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Sisters and Consorts, Adepts and Goddesses: Representations of Women in the *Brahmayāmala*¹

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Women, revelation, and esoteric community

In the study of early-medieval India's tantric traditions, we face enormous difficulty recovering substantive glimpses of historical women. The prospects for meaningful recovery of women's own voices seem particularly discouraging.² Nonetheless, discourse on women abounds in tantric literature, and may afford scope for reconstructing at least limited aspects of their participation in some early tantric traditions. One of the richest potential sources is the *Brahmayāmala* or *Picumata*, a voluminous Śaiva *Bhairavatantra* of the goddess-centred *vidyāpīṭha* division which may

¹ I would like to thank Vincent Eltschinger, Nina Mirnig, and Marion Rastelli for inviting this contribution and for organizing such a stimulating symposium. This essay was initially drafted prior to publication of Judit TÖRZSÖK's (2014) insightful article, "Women in Early Śākta Tantras: *Dūtī*, *Yoginī* and *Sādhakī*." Though her aims are broader, these overlap in subject matter and in some of the particular evidence analysed. I am grateful that she has nonetheless encouraged me to complete and publish my essay, noting that our emphases have in many respects differed. In revising, I have tried to place these essays in conversation and to curtail the degree of overlap, though some inevitably remains (especially the discussion of *Brahmayāmala*, chapter 24). I am grateful to Alberta Ferrario, Ayesha Irani, Csaba Kiss, and the volume's editors for their comments on drafts of this essay. Quotations from the *Brahmayāmala* are from the editions of HATLEY (2007 and forthcoming) and KISS (2015), for published chapters, and otherwise from my draft editions based on the principal manuscript (siglum "A" in the critical edition; see the bibliography). Passages adduced from the *Brahmayāmala* generally follow the orthography of this Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript, as discussed in the introduction to HATLEY (forthcoming). The language of the *Brahmayāmala* is highly non-standard; for a detailed discussion, see KISS (2015: 73–85).

² Notwithstanding the controversial claims of Miranda SHAW (1994). For a striking exception to the relative absence of women's voices, albeit from early twentieth-century Tibet, note the case of Sera Khandro, admirably studied by Sarah JACOBY (2014).

date in some form to the mid-seventh to early-eighth centuries.³ Spanning more than twelve-thousand verses, the *Brahmayāmala* (hereafter “BraYā”) affords a comparatively broad as well as early window into women’s involvement in a *śākta-śaiva* cultic context, tinted though this is by preoccupation with the virtuoso male *sādhaka* and his quest for supernatural attainment (*siddhi*).⁴

While the *sādhaka*’s rites frequently demand solitude, the BraYā nonetheless intimates the existence of an esoteric community structured around the institution and person of the guru. Initiates contravene conventional social identities, entering into new modes of relationality based on initiatory lineages and hierarchies. Practitioners also enter into “kinship” with the deities, a bond established by entry into particular deity clans (*kula*) during initiation. Unfortunately, the social dimension and corporate ritual of the BraYā’s cult receive minimal elaboration, and must to a large degree be inferred through scattered remarks.⁵ Despite their disinterest in codifying or describing social religion, the redactors nonetheless articulate a detailed, if highly idealized vision of the BraYā’s textual community.

In the revelation narrative of chapter (*paṭala*) 1, the BraYā portrays its redaction as a cosmogonic process, narrating the “descent” (*avatāra*) of the primordial scriptural wisdom (*jñāna*) into the world in the bounded form of text. This narrative simultaneously articulates a social vision by delineating the scripture’s lineage of redactors, a metacommunity spanning levels of the cosmos (*tattva*) and cycles of time. More than twenty-five persons find mention, in the majority of cases with specification of caste identity and region of origin.⁶ Details such as affiliations with Vedic schools (*śākhā*), pre-initiatory names, native villages, or even the name of a parent flesh out some of the descriptions. Mirroring revelation’s vast temporal and cosmological framework, the narrative invokes an expansive Indic geography: individuals involved in the BraYā’s transmission span from Oḍradeśa in the east to Sindh (*sindhaviṣaya*) and the Swat Valley (*oḍḍiyāna*) in the northwest, and Kashmir (*kaśmīra*) and Lampā in the far north. Two facets concerning the persons described stand out: the prominence of male brahmins in the production and transmission of scripture, and the simultaneous inclusion of a spectrum of other castes. Eleven brahmin males figure among the individuals named, representing a variety of regions and Vedic *śākhās*. The lineage features two *kṣatriyas* and two *śūdras*, and includes two members of the “tribal” *mātāṅga* community as well; the remaining individuals belong to unspecified castes. This inclusive metacommunity may reflect the actual diversity of participants in the BraYā’s cult, for caste and gender, in principle, do not determine eligibility for initiation. The lineage of the text’s redactors also intimates the reality that textual production and the status of officiant were likely domains in which male brahmins predominated.

³ For an overview of Tantric Śaivism’s branches and literatures, see SANDERSON 1988 and 2014. On the *Brahmayāmala*, see HATLEY 2007 and forthcoming, and KISS 2015.

⁴ The rites of the *sādhaka* form the focus of volume II of the BraYā, published by KISS 2015.

⁵ Note, for instance, passing reference to a communal meal in the guru’s home, in BraYā 45.227–230; and to a feast involving non-initiates following the rite of image-installation (*pratiṣṭhā*), in BraYā 4.707–709 (quoted in n. 93 below).

⁶ Cf. the discussions of SANDERSON (2009: 296, n. 703) and HATLEY (2007: 228–234).

From the outset, the BraYā articulates a vision of its readership community, its idealised community of practice, that explicitly incorporates women. In the opening chapter, Bhairava prophesies, “‘In home after home, O great goddess, whether they be men fit for *siddhi*, or women fit for *siddhi*, [the *Brahmayāmala*] shall spread to all of their homes. But those unfit for *siddhi*, whether a man or women, shall not attain even the mere *vidyā*-mantra, O great queen.’ Thus did speak Bhairava.”⁷ This is not isolated rhetoric, for references to initiated women abound in the text, and two women figure prominently in the revelation narrative. One of these participates directly in the text’s transmission. She is in fact the goddess Bhairavī or Aghorī herself, the divine interlocutor whose questions to Bhairava structure the text. Incarnate in the world in response to a curse, she was born as the girl Sattikā⁸ in a village near Prayāga to a brahmin named Meghadatta, and is said to possess intellect (*buddhi*) and the marks of auspiciousness (*lakṣaṇānvitā*). Worshipping the *liṅga* perpetually with great devotion, at the age of thirteen she attained perfection (*siddhā*) through the grace of the supreme *śakti*,⁹ thence ascending into the skies where she regained her consort, Bhairava, and the divine name Aghorī. This sets the stage for Bhairava once again to reveal to her the BraYā, which

⁷ BraYā 1.116c–118 (edition of HATLEY forthcoming): *grhe grhe mahādevi ye punsāḥ siddhibhājanāḥ* || 116 || *striyo vā siddhibhāginyas teṣām api grheṣv atha | pracariṣyati deveśi evam vai bhairavo ’bravīt* || 117 || *asiddhibhājanā ye tu puruṣo ’tha striyo ’tha vā | vidyāmātram apiś caiva na prāpsyanti mahādhipe* || 118 ||.

⁸ The name appears only once in the BraYā’s old manuscript, where the orthography is ambiguous: both *santikā* and *sattikā* are possible. I consider the latter more probable, and interpret this as the Prakrit equivalent of Sanskrit *śaktikā*.

⁹ BraYā (HATLEY 2007) 1.24–30: *tatas tvām vihvalān drṣṭvā grhītaḥ karuṇayā hy aham | evam uktāsi kārūṇyān mahāmanyubhr̥tena tu* || 24 || *bhūrlokaṃ gaccha deveśe avatāraṃ kuruṣva ’tha | brāhmaṇasya grhe deham aparaṃ grhṇa suvrate* || 25 || *tatrasthāyās tatas tubhyaṃ bhaktyāhaṃ sampracoditaḥ | anugrahaṃ kariṣyāmi tavāhaṃ śakti-r-ājñayā | mayā sārddham punas tv aikyan tat sarvvam prāpsyasi priye* || 26 || *tato ’vatīrṇṇā madvākyāt prayāgasya samīpataḥ | kaṇavīre mahāgrāme meghadattagrhe śubhe* || 27 || *chandogasya mahādevi utpannā lakṣaṇānvitā | sattikā tatra saṃjātā tava nāman na saṃśayaḥ* || 28 || *tato mahā tvayā bhaktyā buddhisampannayā hy aham | ārādhito mahādevi satataṃ liṅgapūjayā* || 29 || *tatra trayodaśe varṣe siddhā tvam śaktyanugrahāt | khecaratvam avāpnoṣi samprāptā ca mamāntikam* || 30 || (“[24] After this, seeing you agitated, I was overcome by compassion. I spoke to you thus—out of compassion, but filled with great anger: [25] ‘Go to the mundane world (*bhūrloka*), O queen of the gods; incarnate yourself. Take on another body in the house of a brahmin, O pious lady. [26] Then, impelled by your devotion while you dwell there, I shall bestow my grace upon you, by command of the *śakti*. Oneness with me again—you will obtain all this, my dear’. [27] Then, by my order, you took incarnation near Prayāga in the large village of Kaṇavīra, in the good home of Meghadatta. [28] O great goddess, you were beget of *chāndogya* [brahmins] and possessed the marks of auspiciousness. Born there, undoubtedly, your name was Sattikā. [29] Then, endowed with intelligence, you paid reverence to me through constant *liṅga* worship, with great devotion. [30] There, in [your] thirteenth year, you attained *siddhi* by the grace of the *śakti*. You attained the state of a Sky-traveller, and reached my proximity.”).

