eight chapters, except for the third one. My own reading of the text identifies some 20 more stanzas. It is highly probable that some more will come to light as our knowledge of Kṣemendra and the Tantric traditions from Kashmir grows. In any case, the importance of all these

³⁰ Respectively *Das Zauberbuch der Hetären*, Lotus Verlag, Leipzig, 1903; *La perfetta cortigiana*, Editoriale Nuova, Novara, 1984, and *The Courtesan's Keeper. A Satire from Ancient Kashmir*, Rupa, Delhi, 2008.

³¹ See n. 3.

stanzas cannot be reduced to a quantitative or statistical fact. Their true import is subtler. Without eclipsing the brothel plot, Tantric references and innuendos build a sort of subtext around Kaṅkāli's leading role, subtly reminding the audience that SM is not only a brothel story with a predictable didactical purpose, but also and at the same time a deep meditation on human hypocrisy, specially on religious hypocrisy, for which Tantra offers the greatest literary potential. In the next section, I will try to show in what sense. For now, let us mention a few instances.

The ascetics Nandisoma and Bhairavasoma are both Kāpālikas as can be inferred from the name ending in *-soma*;³² Līlāśiva, Śambarasāra and Dambhabhūti are described as libidinous Śaiva ascetics;³³ the drunkard penitent Kaṭighaṇṭa and, in the fifth chapter, the anonymous ascetic with a clandestine paramour are presumably also Śaivas.³⁴ In the fourth chapter, as Kaṅkāli enters in Kalāvati's house, we read: "[There is] Nobody like her to protect the forest of the prostitutes and to reduce the body of the lovers who follow the 'great sex observance' to [the condition of] the sacred staff [*i.e.*, thin and emaciated like an staff]".³⁵ Kṣemendra has here in mind Lākulas and Kāpālikas ascetics, who according to a number of sources were the first Śaivas who follow the "great observance" or "great vow" (*mahāvratā*). Such observance included the use of a human skull (*kapāla*) as alms bowl, as well as a sacred "staff" (*kaṭvāṅga*) with a skull on the top.³⁶ In his SM, Kṣemendra mocks at the *mahāvrāṭins* as following the observance not in the name of Bhairava but in the name of "sex" (*rāga*), becoming thus the victims of the bawd, who reduces them to the *kaṭvāṅga*, not understood anymore as a "sacred staff" but as an ordinary

³² SM 2.19 and 2.58.

³³ SM 6.9, 6.25, 7.42.

³⁴ SM 2.89 and 5.64.

³⁵ SM 4.8.

³⁶ See Sanderson, A., "The Lākulas: New Evidences of a System Intermediate Between Pāncārthika Pāśupatism and Āgamic Śaivism", *The Indian Philosophical Annual* 24, 2006: 178-183, and Törzsök, J., "Kāpālikas", in Jacobsen, K. A. (ed.), *Brill's Encyclopaedia of Hinduism*, vol. 3, Brill, Leiden, 2011: 355-356.

walking stick, a symbol of decrepitude. In this connection, the ascetic who conducted the funerals of Kalāvātī's father was also a *mahāvratin*.³⁷

As for Tantric ceremonies, the sequence 8.3-7 about the sudden catatonic state of Paṅka, the first victim of Kalāvātī, during his encounter with her stands out. The sequence appears to be parodying a Tantric rite of initiation (*dīkṣā*), so that the "scoundrel lad" (*dhūrta śiśuka*) would in fact be a "false disciple" receiving initiation not in the sacred mysteries but in the amatory arts. The image of the young man with lifeless members would parody the state of possession of the initiates at the time of rendering their will to the goddess' will as she descends upon them. Describing this rite in his *Tantrāloka*, Abhinavagupta, the great Śaiva exegete and Kṣemendra's teacher in poetics, mentions that this descent takes place once the members of the initiate look "without support" (*nirālamba*), that is to say, adds Jayaratha (thirteenth century C.E.), the author of the only commentary of the *Tantrāloka* that has come to us: "Virtually lifeless, for the energy [of the initiate], being transitory and superficial, has extinguished itself".³⁸ At that moment, says Abhinavagupta, the initiate falls "at the feet [of the goddess]" and in a state of possession he begins to unwittingly move one hand, conceived now as the goddess' hand. It is a moment of death and resurrection. In SM, the movement of Kalāvātī's hand upon the chest of Paṅka trying to bring him to life again may also be a parody of the rite.³⁹ For its part, the sequence in 4.94-111 seems to parody the foundational myth of the Kāpālikas and other Tantric groups, namely the myth of Śiva-Bhairava stigmatized as a skull-bearer after having committed "the killing of a Brahmin" (*brahmahatyā*, *brahmavadha*), the worst of sins according to traditional law

³⁷ SM 7.33.