Śrīkaṅṭha had earlier imparted to him, setting in motion the process by which the scripture once more reaches the world in redactions of various length.

One other woman participates in revelation, though indirectly: Deikā of Ujjayinī. After numerous miscarriages, she bathed and approached the Mother-goddesses, praying for a son; impelled by the *śakti*, the Mothers placed in her womb a failed *sādhaka* named “Without a Mantra” (Amantrin), an initiate who in a previous birth had broken the initiatory pledges (*samaya*).¹⁰ Belying this ignominy, Amantrin’s combination of tantric initiation and breach of the initiatory pledges in a past life defines the exalted type of *sādhaka* known as the *tālaka*, whose virtuoso transgressive rituals are among the BraYā’s paramount concerns.¹¹ Reborn, Amantrin regains the BraYā’s *vidyā*-mantra “by the power of the Mother-goddesses,” and attains *siddhi*. Consecrated as Svachchandabhairava, he learns a redaction of the BraYā from Krodhabhairava, the primordial disciple of the Goddess. His own disciples preside over ever-diminishing redactions of the scripture at the twilight of the cosmic cycle, at the end of which goddesses known as *yoginīs* hide away the teachings altogether.

Of contrasting pedigree and attainment, the women of this narrative share in more than having vernacular, Prakrit names: both appear to lack tantric initiation, engaging in lay devotional worship which ultimately bears fruit by divine grace. This is particularly striking in the case of Sattikā, who in effect recovers her former, forgotten divinity through devotional worship (*liṅgapūjā*) alone rather than tantric methods. Given the abundant evidence in the text for female initiation, this invites questions concerning the nature of women’s roles in the religion.

Terms for women, terms for goddesses

Discourse concerning women occurs primarily in the BraYā’s descriptions of ritual, whose paradigmatic agent is the male *sādhaka* or *mantrin* (less frequently, *yogin*). Initiation binds him to the demanding ascetic and ritual regimens delineated over the course of this twelve-thousand verse scripture, above all in chapter 45, recently edited and studied by Csaba KISS (2015). In addition to the *sādhaka*, who is of three grades,¹² the text envisions two other categories of initiated practitioner: the neophyte, called the *samayin* or pledge-holder; and the *ācārya* (also *deśika* or *guru*), the tantric officiant who

¹⁰ The narrative concerning Amantrin or Svachchandabhairava and his disciples, spanning two Kaliyugas, comprises BraYā 1.78c–118 (published in HATLEY forthcoming). See especially BraYā 1.81–86b: *ujjayinyān tu saṃjāto viprajo †ukaputrakah† | deikā tasya vai mātā bahugarbhaprasāritā || 81 || snātācāmati mātṛñam purataḥ putrakāṅkṣiṇī | japtavidyo mahāvīryaḥ samayalaṅghaprabhāvataḥ || 82 || kṣipiṣyanti hy asiddhatvān mātaraḥ śakticoditāḥ | tasyā garbhe mahābhāge amantrīnāmakas tathā || 83 || tatas tasya mahādevi tāsām caiva prabhāvataḥ | vidyām prāpya japaṃ kṛtvā tataḥ śāstram sa vetsyati || 84 || tato nibaddhagranthaś ca divyasaṅgānubhāvataḥ | daśasāhasrakenārtham aśeṣaṃ kathayiṣyati || 85 || tatas tenaiva jñānena paścāt siddhiṃ sa lapsyati |.*

¹¹ On the *tālaka*, whose ritual program is a key topic of BraYā 45, see KISS 2015: 35–55.

¹² See KISS (ibid.). The grades of *sādhaka* are the transgressive *tālaka*, the *miśraka* of “mixed” purity, and the vegetarian, celibate *carubhojin*. A somewhat different fourfold typology of *sādhakas* appears in the latter chapters of the BraYā (*paṭalas* 91–94).

is entitled to confer initiation.¹³ Supernatural attainment (*siddhi*) is the predominant ritual aim, and in contrast to the mainstream of the Mantramārga, the BraYā does not envision a category of liberation-seeking practitioner distinct from the *sādhaka* (known in other sources as the *putraka*, “son [of the guru]”).¹⁴ A number of rituals also require the participation of one or more individuals referred to as “assistant *sādhaka*” (*uttarasādhaka*) or “friend/companion” (*sakhāya*), presumed male. These expressions indicate a ritual function rather than grade of initiation, though the *uttarasādhaka* may typically have been a neophyte.¹⁵

A distinct and more nebulous vocabulary applies to the women involved in ritual. Multiple words may refer to female practitioners, terminology which Judit TÖRZSÖK (2014) has fruitfully analysed in the contexts of the BraYā and the closely-related *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*. Generic Sanskrit words for women occur throughout the BraYā, such as *strī*, *vanitā*, *nārī*, and *abalā*. In some cases these may apply to female practitioners; in particular, TÖRZSÖK (2014: 358–364) highlights the frequent occurrence of *abalā* (“powerless”, a member of the “weaker sex”), suggesting that this usage contrasts the “powerless” condition of womanhood with the possibility of apotheosis through tantric ritual: a transformation from *abalā* to a state of divine power and autonomy. More often, the BraYā employs terms which specifically intimate a woman’s status as an initiated practitioner, principally *śakti*, *dūtī*, and *yoginī* (or *yogeśī*), and secondarily *bhaginī*, *bhairavī*, and *adhikāriṇī*. In contrast to the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, the term *sādhakī*, feminine of *sādhaka*, does not occur in the BraYā, nor does *sādhikā*, a term appearing in numerous much later sources.¹⁶

Notably, each of the BraYā’s main terms for female practitioners possesses a double sense, potentially designating female initiates, but in other contexts referring to female divinities. In contrast, few terms for male practitioners apply also to deities (one of exceptions these being *vīra*, “hero”). This distinction may reflect the emphasis on female divinization prevalent in *śākta-śaiva* traditions. These two levels of meaning obtain even with lesser-used designations for initiated women, namely *bhaginī* (“sister”), which also designates the cult goddesses of the *vāmasrotas* (the “leftward stream” of scriptural revelation); and *bhairavī*, a common name for the supreme goddess herself. An exception to the double valence of terms for women is the descriptor *adhikāriṇī*,

¹³ Initiation (*dīkṣā*) and consecration (*abhiṣeka*) are mainly treated in a cycle of seven voluminous chapters – *paṭalas* 32–38.

¹⁴ The possibility that a *sādhaka* might seek liberation alone is intimated in BraYā 25.342cd: “These three pantheons are taught for the *sādhaka* who desires liberation” (*etad yāgatrayaṃ proktaṃ mumukṣo[h] sādhakasya tu*).

¹⁵ *sakhāya* is a variant stem of the irregular Sanskrit *sakhi* (“companion”); see EDGERTON (1953, vol. I: §10.8). On the desired qualities of the *uttarasādhaka*, which include knowledge of the initiatory pledges (*samaya*), see BraYā 21.51–54 (KISS 2015).

¹⁶ Concerning *sādhakī*, which occurs in chapter 10 of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, see TÖRZSÖK 2014. *sādhikā* seems mainly to occur in late-medieval east-Indian *śākta tantras*, for instance *Kaulāvalīnirṇaya* 9.94.

“authorised/entitled”, which the BraYā uses occasionally in the sense of “woman entitled to the teachings [by initiation]”¹⁷.