³⁸ Abhinavagupta, *Tantrāloka* 29.187-198 (with Jayaratha's *Viveka* commentary).

³⁹ SM 8.6. See also *Narmamālā* 3.79, where Kṣemendra includes a similar scene in the context of an orgy disguised as Tantric ceremony.

codes.⁴⁰ Also, in the very invocation, the text is defined as a *mantra-tantra* for prostitutes, where the formula *mantra-tantra* clearly evokes a magical power that parodies Tantric cults as pleasure cults. As for the many names Kaṅkāli adopted throughout her bizarre life, most of them have a Tantric import: Śikhā, Vajraghaṇṭā, Tārā, Bhāvasiddhī, Kumbhādevī, Kalā.⁴¹ Finally, her CV includes stays in sinister Tantric monasteries;⁴² she is a devotee of the goddess Sureśvarī (Durgā);⁴³ she is conversant with *maṇḍalas*, mantras, yoga, and magical ablutions;⁴⁴ she can use magic to cure wounds, to paralyze armies, to turn herself invisible, and to control the forces of the netherworld;⁴⁵ she is an augur, an expert in drugs, a snake charmer, an alchemist and an expert in black magic;⁴⁶ she wanders naked like a lunatic, and people think that she is a supernatural creature.⁴⁷

With the text's Tantric background in mind let us deepen the analysis.

3. The secular and the religious

Although evidence from Kashmir indicates that false Tantric gurus and their worship of pleasure were not only a literary fiction,⁴⁸ the mockery of Tantra that subtly pervades SM is to a large extent built upon the stereotyped image of the *tāntrika* in previous literary works. How to conciliate this continuity with the temporal distance between Kṣemendra and those antecedents? As we saw, the continuity of the stereotype is not

⁴⁰ On this important myth and its many variants see Ladrech, K., *Le crâne et le glaive. Représentations de Bhairava en Inde du Sud (VIIIe-XIIIe siècles)*, Institut français d'Indologie/École française d'Extrême-Orient, Pondichéry, 2010: 54-83.

⁴¹ Respectively SM 2.58, 2.61, 2.76, 2.85, 2.86 and 2.88.

⁴² SM 2.43, 2.61 and 2.92.

⁴³ SM 2.29.

⁴⁴ SM 2.63-64, 2.94 and 2.97.

⁴⁵ SM 2.95, 2.96, 2.98 and 2.100.

⁴⁶ SM 2.84, 2.88, 2.101, 2.103, and 8.39.

⁴⁷ SM 2.86 and 2.54.

⁴⁸ See for instance Kalhaṇa, *Rājatarangīnī* 7.277-284.

free from innovation. But innovation can be overlooked insofar as it primarily consists in iteration or intensification. Kṣemendra exaggerates the stereotype.

But again, considering the time and the place where he lived, considering that he was a student of Abhinavagupta, the great exegete of Śaiva Tantra, the persistence of the stereotype cannot be but surprising, for one would assume that, unlike his predecessors, Kṣemendra was acquainted with the Tantric sophisticated doctrines of his time. Despite of this, he avoids any reference in that direction and instead focuses his attacks precisely on the stereotyped version of Tantra, intensified through the aberrant combination of a goddess and a bawd. In sum, while in earlier works containing Tantric episodes – the already mentioned *Mālatīmādhava*, *Kādambarī* or *Mattavilāsa* –, written three to four centuries before, simplification and clichés are to some extent understandable due to the incipient and marginal nature of the Tantric phenomenon, in Kṣemendra's case, an author of the eleventh century, from Kashmir, student of Abhinavagupta, the same parodic simplification cannot be but deliberate. This confirms the literary nature of the Tantric element in SM.