To a large degree, context dictates the use of terms for women. While the expressions *śakti* and *dūtī* appear almost exclusively to designate a female participant in sexual rites, the BraYā avoids the expressions *yoginī* and *bhaginī* in this context. These two pairs of terms thus correlate with strikingly divergent representations of women.

dūtī, “female messenger/go-between,” in this literature has the sense of “female companion”, i.e. ritual consort. Applied to deities, *dūtī* designates four of the eight goddesses who comprise the core retinue of Kapālīśabhairava, the BraYā’s principal male deity. Known also as “the handmaidens” (*kin̄karī*), their status is secondary to the tetrad of *devīs* or *guh̄yakās*. All eight goddesses serve as *dūtīs* of Kapālīśabhairava, who, in the BraYā’s opening verse, is said to sport as a lingam in their lotuses with unexcelled pleasure.¹⁸ Applied to women, in the BraYā *dūtī* refers exclusively to female participants in sexual ritual, in alternation with *śakti*. Though similarly restricted to the context of sexual ritual, *śakti* is in fact the most widely occurring term for initiated women in the BraYā. This accords with the fact that *-śakti* is appended to female initiation names, much as male names end with *-bhairava*. Doctrinally, *śakti* denotes the power (gendered female) of the (male) supreme deity, both in its totality and as differentiated into various aspects, such as Śiva’s powers of knowledge, action, volition, and grace. Personified as the singular supreme Goddess, *śakti* also pervades the cosmos as the myriad female deities who are her rays (*raśmi*, *gabhasti*, etc.). These embodiments include the flesh-and-blood *śaktis* who serve in ritual as conduits to this transcendent power.

In contrast, the category *yoginī* may designate women as autonomous ritualists or even living goddesses beyond the context of sexual ritual. Integral to the category *yoginī* (synonym *yogeśī*) is its blurring of boundaries between the divine and human, for this category of divine female represents a state of being women seek to attain through ritual perfection.¹⁹ Applied to goddesses, *yoginī* (“female yogi” or “possessed of yogic power”) designates flying, shapeshifting deities central to *vidyāpīṭha* cults such as the BraYā’s, goddesses with whom *sādhakas* sought visionary, power-bestowing encounters (*melaka*). A sextet of *yoginīs* belongs to the BraYā’s core deity pantheon, and its extended pantheon incorporates multiple similar sets. Applied to women, the BraYā uses *yoginī* in a sense close to “female *sādhaka*” (*mantrin* or *yoginī*), as illustrated by these terms’ occasional pairing. Note, for instance, BraYā 22.72cd, which promises, “A *sādhaka* or *yoginī* [becomes] perfected [through this worship system (*yajana*)], without a doubt, O goddess” (*siddhas tu sādhasakā devī yoginī vā na saṁśayaḥ*).²⁰ Strikingly, in the BraYā this usage mainly occurs in ritual contexts of a non-sexual nature. In other words, unlike the terms *śakti* and *dūtī*, the BraYā avoids using *yoginī* in the sense of “ritual consort”. It is thus ironic that David WHITE’s (2003) monographic treatment of tantric

¹⁷ This term occurs in BraYā 45.575a, and thrice in *paṭala* 24, which uses the expressions *anadhikāriṇī* (“a woman not authorized”, 24.74a), *pūrvādhikāriṇī* (“previously [but no longer?] authorized”, 24.75a), and *guptādhikāriṇī* (“secretly authorized”, 24.85d).

¹⁸ BraYā 1.1b: *dūtīnām padmaśaṅḍe ’samasukhaviṣal līṅgarūpaṃ bibharti* l.

¹⁹ For analysis of the category *yoginī*, see TÖRZSÖK 2009 and HATLEY 2013.

²⁰ See also the introduction to *paṭala* 14, cited below in n. 97.

sexual ritual revolves so squarely around the figure of the *yoginī*, whom he conflates with the tantric ritual *dūtī* or *śakti*, counter to the usage prevalent in many, if not most, early tantric Śaiva sources. If the term *śakti* suggests a view of female practitioners as necessary complements to the male, conduits to the ultimate source of power – Śiva’s *śakti* – *yoginī* reflects a vision of female practitioners as independent and powerful, as actual or potential goddesses. Even in a rare instance where *yoginī* describes a woman potentially engaging in sex with a *sādhaka*, she is represented as instigating the encounter herself, stirred by the supreme *śakti*.²¹ As I will argue subsequently, in the *yoginī* we glimpse the possibility of women as autonomous ritualists who act to attain their own objectives rather than facilitating the aims of men.

A similar possibility underlies the term *bhaginī* or “sister.” This occurs sparsely in the BraYā, but is notable for suggesting, as TÖRZSÖK (2014: 360) observes, a non-sexual relationship based upon initiatory kinship: *bhaginī* occurs mainly in explanations of the verbal and non-verbal codes (*chomma*) used to identify and communicate with other initiates – the *sādhaka* or *bhrāṭṛ* (“brother”) and *yoginī* or *bhaginī* (“sister”).²² This category of women receives meagre attention, perhaps on account of lacking immediate relevance to the male *sādhaka*’s ritual life – the text’s predominant concern.

It should be emphasized that the contextual, relational nature of these terms for women leaves open the possibility of significant overlap. A woman represented in one context as a *śakti* or *dūtī* could be viewed in another as a *yoginī* or *bhaginī*.²³ Nonetheless, I will argue that the BraYā’s divergent ways of representing female practitioners point toward women of diverse status and accomplishment, and not merely a multiplicity of ritual roles.

Women as ritual consorts

The BraYā’s most extensive references to women occur in the context of rituals involving coitus, where *dūtī* and *śakti* serve as their main designations. Descriptions of the *dūtī* or *śakti* in sexual ritual provide a vivid, though entirely one-sided window into women’s ritual roles. Much data derives from the BraYā’s *sādhakādhikārapaṭala*, chapter 45, a treatise of 674 verses on the disciplines of *sādhakas* published by KISS (2015). Of the three grades of *sādhaka*, who is unambiguously male, only the disciplines of the *tālaka* or “pure” (*śuddha*) *sādhaka* mandate ritual coitus. While the *tālaka*’s demanding disciplinary regimen is delineated with abundant detail, the *dūtī* with whom he consorts finds mention only when she features in his ritual. Her religious life is little

²¹ BraYā 24.75c–76b: *āsām madhye kadā cit syād yoginī śakticoditā* [em.; °*coditaḥ* Ms.] ||75 || *icchate sādhakaṃ devi bhoktavyā -m- aviśaṅkīte* [em; *avaśaṅkīte* Ms.] | (“If a *yoginī* among those women at some point desires the *sādhaka*, impelled by the *śakti*, she may be enjoyed without hesitation, O goddess”).

²² See BraYā 56.98c–102, quoted in n. 124 below.

²³ Cf. TÖRZSÖK’s (2014: 341–342) cogent remarks on the fluidity of the categories of women she identifies in early *śākta-śaiva* works.

expanded upon beyond her role in the *tālaka*'s practices.²⁴ Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that the BraYā envisioned ritual consorts as initiated practitioners.

Delineating the characteristics desirable in a consort, a passage in chapter 45 of the BraYā (vv. 186–189b) depicts the ideal *dūtī* as an accomplished ritualist. Beauty appears among her desired qualities (186d), but this is not expressed in particularly erotic terms. On the other hand, her capacity for asceticism and meditation, devotion, learning, and her understanding of nondualism (*advaita*) are key. The ideal female partner, in other words, is an accomplished tantric adept:²⁵

guru-m-ādeśasamprāptā śobhanā lakṣaṇānvitā || 186 ||
jitāsanā mahāsattvā tantrasadbhāvabhāvitā |
gurudevapatibhaktā kṣutpipāsājitaśramā || 187 ||
advaitavāsītā nityaṃ nirvikalpā hy alolupā |
*samādhijñātha yogajñā jñānajñā samśītavratā*²⁶ || 188 ||
*tām avāpya mahāprājñāḥ*²⁷ *kalpoktaṃ tu samācaret* |

[186c–87] Obtained by the command of the guru, lovely, possessing the marks of auspiciousness, who has mastered the sitting postures (*jitāsanā*), possessing great spirit, purified by the true essence of the *tantras*, devoted to the guru, the deity, and her husband (*pati*), unfatigued by hunger and thirst, [188–89b] ever steeped in nonduality, free of discriminative thoughts and lust, well-versed in trance (*samādhi*), yoga, and scriptural wisdom (*jñāna*), steadfast in the observances (*vratā*): after obtaining [a woman like] her, a man of great wisdom should practice what is taught in his ritual manual (*kalpa*).

Despite this emphasis on her skill and virtue, the *dūtī* or *śakti* is represented as having minimal ritual agency, and the BraYā expands little upon her religious life beyond her sexual role. She enters into action in chapter 45 after nearly two hundred verses dedicated to the male *sādhaka* and his preparatory rituals. “Firm in her resolve” and with hair unbound, she is naked but for the Five Insignia (*mudrāpañcaka*) fashioned of human bone. The *sādhaka* worships her vulva and prepares a bed. They copulate and then consume the mixed sexual fluids “joyfully.”²⁸ Their alternating patterns of worship,

²⁴ This omission is not entirely determined by gender; a similar silence surrounds the *sādhaka*'s male assistant (the *uttarasādhaka*).

²⁵ Text as constituted by KISS 2015, except as noted; translation mine. This passage is also discussed by TÖRZSÖK 2014: 343.

²⁶ *saṃśīta*°] *em.*; *saṃśṛta*° Ms.; *saṃśṛita*° Ed.