In general, this intensified continuity reiterates the movement by which classical Sanskrit belles lettres (*kāvya*) externalized secular life through negative characters, *i.e.*, through idealized characters but in the inferior scale, characters that inspire empathy (they are common people) in the very act of displaying the persistence of forces like desire and greed. Therefore, the stereotype's iteration may be understood more generally as a component of *kāvya*'s original interest in love and desire as central motifs *vis-à-vis* the sacred order. Tantric practices, especially those focused on magical acquisition of power and worldly enjoyment, allowed for a larger visibility of the tension between these two orders, the secular and the religious, and therefore represented a suitable literary motif. Perforce, resorting to such motif produced a parodic demonization of Tantra. But such demonization does not necessarily end in itself insofar as it is a literary construct. And being a deliberate stereotype, focusing only on the attack to Tantra for didactical

purposes is not enough. The stereotype has other purposes. This is crucial to understand SM's deepest meaning.

With a devious Tantric goddess as main character in her own right, Tantric religion is no more a peripheral narrative element, the experience of secondary characters. Rather, it becomes the central motif. This places Tantra in a privileged position, even if the tone is satirical. In the text the privilege has to do with the absence of an opposite force, at least openly. Kaṅkāli is a devious figure, but her depravity possesses wisdom. This underlies the text's empathy towards her and her world, the world of desire and material gain: she is never openly condemned and there is no opposite moral message. The only allusion in that sense, in the epilogue, limits itself to wishing rich men to keep their money, not that they become better or more virtuous persons. Also in the epilogue, the comparison between the prostitute and the poet as illusion makers is equally illuminating: "Like the verses of good poets, the best of prostitutes bewitches by means of her attributes". The prominence of Kaṅkāli converges with the ultimate goal of poetry, for both have the power to create the illusion that unmasks the naivety of those who think the matter is as easy as casting all evil and guilt upon the shoulders of prostitutes, parasites and Tantric initiates.

In fact, the life of the brothel ends up as the model. Existence is characterized by greed, hedonism, hypocrisy, and illusion. No character can be identified as the story's good guy. Victims and aggressors shape together this secular reality, and in that sense victims, either due to ignorance or consciously, are as guilty as their aggressors.⁴⁹ Of course, this sort of reversal is particularly powerful in connection with orthodox religious values. All kinds of ascetics, Brahmins, and mere devotees are mixed up with hedonists, parasites, and pariahs, for they all share the same secular aspirations, pursued with the same obstinacy. In that sense, the devious model associated with Tantric religion becomes something like a trial by fire or a lie-detector. The

⁴⁹ See Zentai, G., "The Use of Religious Themes in the Satires of Kṣemendra", *Chronica: Annual of the Institute of History* 17, 2017: 104.

reversal that emerges from the centrality of the Tantric mother and her victims, calls for a new look at things. As L. Siegel has suggested, everyone knows that nothing good can be expected from a bawd and the circle around her. Therefore, it is a bit naïve to assume that Tantra may be the only target of Kṣemendra's mockery.⁵⁰ Rather, precisely due to Kaṅkāli's prominence, our attention is subtly displaced to those who presume to live in the superior levels, on the side of the "good manners". Suddenly, nobody seems to remain without sin.

A few examples suffice. The most evident ones involve the priestly class, including orthodox Brahmins. The two stories narrated by Kaṅkāli in the fourth chapter to illustrate how stupid can a man be once overcome by desire revolve around Brahmins who were her lovers.⁵¹ Among the easiest victims for a prostitute, she explains, is the "son of an adulterous Brahmin".⁵² The parasites portrayed in the sixth chapter leaving the brothels at dawn include a number of priests.⁵³ The seven parasites that accompany the young Paṅka to his encounter with Kalāvatī are described as "cunning Brahmins who never miss the opportunity to preside over the sacred plundering of riches".⁵⁴ The selected staff in Kalāvatī's brothel includes the "voluptuous Brahmin Ratiśarma, the protector of courtesans against the evil eye".⁵⁵ Mockery of Buddhism is also present. Kaṅkāli's record of deceits includes having pretended to be a Buddhist nun under the name Vajraghaṇṭā, a woman who shamelessly begged for alms wrapping herself in a red shawl – "a reminiscence of the passion she used to feign in bed" – and tonsuring her head – "a monastic Eden" (*vihāra*) for her lovers –.⁵⁶ Even the integrity of the

⁵⁰ *Laughing Matters. Comic Tradition of India*, The University of Chicago, Chicago, 1987: 111-112.

⁵¹ SM 4.9-65.