²⁷ *prājñāḥ*] *em.*; *prājñoh* Ms., Ed.

²⁸ BraYā 45.198–202 (edited by KISS 2015): *agrataḥ śaktim āropya ūrdhvarūpām digāmbarām* | *mudrāpañcakasaṃyuktaṃ muktakeśī dr̥ḍhavratām* || 198 || *pīṭhaṃ tu-m-ārcayet tasyā astrodakasamanvitām* | *vilepayitvā gandhais tu āsanam tatra kalpayet* || 199 || *yāgam pūrvavidhānena aśeṣam tatra vinyaset* | *bhūmyām tathāsanam kṛtvā svalpaprastaraṇāntikam* || 200 || *upaviśyāpayet tatra cumbanādyāvagūhanam* | *kṛtvā kṣobham samārabhya pavitraṃ grhya sādhakaḥ* || 201 || *prāśayitvā tu tau hr̥ṣṭau yāgadravyāṇi prokṣayet* | *arcanam hi tataḥ kṛtvā naivedyāni tu dāpayet* || 202 ||.

coitus, mantra incantation, and fire sacrifice have numerous inflections, as do their costumes and sexual positions.²⁹ Throughout the performance, the *sādhaka* is the principal ritual agent. She stands, sits, lays down, or is entered into as the ritual demands. Along with the maṇḍala and fire, her vulva serves as a primary locus for installation (*nyāsa*) and worship of the mantra-deities. Her role is passive to such an extent that she is repeatedly instructed not to rise from the bed while the *sādhaka* performs worship (*yāga*) or fire sacrifice (*homa*).³⁰ Indeed, at least in this chapter, it is unclear whether she actively engages in worship with the *sādhaka* at all between bouts of coitus. A passage from another chapter (30) epitomizes the consort’s lack of ritual agency: the *tālaka*, in the absence of a flesh-and-blood *śakti*, is instructed to create a substitute made of clay or *kuśa*-grass.³¹

The degree to which the BraYā’s sexual rituals are framed in terms of the *sādhaka*’s religious aspirations is illustrated by the rites for seeing his past lives.³² A rather unique “tantric community” obtains in these virtuoso sexual performances. These rites are a form of ritual diagnostics: through them, an unsuccessful *sādhaka* seeks a vision of his past lives to identify obstacles impeding his quest for *siddhi*. Playing on the double meaning of *yoni*, the premise is to use a woman’s womb (*yoni*) to see one’s past births (*yoni*). To have knowledge of three lives, the *sādhaka*’s own consort will suffice, but a vision of seven lives requires the participation of seven initiated women. Led by his consort, the women sit in a row, dressed in red. Over a period of seven days, the *sādhaka* copulates with each in turn in the course of the daily rites. During interludes, they are instructed to pass the time in song and other pleasant diversions (*vinoda*).³³ The most elaborate version of the rite requires eight women, performed while sequestered in an earthen hut or cave (*bhūgrha*) for a period of six months. The women recruited should be “led by

²⁹ KISS (2015: 47–48) summarizes the pattern of worship as follows: “The basic ritual ... includes ritual bathing (*snāna*), mantric installation (*nyāsa*), him entering the ritual site (*devāgāra*) and the performance of worship (*pūjā*). The *Sādhaka* should perform pantheon worship (*yāga*) and fire rituals (*homa*), facing south, his hair disheveled, naked, his body covered in ashes. His female partner should be standing, naked, her *pīṭha*, i.e. her genitals, are to be worshipped, and the installation of the pantheon (*nyāsa*) should be performed on them. She then sits down, he kisses and embraces her, he brings her to orgasm, collects the sexual fluids, and they eat these sexual fluids together. *Homa* is performed again with transgressive substances such as cowflesh. He inserts his *liṅga* in her *pīṭha*, and finally *homa* of meat is performed.” This basic pattern is inflected for different ritual aims, for details of which see the edition and translation.

³⁰ See BraYā 45.278cd, 282, 309, 312, etc.

³¹ BraYā 30.218–219b: *naktabhojī mahāvīrah śaktiyuktas tu tālakah | śaktyālābhe mahādevi mṛṇmayīṃ* [em.; *mṛṇmayī* Ms.] *kārayed budhah* || 218 || *kuśamayīṃ vāpi deveśi śaktihīno na kārayet* | (“The greatly heroic *tālaka* should eat by night, together with the *śakti*. In the absence of a *śakti*, O great goddess, a wise man should fashion [an effigy of one] out of clay or *kuśa*-grass. He should not perform [the ritual] without a *śakti*. O queen of the gods” [understanding *kārayet* as non-causative in sense]).

³² BraYā 45.529c–636.

³³ BraYā 45.540c–542b.

one’s consort, lovingly devoted, full of faith, initiated, and free of shame and aversion”.³⁴ They enter the dark chamber with hair unbound, naked but for a yoga-cloth, or else wearing red garments.³⁵ Arrayed like goddesses in the eight directions around the Bhairava-like *sādhaka*, he copulates with them in turn in the daily rites. No reward is promised to the women for their trouble, while the *sādhaka* may attain mastery over all mantras and omniscient vision.³⁶ One is left to imagine the claims and incentives motivating women’s participation, on which the text is silent.

Who served as tantric consorts, and under what circumstances? What kinds of relationships obtained outside of ritual? In general the prescriptive literature affords meagre insight into such questions. Some useful data nonetheless emerges from study of the BraYā’s twenty-fourth chapter and a section of chapter 22, which concern the “secret nectars” (*guhyaṃṛta*).³⁷ These include alcoholic drinks, for which the text provides numerous recipes (*āśavalakṣaṇa*, BraYā 24.129c–189). Its principal concern, however, is with sexual and menstrual fluids. In this context the consort’s role is like a milch cow prized for her ritual-sustaining fluids and her mantra-empowered vulva.³⁸ One remarkable rite even uses her body as catalyst for producing magical pills (*guḍikā*), which are made from a pulverised dildo fashioned of various impurities, including beef and faeces, after it has been churned in her *yoni*.³⁹

This discourse on fluids furnishes valuable detail concerning the *tālaka*’s sexual regulations and the women he consorts with. We learn, for instance, that a *tālaka* may either be “wedded to a single consort” (*ekaśaktiparigrāhin*) or consort with multiple women. The path of committing to a single *śakti* bestows rapid success; yet, as the BraYā twice asserts, such monogamy is “difficult, even for Bhairava.”⁴⁰ A monogamous

³⁴ BraYā 45.597c–98b (KISS 2015): *nāryaṣṭaka samāhṛtya śaktyādyā bhaktivatsalā* || 597 || *śraddadhānādhikārī ca nirlajjā nighṛṇās tathā* |.

³⁵ BraYā 45.608c–609 (KISS 2015): *yogapaṭṭakṛtāṅgābhi digvāsābhis tathaiva ca* || 608 || *raktavāsottarīyābhir muktakeśābhir āvṛtāḥ | praviśet sādḥako dhīras tādr̥gbhūto na saṃśayaḥ* || 609 ||.

³⁶ BraYā 45.649 (KISS 2015): *añimādiḡuṇaiśvaryaṃ tadā tasya prajāyate | mantrā kiṅkaratāṃ yānti tadā devi na saṃśayaḥ* || 649 ||.

³⁷ Both of these chapters were read, in part, in the Second International Workshop on Early Tantra of 2009, in a session led by Alexis Sanderson. My understanding of the material has benefitted considerably from this. Emendations not my own have been noted as such.

³⁸ For a detailed account of the BraYā’s rites of the “secret nectars”, see TÖRZSÖK 2014: 343–344.

³⁹ The recipe for these magical dildo pills appears in BraYā 22.153–155: *dravyapṛāsyā[m] purā kṛtvā gomānsaṃ kiṅcisam̐yutaṃ | surāṣṭhinā samāyuktaṃ piṣṭaṃ piṅḍīkṛtan tathā* ||153|| *kṣobhadravyeṇa saṃmardya liṅgākāraṇ tu kārayet | prakṣiped yonimadhye tu niṃṣaṃ cālyā pīḍayet* ||154|| *mantram uccārayen mantrī saṃkhyāyāṣṭasatan tathā | karṣayitvā tu taṃ liṅgaṃ guḍikāṃ kārayet tataḥ* ||155||. In this passage and elsewhere in the BraYā, *kiṅci/kiṅcit* (“a little [something]”?) can refer to faeces, oddly enough; the meaning of *surāṣṭhi* is uncertain.

⁴⁰ BraYā 24.110: *ekaśaktiparigrāhī āśu* [corr.; *āśuḥ* Ms.] *sidhyati tālakaḥ | duścaraṃ bhairavasyāpi ekaśaktiparigrahaṃ* || 110 || (110cd is repeated in 114cd).

sādhaka must avoid intercourse with all other women,⁴¹ even if divine *yoginīs* perfected in yoga hanker after him.⁴² Comparative ease marks the path of the *tālaka* having multiple consorts, but his ritual bears fruit more gradually. A polygamous *sādhaka* “resorts” to his consorts alternately in the daily rites (*āhnikā*),⁴³ apparently maintaining ritual relationships with multiple women concurrently, in addition to his actual wife or wives (who may or may not be tantric consorts).