⁵² SM 5.66.

⁵³ SM 6.15-22.

⁵⁴ SM 7.20.

⁵⁵ SM 7.39.

⁵⁶ SM 2.61-62. As noted by D. Rossella y G. Boccali, among Buddhists and Jains the term *vihāra* means "temple" or "monastery", and therefore the use of the word to describe Kaṅkāli's head is a way of making fun of both traditions on the basis of the erotic appeal attributed to the head in various texts (see for instance *Kāmasūtra* 2.7.1-2, also Śyāmilaka's

Vaiṣṇava faith is called into question in the person of Viṣṇu and his avatar Rāma, whom myths and legends portrait as stupidly blinded by desire and greed.⁵⁷

Again, due precisely to its nerve to make apparent what others pretend, the caricature-like depiction of Tantric adherents works like a mirror where the hypocrisy of all kind of believers becomes visible. And by suggesting that no religious group is the panacea, the stereotype goes further, with its mordacity pointing now to the social fabric and the human condition. The exaggeration of the stereotype through the prominence of a Tantric goddess who is also a bawd allows to take that very stereotype beyond the antagonism of the good guy versus the bad guy. The Tantric motif behind the brothel plot does not culminate in a judgement about the superiority of some religion upon another, but rather in something simpler and yet profound, that to which all religions are also subjected and sometimes contribute: hypocrisy, ignorance, delusion. Kṣemendra's satire needs the distorted image of Tantra in order to make complete sense, *i.e.*, in order to expand its criticism to those who pretend to be free from stain. It employs irony and humour – the brothel plot – as means to reflect upon the human condition.

Although it is a caricature or precisely because of that, Kaṅkāli represents the secular world in its facticity. Indirectly, the demonization of prostitution through Tantric religion, and the other way around, the vulgarization of Tantric doctrine through brothel hedonism, question society as a whole. By demonizing the *tāntrika*, Kṣemendra suggests the fragility of traditional values and ideals, all of them focused on the possibility of escaping the “illusion” of the secular. Moreover, due to her own cheek, the bawd, and with her Tantric religion,

Pādatāḍitaka, one of the *Caturbhāṇī*, 1.16-35). Kaṅkāli's head is the “true” *vihāra* where monks take refuge. See Rossella, D., “Ancora sulla Samayamātrkā di Kṣemendra”, *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università degli Studi di Milano* 39-2, 1986: 159, and Boccali, G., “In margine a un testo de Kṣemendra”, in G. Bolognesi, G., and Pisani, V. (eds.), *Linguistica e filologia. Atti del VII Convegno Internazionale di Linguisti*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia, 1987: 209.

⁵⁷ SM 4.32-34. Similarly see Kṣemendra, *Darpadalana* 7, as well as *Narmamālā* 2.29, 3.37, and 3.39-40.

appear as ironic models of wisdom and honesty. Suddenly, to be bad has a liberating power.⁵⁸ In acknowledging this wisdom lies the clue to understanding that the stigma of Tantric religion as perversion, reiterating the old stereotype, cannot be reduced to a mere condemnation of Tantric religion. The transformation of the Tantric mother into a leading character has less to do with legitimating traditional religious discourse and more with dismantling satirically the supposed wisdom of that discourse. Here lies the deepest implication of SM's stereotyped image of Tantric religion taken as a literary image.

4. Final remarks: towards an ethical religiosity?

SM's catastrophic element should not come as a surprise. By choosing the brothel as representation of the society of his time, Kṣemendra had in mind the decadence and corruption associated with Kaliyuga, the last and worse of the four ages (*yuga*) that make a cosmic aeon (*kalpa*).⁵⁹ In this context, Kaṅkāli is compared to the scale that judges the creation in Kaliyuga, the age of deception, when nobody can trust anyone.⁶⁰ As other late Sanskrit authors, Kṣemendra's words convey a deep awareness of the evils of Indian society as a sign of the "modern" times.

His criticism is directed to a political and administrative system corrupted by greed and lust, a view reiterated one century later by Kalhaṇa in his chronicle of the kings of

⁵⁸ See Siegel, L., *Laughing Matters. Comic Tradition of India*, The University of Chicago, Chicago, 1987: 115-116.