How a *tālaka* meets and enters into relations with potential consorts receives scattered attention. One passage speaks of him taking as consort a woman he identifies as a secret initiate.⁴⁴ Most of the BraYā’s discussions, however, characterize the *dūtī* using kinship terms: “Mother, sister, daughter, and wife are indeed held to be consorts.”⁴⁵ Problems attend interpretation of these terms; as TÖRZSÖK (2014: 345) observes, it is unclear “whether they express the relationship of the *dūtī* with the *sādhaka*, or the status of these women, or denote certain conventional types of *dūtīs* defined by the tradition itself”. Some statements imply that kinship terms express modes of relationship rather than blood kinship. Take for instance BraYā 24.32c–35b, which has multiple difficulties:

*mātā ca bhaginī putrī bhāryā vai dūtayah smṛtāḥ*⁴⁶ || 32 ||

*dātavyan tantrasadbhāvaṃ nānyathā tu kadācana*⁴⁷ |

*svaśaktiḥ*⁴⁸ *sādhakasyātha adhikārapade sthitā*⁴⁹ || 33 ||

avikalpakarā nityaṃ jñānatvārthabhāvitā |

*nānyaṃ †vai tarāṇe†*⁵⁰ *caiva svāmivat sarvvabhāvataḥ* || 34 ||

*bhrātaraṃ pītaraṃ putraṃ patim*⁵¹ *vā paśyate sadā* |

[32c–33] Mother, sister, daughter, and wife are indeed held to be consorts. The essence of the *tantras* should be given [to them], but never otherwise. The *sādhaka*’s own *śakti* then has entitlement [to perform ritual] (*adhikārapade sthitā*). [34–35b] Always free from discriminating thought

⁴¹ Presumably the *ekaśaktiparigrāhin* is either unmarried or else married to his ritual consort, but this is not clarified.

⁴² BraYā 24.111c–112: *manasāpi hi deveśi ekaśaktiparigrahe* || 111 || *yoginyo yogasiddhās tu yadā tā icchayanti hi | tābhiḥ sārddhan na karttavyaṃ saṅgo vai siddhim icchatā* || 112 || (understanding *karttavyaṃ* as agreeing with *saṅgo*).

⁴³ BraYā 24.115–117b: *bahuśaktiparigrāhī sidhyate kālagocarāt | sukhopāyaparakāreṇa* [em.; °opāyā A] *nānāśaktivijrmbhakaḥ* || 115 || *īpsitāṃ* [em.; *ipsitāṃ* Ms.] *labhate siddhiṃ samayāpālanatparah | bahavaḥ śaktayo yasya paripāṭyā samācāret* || 116 || *ṣobhaṃ tālakamārgge tu āhṇike cāhṇike tathā* |.

⁴⁴ BraYā 24.85c–87b, quoted below, p. 14.

⁴⁵ BraYā 24.32cd, quoted below.

⁴⁶ *smṛtāḥ*] em.; *smṛtā* Ms.

⁴⁷ *kadācana*] em.; *kadācanaḥ* Ms.

⁴⁸ *svaśaktiḥ*] corr.; *svaśakti* Ms. (*unmetrical*).

⁴⁹ *sthitā*] em.; *sthitāḥ* Ms.

⁵⁰ I am unable to interpret *tarāṇe*, and suspect that a finite verb such as *sevate* underlies this. Csaba Kiss suggests the possibility of *tarpayet*, on a diagnostic basis.

⁵¹ *patim*] em.; *patis* Ms.

(*vikalpa*), purified by the essential meaning of the scriptural wisdom (*jñānatattvārtha*), †she truly ...[serves him?]. . . † and no other as master, with all her heart. She ever looks upon him as brother, father, son, or husband.

The verb *paśyate* implies an affective relationship: she “sees”, i.e. looks upon the *sādhaka* as brother, father, etc., a choice perhaps dictated by age difference or the nature of their interactions outside of ritual, including actual kinship. Another point of interest is the suggestion, in 33ab, that a *sādhaka* may himself initiate a woman as a *śakti*, giving her “the essence of the tantras” and becoming, in effect, her guru, despite lacking formal consecration as an officiant (*ācāryābhiṣeka*).⁵²

Subsequent passages both enrich and complicate this picture. BraYā 24.49–61 seems relatively unambiguous in envisioning actual kinswomen as consorts:

*mātā siddhipradā proktā bhaginī ca tathaiva ca |
putrī caiva nijā śaktiḥ⁵³ sarvasiddhipradāyikā⁵⁴ || 59 ||
tatkālavatirekeṇa⁵⁵ punar lobhā⁵⁶ na sambhajet |
garbhiṇīm⁵⁷ naiva kṣobhīta dravyārthaṃ sādhakottamaḥ || 60 ||
bhāryām āhnikavarjyā⁵⁸ tu garbhiṇīm api kṣobhayet |
bhaginīm vātha putrīm vā na kuryā⁵⁹ kurute yadā || 61 ||*

[59] Mother, sister, and likewise daughter are said to bestow *siddhi*; one’s own consort (*nijā śakti*) bestows all *siddhis*. [60] Aside from the time [of ritual], one should not copulate with them out of lust. The excellent *sādhaka* must not sexually stimulate a pregnant woman to procure substance (*dravya*). [61] Excluding the daily rites, he may [however] sexually stimulate his wife, even if she is pregnant. He should not do so to sister or daughter; when he does do so ...

There follows a rite of reparation by which the inappropriately-bedded “sister” or “daughter” becomes fit (*yogyā*) again for ritual. In restricting coitus with consorts to ritual, prohibiting ritual coitus with pregnant women, and allowing for non-ritual coitus with one’s wife, even if pregnant, this passage evokes a realistic domestic milieu. The distinction made between “one’s own consort” (*nijā śaktiḥ*) and “mother, sister, and daughter” could also suggest that in addition to his principal consort (his wife?), a *sādhaka* might have various auxiliary consorts drawn from among kinswomen. There is little to suggest that terms such as “sister” here refer to affective relations or consort types

⁵² This is consistent with indications in chapter 38 that a *sādhaka* – and not only the *ācārya* – may bestow the initiation for neophytes (*samayīkaraṇa*), an issue meriting closer study.

⁵³ śaktiḥ] *corr.*; śakti Ms.

⁵⁴ °pradāyikā] Ms. (*after correction*); °pradāyikāḥ Ms. (*before correction*).

⁵⁵ °vyatirekeṇa] *corr.*; °vyatirekena Ms.

⁵⁶ lobhā] *em.* (Cs. KISS; understand as ablative, with loss of the final consonant); llobho Ms.

⁵⁷ garbhiṇīm] *em.*; garbhiṇī Ms.

⁵⁸ Understand as ablative (°*varjyāt*), or perhaps emend to the accusative.

⁵⁹ Understand *kuryā* as optative in sense, with loss of the final consonant.

rather than actual kinship relationships. A subsequent passage reinforces this impression, delineating a large number of familial relationships and ending with the statement, “One should take these and other women as consorts.”⁶⁰

Although sexual fidelity is expected of a *śakti*,⁶¹ a *sādhaka* may apparently lend or transfer her services to someone else. A problematic section on this subject (24.91c–96b) merits quoting in full. Depending upon how one resolves a textual problem in the initial verse quarter (91c), this passage may address both the circumstances in which a *sādhaka* lends or transfers his consort as well as what to do when he wishes to end his relationship with her:

*utsṛṣṭā tu*⁶² *sadā deyā svaśaktyā*⁶³ *sādhakena tu* || 91 ||
*abhyāgatasya*⁶⁴ *deveśi devakarmaratasya ca* |
prārthitena svayam vāpi yāgakāle na saṃśayaḥ || 92 ||
*sāmānyasyāpi dātavyā srotaśuddhiprapālanāt*⁶⁵ |
*svaśiṣyasyāpi*⁶⁶ *dātavyā ācāryeṇa mahāyaśe* || 93 ||
svayāge śiṣyayāge vā nirvvikalpena cetasā |
svatantrasamayo hy eṣa bhairaveṇa prabhāṣitam || 94 ||
*kartavyo*⁶⁷ *siddhikāmena*⁶⁸ *trṣāyā varjitena tu* |

⁶⁰ BraYā 24.68–72b: *bhaginī putriṇī bhāryā yāgakāle* [conj.; *ādyākāle*] *vidhiḥ smṛtaḥ* | *mātāmahī pitāmahī tathā mātṛśvasā* [corr.; °*śvasā* Ms.] *-m- api* || 68 || *pitṛbhrātus* [em.; °*bhātṛs* Ms.] *tathā bhāryā bhrātur* [em.; *bhrātu* Ms.] *bhāryā* [em.; *bhāryās* Ms.] *tathaiḥ ca* | *bhāgneyī tu snuṣā caiva pautṛdohitṛkās* [em.; °*pautṛdohitṛkān* Ms.] *tathā* || 69 || *mātulasya tathā pitṛmātṛśvasā* [corr.; °*śvasā* Ms.] *tathā †pitṛn* | *bhrātā tathā pitā vāpi putṛm bhrātaras tathāpi vā†* || 70 || *evamādi tathā cānyā[h] śaktayaś caiva kārayet* | *mātuḥ sapatnī* [em.; *svapatnī* Ms.] *†māte vā† śaktyā vā* [conj.; *vai* Ms.] *kārayed budhaḥ* || 71 || *anyathā kurute mohāt prāyaścittam samācaret* | (“[68–69b] At the time of worship, [this] is said to be the procedure: sister, daughter, wife; or else maternal grandmother, paternal grandmother, mother’s sister, paternal uncle’s wife, brother’s wife, [69c–70] sister’s daughter (*bhāgneyī*), daughter-in-law (*snuṣā*), granddaughters and daughters of one’s maternal uncle, one’s maternal or paternal aunt (*pitṛmātṛśvasā*), † and ... or else one’s brother’s daughters†. [71–72b] One may take these and other women as consorts. Otherwise, a wise man should take as a consort the co-wife of one’s mother † ... †. One who does otherwise, due to infatuation, should perform expiation.”). The interpretation of this problematic passage is somewhat conjectural. In 71d, *śaktyā* is accusative singular in sense, though formally nominative, *śaktyā* being a non-standard alternative stem of *śakti*. Cf. the stem *devyā* (for *devī*), which occurs throughout the BraYā. On the accusative for nominative in *-ā* stems, see EDGERTON (1953, vol. I: §9.20–22).

⁶¹ BraYā 45.89cd: “A wise man should take as consort a woman who does not give sexual company to other men” (*nānyasaṅgamasāñcārām śaktim kuryād vicakṣaṇaḥ*).

⁶² *utsṛṣṭā tu* | conj.; *utkrṣṭas tu* Ms. (see the discussion below).

⁶³ Understanding *svaśaktyā* as nominative (with the irregular stem *-yā*).

⁶⁴ *abhyāgatasya* | ; *ābhyāgatasya* Ms.

⁶⁵ °*prapālanāt* | em.; °*prapālanā* Ms. (otherwise understand as ablative in sense, with Middle-Indic loss of final *-t*).

⁶⁶ *svaśiṣyasyāpi* | em.; *svaṃ śiṣyāpi* Ms. Alternatively, read *svaśiṣye ’pi*, as conjectured by Alexis Sanderson (in the Pondicherry Early Tantra workshop).

*tatkālāt*⁶⁹ *tu mahādevi pralobhaṃ naiva kārayet* || 95 ||
yasya śakti samarpitā tena devi na saṃśayaḥ |

[91c–92] O queen of the gods, when she has been released (? *utsṛṣṭā*), a *sādhaka* should undoubtedly always give over his consort to a visiting [*sādhaka*] who is devoted to deity worship, at the time of pantheon worship (*yāga*), either on request or of his own accord.⁷⁰ [93ab] She may also be given to someone of the same lineage (*sāmānyasya*) in order to guard the purity of [one’s] stream of transmission (?). [93c–94b] An *ācārya* may also give her to his own disciple, O woman of renown, with a mind free of conceptualization, whether in his own pantheon worship or his disciple’s. [94c–95b] For this is the autonomous convention declared by Bhairava. It is to be done by one desiring *siddhi*, but devoid of jealousy. [95c–96b] O great goddess, one who has offered over his *śakti* must not, undoubtedly, lust for her afterwards (?).⁷¹

A number of questions arise: does the entire passage concern the *śakti* whom a *sādhaka* releases? Do some cases of transfer apply only for the duration of ritual? Were consorts economically or socially dependent in ways that warranted assignation to another *sādhaka* – a kind of “remarriage” – if abandoned? Was continued alliance with a *sādhaka* integral to a woman’s belonging and status in the esoteric community? Less ambiguous is the presumption of a *sādhaka*’s control over his consort, to the extent of exclusive power to transfer his ritual “conjugal” rights. (An early twentieth-century Tibetan woman, Sera Khandro, writes of precisely this experience: being transferred from the custody of one Lama to another without consultation.⁷²) This *śakti*-sharing finds justification in “ritual nondualism”: the transcendence of discriminative, dualist conceptualization (*vikalpa*), based most fundamentally on the false dichotomy of “pure” and “impure”.⁷³

A somewhat different picture emerges from a contrasting passage (BraYā 24.85c–87b), which may speak of male and female initiates forming temporary, voluntary relationships:

⁶⁷ karttavyo] *em.*; karttavyā Ms.

⁶⁸ °kāmena] *corr.*; °kāmeṇa Ms.

⁶⁹ tatkālāt] *em.* (Cs. KISS, personal communication); tatkālan Ms.

⁷⁰ This interpretation depends on the conjecture of *utsṛṣṭā tu* (“[a woman] let go/dissolved) in 91a for the Ms.’s phonetically similar and contextually unintelligible *utkrṣṭas tu* (“[an] eminent [man]”). While the emendation is conjectural, the reading of the Ms. seems implausible here. I had initially conjectured *utkrṣṭasya* instead, in which case 91c–92b could be understood thus: “O queen of the gods, to a visiting [*sādhaka*] who is distinguished (*utkrṣṭasya*) and devoted to deity worship, a *sādhaka* should undoubtedly give over his own consort, either on request or of his own accord.”

⁷¹ The construction in 24.95c–96b is grammatically flawed, and the interpretation somewhat speculative.

⁷² JACOBY 2014.

⁷³ On “ritual nondualism” in early *śākta* tantras, see TÖRZSÖK 2013.

*ādiṣṭo vātha nādiṣṭo*⁷⁴ *jñātvā guptādhikāriṇīm* || 85 ||
śaktyā tu kārayed devi nityam eva hi sādhaḥ |
pakṣam māsaṃ ritum vāpi ṣaṭmāsam abdam eva vā || 86 ||
*āgantūnām*⁷⁵ *vidhi hy eṣā śaktīnām tālakasya tu* |

If he comes to know that a woman is secretly an initiate, whether he is instructed to or not, a *sādhaka* should always make a consort of her,⁷⁶ O goddess – for a fortnight, month, season, six months, or year. This is the procedure for the *tālaka* and for adventitious (*āgantū*) *śaktis*.

Qualifying *śaktīnām*, the expression *āgantūnām* could have the sense of “unexpected visitors,”⁷⁷ but I would suggest that it has a more technical meaning. A classification of *yoginīs* in BraYā, chapter 14, discussed in the next section of this essay, describes the *āgantū* as a woman who attains the wisdom of *yoginīs* through her own ritual accomplishment (14.266). While ambiguous, the passage seemingly intimates a scenario in which a *sādhaka* recognizes a woman as a secret initiate and approaches her to enter into a temporary relationship (perhaps by recourse to secret signs, *chomma*). As with the subsequently-discussed descriptions of hidden *yoginīs*, the female practitioner envisioned here seems to have a degree of autonomy.

On the whole, the BraYā’s representations of sexual ritual ascribe minimal agency to women, treat them as subordinate to the male practitioner, if not as chattel, and largely ignore the question of whether and how they might derive spiritual or temporal benefit. While the *sādhaka*’s goals, ritual actions, and subjective states are delineated minutely, few such instructions are directed toward the consort. There are, for instance, no indications that she should meditate or incant mantras during copulation. In these respects her subjectivity is virtually ignored; yet in contrast, female desire, pleasure, and sexual agency do sometimes feature as concerns.⁷⁸ This may seem incongruous with the emphasis on ascetic and religious virtues as preconditions for a consort’s selection, but accords entirely with the rites’ emphasis on the flow of the “secret nectar” (*guhyaṃṛta*).

Did the BraYā envision all women involved in sexual ritual as initiated practitioners? Two cases might suggest otherwise: those of the coital ritual known as the *asidhārāvṛata* (“sword’s edge observance”), and the sexual rites of the *miśraka*, the *sādhaka* of “mixed” purity. In the *asidhārāvṛata*, the subject of chapter 40, the description of the ideal consort contrasts sharply with that of chapter 45. In this case her erotic appeal receives overwhelming emphasis (40.2–8b):⁷⁹

⁷⁴ *vātha nādiṣṭo* | *em.*; *nātha vādiṣṭo* Ms.

⁷⁵ *āgantūnām* | *corr.*; *agantūnām* Ms.

⁷⁶ In 86a, *śaktyā* appears to be accusative singular in sense, though ostensibly a nominative formed on the extended stem *śaktyā* (for *śakti*); see note 60 above. One might instead emend to *śaktyām*.