⁵⁹ A *kalpa* presupposes the process of material entropy and moral degeneration to which creation is subjected. Being the final stage of that process, Kaliyuga is characterized by "discord" and "conflict", the primary meanings of the word *kali*. For the catastrophist view of Kaliyuga, see Sharma, R. S., "The Kali Age: A Period of Social Crisis", in Mukherjee, S.N. (ed.), *India: History and Thought*, Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 1982: 186-203, and Yadava, B.N.S., "The Accounts of the Kali Age and the Social Transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages", *Indian Historical Review* 5, 1978: 31-63.

⁶⁰ SM 4.4, 6.29 and 8.39. See also *Narmamālā* 1.9-19 on the political class as incarnation of Kali, the god of corruption and moral decadence.

Kashmir.⁶¹ Yet, as SM shows, his satirical attacks have also religion as a key target. If the moral decadence associated with Kaliyuga affects humanity, then human beliefs cannot but be infected by the same disease. The satirical appropriation of Tantric religion seeks to make more visible the disease. Therefore, it could be argued that for Kṣemendra no religion is per se superior to any other.

How to conciliate Kṣemendra's mockery of all sectarian affiliations with the biographical information that suggests a religious sensibility? Kṣemendra speaks with admiration about two important Śaivas in his life, his father Prakāśendra and his teacher Abhinavagupta;⁶² he praises a Vaiṣṇava (*bhāgavata*) teacher called Soma,⁶³ and puts his literary skills at the disposal of this tradition by writing a book about the deeds of Viṣṇu's ten avatars, the *Daśāvatāracarita*; his respect for orthodox (*vaidika*) Brahmanism is evident from a number of passages, notably those extolling his father as a benefactor of the priestly class.⁶⁴ Finally, a sincere admiration for Buddhism and even an oniric vision of the Buddha himself inspired him to write his *Avadānakalpalatā*.⁶⁵

So contrasting evidence claims for a different look at things, beyond the almost futile attempt at finding Kṣemendra's "religion" in a traditional sense, *i.e.*, as sectarian adherence. Rather, by satirically displacing the attention towards the universal problem of human stupidity and hypocrisy, Kṣemendra seems to invite his readers to look more carefully at rivalry among religions. Moreover, his stance casts important light on the subject of sectarianism in Medieval India. SM evokes a flexible intermingling of sectarian adherences as the hallmark of religious life in Medieval Kashmir, something that

⁶¹ See Kalhaṇa, *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* 4.661-670, 7.277-284, among many other passages.

⁶² See *Brhatkathāmañjarī* 19.34-35, and *Aucityavicāracarcā*, epilogue 1-2.

⁶³ See *Brhatkathāmañjarī* 19.38, and *Bhāratamañjarī*, epilogue 9.

⁶⁴ See *Brhatkathāmañjarī* 19.34-35; *Daśāvatāracarita*, epilogue 2; *Carucārya* 20, and *Daśāvatāracarita* 10.5-9.

⁶⁵ *Avadānakalpalatā* 1.11-17.

puts into question and calls for a revaluation of the notion of deep separations between different religious groups.⁶⁶

At any rate, SM can be read as advocating a sort of ethical position wherein what matters is not sectarian identity but important moral values. Given the illusory nature of this world and the universality of human stupidity as essential components of Kaliyuga, the ultimate foundation can only be ethics, without distinction of creed. Seen in this light, SM's satirical tone seems to bear a ludic, non-sectarian, and at times even universal significance.

This is indeed a very original stance within classical Sanskrit literature and as such one which deserves further analysis, not only in order to understand fully the contents and purpose of SM, as I have tried here, but also in order to appreciate more accurately some of Kṣemendra's other works, both satirical and didactical, and finally in order to appreciate his contribution to our understanding of the the complex interaction of religious and secular orders in pre-modern India, and the role of Tantric religion in that interaction.

⁶⁶ On this topic see Sanderson, A., "Tolerance, Exclusivity, Inclusivity, and Persecution in Indian Religion During the Early Medieval Period", in Makinson, J. (ed.), *Honoris Causa: Essays in Honour of Aveek Sarkar*, Allen Lane, London, 2015: 155-224. This flexibility also underlies a passage of his *Narmamālā* where the protagonist is described as having been "a Buddhist in the beginning, then out of hypocrisy he became a Vaiṣṇava, and now, in order to protect his wife [from suitors], he began to show interest in the Kaula tradition" (2.101) – a multiple religious conversion that we could well have found in SM.

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