⁷⁷ Cf. the reference to visiting (*abhyāgata*) *sādhakas* in BraYā 24.92, quoted above.

⁷⁸ On women’s sexual agency, note for instance BraYā 24.75c–76b, quoted above in n. 21.

⁷⁹ Text and translation from HATLEY (forthcoming); see the latter for discussion of the passage’s numerous problems of text and interpretation. BraYā 40.2–8b: *pūrvvalakṣaṇasaṃyuktām yoṣitām suratochukām | atīvarūpasampannām*

[2–3b] [One should find] a woman desirous of lovemaking who possesses the aforementioned qualities (*pūrvalakṣaṇasamyuktā*), endowed with surpassing beauty, proud of her pristine youth; [3c–4] flirting with humour and amorous dance, making coquettish gestures and so forth, possessing [fine] garments and jewellery, adorned with all [kinds of] ornaments – endowed with necklaces, armlets, rubies, and strings of pearls – or obtained to the extent of one’s means, even if she has very little adornment. [5-6b] Smeared with perfumes and lac (?), ever marked with sandalwood paste, possessing plump, raised breasts very round in girth; her nipples are beautified by flower strands, and her breasts firm. [6c–8b] Devoted and loving, [having] superlative bangles (?), endowed by nature with good conduct, clever and flirtatious, either a *kṣatriya* woman, or a woman belonging to another caste; and he should adorn himself with apparel of the same kind.

I would suggest that this emphasis on the consort’s beauty and concupiscence is a departure reflecting the distinctive history and aims of the *asidhārāvrata*. This observance has roots in an orthodox ascetic discipline of the same name by which men strove to attain self-restraint in the face of extreme temptation. As I argue elsewhere (HATLEY, forthcoming *a*), earlier tantric versions of the observance emphasize the erotic appeal desired of a consort, but do not envision her as initiated. The BraYā’s version of the *asidhārāvrata* maintains the emphasis on erotic beauty, but departs in envisioning the consort as an initiate. This is intimated, in particular, by the fact that following the evening meal, the consort and *sādhaka* perform worship together.⁸⁰ Her erotic appeal serves to augment the *vrata*’s difficulty and potential efficacy, and is a stipulation additional to the *dūtī*’s usual qualifications. This is signalled by the statement that she should, first of all, possess “the aforementioned qualities” (*pūrvalakṣaṇasamyuktā*, 2a) – in all likelihood a reference to the list of virtues cited above from chapter 45.⁸¹ In other words, the consort’s dazzling sexiness in the BraYā’s *asidhārāvrata* is merely an inflection of ritual syntax, of the same order as variations in garb, gesture, paraphernalia, and mantra. She must still be an initiated *dūtī*.

In contrast, the rites of the “mixed” (*miśraka*), middle-grade *sādhaka* more clearly evince the possibility of non-initiated women’s participation. His disciplines in most respects mirror those of the *tālaka* or “pure” *sādhaka*, yet, as a general rule, exclude

navayauvanadarppitām || 2 || *hāsyalāsyavilāsinyām* *vibhramādividhānakām* |
vastrālāṅkārasaṃpannām *sarvābharaṇabhūṣitām* || 3 ||
hārakeyūramāṅikyamuktāvalisusaṃsthitām | *yathāvibhavasamprāptām* *svalpabhūṣaṇakāpi* vā || 4
|| *sugandhamālyā kālā tu gandhapaṅkāṅkitā sadā* | *pīnonnatāstanopetām ābhogaparimaṅdalām* ||
5 || *cūcukā sragdāmasobhā saghanā tu payodharā* | *bhaktāñ caivānuraktāñ ca valayām*
uttamottamā || 6 || *prakṛtyā śīlasaṃpannām vidagdham ca vilāsinīm* | *rājānayoṣitām vāpi*
anyavarṇṇagatām api || 7 || *tādr̥gvidhopabhogaiś ca ātmānaṃ samalāṅkaret* |.

⁸⁰ BraYā 40.18cd: *nityavratam tu niṣkramya tayā sārddham samācaret* |.

⁸¹ That a passage from chapter 45 is referred to as “earlier” (*pūrva*) suggests that the chapters were re-ordered at some point; see HATLEY 2016.

coitus.⁸² As an exception to his ritual chastity, he may perform coital ritual by command of the guru (*ādeśena*), but only if he succeeds in magically summoning a female being, whether human or divine.⁸³ It seems that any which female one magically attracts becomes a suitable consort, with no stipulations or restrictions concerning initiation. He must in fact accept whoever appears, at the pain of expiation.⁸⁴ Minimal detail concerning women emerges from these passages, beyond vague indications that celestial maidens (*divyakanyā*) were the preferred targets of magical summoning (*ākaraṣaṇa*).⁸⁵ Nonetheless, an encounter with an initiated, flesh-and-blood woman is key to the curious circumstance by which a *miśraka* takes up the *tālaka*'s path (*tālakamārga*), as a somewhat doubtful passage describes (BraYā 45.523c–526b):⁸⁶

*ādeśaṃ tu vijānīyād yadāsau lakṣaṇānvitā*⁸⁷ || 523 ||
upatiṣṭhe svayaṃ śaktiḥ ādiṣṭā śakticoditā |
*puṣpakāle bhaven nityaṃ phalaṃ yasya*⁸⁸ *na saṃśayaḥ* || 524 ||
samayī bhaktisampannā yadā tasya prajāyate |
tadā devi vijānīyād ādeśo mama nānyathā || 525 ||
yogibhir kathito 'py evaṃ tadā mantrī vilakṣayet |

⁸² On the *miśraka*'s chastity, note, e.g., BraYā 45.435a, “he is always engaged in celibacy” (*brahmacaryarato nityaṃ*); and 447cd, “And he should not have intercourse with women” (*strīsaṅgaṃ ca na kurvīta*).

⁸³ The circumstances permitting coitus are first addressed in BraYā 45.439: “By command, O great goddess, [the *miśraka*] may attract and enjoy [a woman]; conjoined with [this] consort, he may accomplish all rites.” (*ādeśena mahādevi ākrṣyākrṣya bhuñjāyēt | sādhaḥ sarvakarmāṇi śaktiyuktas tu miśrakaḥ* ||). This accords with a discussion of the *miśraka* in BraYā 24.100c–101.

⁸⁴ BraYā 45.505–508 (ed. KISS 2015; translation mine): “Having repeatedly magically attracted a beautiful divine maiden, he [the *miśraka*] should enjoy her. Together with them [i.e. her] (is *tābhi sārddham* plural usage for singular?), the mantrin should again observe what is stipulated in his ritual manual, in due sequence. The *miśraka sādha* should without hesitation take a woman attracted by mantras as his consort, undoubtedly. Otherwise, the *miśraka* should always observe celibacy. Without a doubt, he attains *siddhi* while situated in a sacred field – not otherwise. But he must not [in this case] enjoy a [woman who is] attracted; [if so,] the *miśraka* must perform expiation of twelve-thousand mantra recitations.” (*ākṣyākrṣya bhuñjīta divyakanyāṃ manoramāṃ | tābhi sārddham caren mantrī kalpaktāni punaḥ kramāt* || 505 || *ākṣṭā ya bhaven mantrai sa śaktiṃ nātra saṃśayaḥ | kartavyaṃ miśrakenaiva sādhaḥ kenāvisāṅkinā* || 506 || *athavā brahmacaryeṇa vartayen miśrakaḥ sadāḥ | sidhyate hy avicāreṇa kṣetram āsrītya nānyathā* || 507 || *ākṣṭāṃ na tu bhuñjīta prāyaścittaṃ samācāret | daśasāhasrikāṃ jāpyaṃ kartavyaṃ miśrakena tu* || 508 ||).

⁸⁵ Note for instance BraYā 45.532ab: *ākṣyākrṣya mantraiḥ tu divyakanyāṃ manoramāṃ |*

⁸⁶ Text as per KISS 2015, except as noted; my translation departs in a few respects, and is somewhat conjectural.

⁸⁷ *lakṣaṇānvitā*] *em.*; *lakṣaṇānvitaḥ* Ms., Ed.

⁸⁸ Perhaps emend to *phalaṃ yasyā*: “[a woman] from/of whom there are results,” i.e. who enables the fruition (*siddhi*) of the *sādha*'s ritual.

[523c–24] He should recognize [my] command [to become a *tālaka*] when a consort possessing the auspicious marks would spontaneously approach him, by [divine] command, impelled by the [cosmic] *śakti*. In all cases she would be in her menses, which undoubtedly give results [in ritual] (?).

[525–26b] When a female neophyte endowed with devotion appears to him, then, O goddess, he should recognize my command;⁸⁹ not otherwise. A mantrin should likewise discern [my command] when it is spoken by *yoginīs*.⁹⁰

As will be elaborated further below, ritual imbues a *sādhaka*'s encounters with female beings with meaning, whether nocturnal visions of airborne goddesses, sightings of villagers, or chance encounters with a solitary woman. In the *miśraka*'s case, an auditory exchange with goddesses or fortuitous meeting with a menstruating female initiate serves as the sign to embark on the *tālaka*'s discipline, which requires a qualified consort. Unusually, here her initiatory status is stated explicitly: that of the neophyte (*samayī*, an irregular feminine for *samayinī*).

Beyond the magically summoned consorts of *miśrakas*, non-initiated women are largely peripheral to the BraYā's ritual. To some extent the cultic focus on goddesses translates into ritualized reverence for women. Respectful behaviour is mandated for those undertaking ascetic observances (*vrata*): a *sādhaka*, for instance, must address women he encounters as “mother” or “sister,” and never display anger.⁹¹ Sexual violence is prohibited emphatically.⁹² Reverence for women is also a formal element of a ritual involving the wider, non-initiated community. Following *pratiṣṭhā*, the rite by which an officiant empowers a religious image, rendering it fit for worship, one is to feed the leftover food offerings (*naivedya*) to maidens and women, including those of the lowest social status (*antyaajā*), alongside the more usual suspects – Śaiva ascetics and brahmins.⁹³

⁸⁹ In 525d, *ādeśo* should be understood as accusative in sense; cf. EDGERTON (1953, vol. I: §8.36).

⁹⁰ As KISS (2015) notes, *yogibhiḥ* (526a) is non-standard, occurring for the feminine *yoginībhiḥ*. I have interpreted this line somewhat differently, primarily in light of BraYā 45.184–185ab. The latter passage seems to state that one commences the *tālaka* path either by command of the guru or of the *yoginīs*, as received in *melaka*, a visionary encounter: *eva[m] melakam āpanno ādiṣṭaṃ tair varānane | tālamārga[m] tadā kuryād yadā śuddhas tu sādhaḥ || 184 || gurvādeśena vā kuryād yogibhiḥ ca samarpitaḥ |* (“Having thus attained a visionary encounter, he is commanded by them [the *yoginīs*], O fair woman. He should undertake the path of the *tālaka* when he becomes pure. He should do so either by the command of the guru or when offered over [?] by the *yoginīs*.”).

⁹¹ BraYā 21.24: *striyo drṣṭvā namaskṛtya mātā ca bhaginīti ca | evaṃ sambhāṣayen mantri kroṣaṇan tu na kārayet ||*

⁹² E.g. BraYā 84.17cd: *divyākṛṣya [em; °kṛṣyan Ms.] tu bhuñjīta na ca strī sabalāt [em.; śabalā Ms.] kvacit*, “One may draw down a divine maiden (*divyā*) and enjoy her, but must never [take] a woman by force.” (In 17c, *divyā* should be understood as accusative in sense; cf. *śaktyā*, discussed above in n. 60.)

⁹³ BraYā 4.707-709: *pratiṣṭhāyāṃ na cāśnīyā naivedyaṃ sādhaḥkottamaḥ | tato niṣkramya deveśi samayi sādhu striyān tathā || 707 || kumāryo [em.; kumāryau Ms.] bhojayen mantri*

Despite such ritualization of respect for women, their erotic conquest remains one of the BraYā's most widely advertised magical attainments (*siddhi*). An accomplished *sādhaka* “becomes like the god of love, bringing joy to the hearts of women”.⁹⁴

Women as ritualists, women as goddesses

A degree of ambiguity surrounds female initiation., The BraYā's cycle of chapters devoted to initiation (*dīkṣā*) and consecration (*abhiṣeka*), *paṭalas* 32–38, is largely silent on the subject. However, its instructions for the assignation of initiatory names based upon the cast of a flower into the maṇḍala (*puṣpapāta*) provide a naming convention for females.⁹⁵ This silence, punctuated by a note on women's initiatory names, in all likelihood reflects the matter-of-fact acceptance of female initiation at this level of the tradition. As notes TÖRSÖK (2014: 355–361), the BraYā and other *vidyāpīṭha* and Kaula sources frequently refer to practitioners as belonging to either gender, not only in the context of the initiation of neophytes (*samayadīkṣā*), but in a broad range of ritual contexts. In its more than seven-hundred and fifty verses concerning initiation rites, the BraYā makes no allusion to exclusions or modifications for women, and there are no grounds to assume that the ritual differed in substance. In the narrative of the girl Sattikā's apotheosis and her role in transmitting revelation, the BraYā even tacitly provides a model for female guruship.

Chapter 14 of the BraYā, the “Chapter of the Wheel of the Sky-travellers” (*khecarīcakrapaṭala*), stands out among early scriptural texts for presenting a practice system designated specifically, though not exclusively, for initiated women.⁹⁶ Demanding though it may be, this teaching is framed as a concession to women's supposed limitations. The Goddess complains that the process of worship Bhairava had taught earlier is too elaborate. She characterizes female initiates – here referred to as *yoginīs* – as weak in both intellect (*buddhi*) and spirit (*sattva*), yet dedicated to their husbands and full of devotion to the gurus. On this account, she requests an easy means (*sukhopāya*) for them to attain *siddhi*.⁹⁷ The system expounded in response has as its

antyajās tu striyo 'pi vā | vratīnām brāhmaṇām [em.; brāhmaṇā Ms.] caiva śivaśāsanadīkṣitām || 708 || bhōjayitvā yathāśaktyā bhakṣabhojyādivistaraiḥ | gandhapuṣpaṃ tato datvā kṣamāpya ca visarjayat [em.; visarjayat Ms.] || 709 ||. (One might emend *vratīnām* to *vratinām*, but cf. EDGERTON 1953, vol. I: §10.201.)

⁹⁴ BraYā 64.161ab: *bhavate 'naṅavat [em.; bhavete naṅava Ms.] strīṇām hṛdayānandakāraḥ |.*

⁹⁵ BraYā 34.199c–201b: *nārīṇān [corr.; nārīnān Ms.] tu yadā pātaḥ sthāneṣv [corr.; sthāneṣv Ms.] eteṣu jāyate || 199 || tena gotreṇa tan nāmaṃ śaktisaṃjñam tadā bhavet | yā yasmiṃ saṃsthitā gotre vīro vā yoginī pi vā || 200 || svagoṭraṃ rakṣayantīha sādhaḥ cābalā [em.; sādhaḥ ca balā Ms.] tathā |.*

⁹⁶ An edition of BraYā, chapter 14 will be included in volume III of the *Brahmayāmala* (currently in-progress).

⁹⁷ BraYā 14.1–5: *devy uvāca || yogīnyo svalpabuddhyās tu svalpacittālpasatvikāḥ | bhartuḥ śuśrūṣaṇaparā gurubhaktisamanvitāḥ | tāsāṃ siddhir yathā deva tan me brūhi samāsataḥ || 1 || evam vai pṛcchīto bhaktyā saṃkṣepārthaṃ mayā purā | yāgan tathaiva deveśa vistaraṃ kathitaṃ tvayā || 2 || saṃkṣepe yāgamārgeṇa sukhopāyena caiva hi | kulakramaṃ ca vai tāsāṃ yena tāḥ*

basis an alphabetical diagram known as the “wheel of the sky-travellers” or “wheel of the flying *yoginīs*” (*khecarīcakra*). From this are formed three principal mantras: the *samayavidyā* or lower (*aparā*) *kulavidyā* (“*vidyā*-mantra of the goddess clans”) for neophytes, the *kulavidyā* proper, and the higher (*parā*) *kulavidyā*, also called “heart of the *yoginīs*” (*yoginīhrdaya*).⁹⁸ Rites based on the *khecarīcakra* differ little in most respects from those of the BraYā’s various other alphabetical circles (*cakra*), such as the *vidyācakra* of chapter 17 or *bhautikacakra* of chapter 19. What may somewhat set them apart is an emphasis on the aggressive magical acts sometimes associated with *yoginīs*, such as entry into another’s body (*parakāyapraveśa*) and extraction of the vital fluids (*amṛtākaraṣaṇa*).⁹⁹

While chapter 14 of the BraYā ostensibly expounds practices for women, much of its content seems strikingly incongruous with this purpose. Some material might more accurately be characterized as rites for a *sādhaka* to attain mastery over both divine and mortal females. One short passage, for instance, teaches the “technique for making [a woman] wet” (*kṣaraṇaprayoga*), aimed at rendering her mad with desire for the *sādhaka*.¹⁰⁰ The chapter also has a lengthy exposition of *haṭhamelaka*, techniques for forcibly drawing down and mastering dangerous goddesses, in which there is little ambiguity concerning the maleness of the ritual subject.¹⁰¹ As a whole, the chapter appears oriented toward male mastery of ritual disciplines associated with *yoginīs*, practices envisioned as those women perform in their quest for divine apotheosis. Only in this limited sense does the chapter concern women’s ritual. It seems implausible to conceive of initiated women as the true intended audience; at most, one might envision the chapter as a basis for oral instructions to female disciples.

The BraYā’s conceptions of “female” ritual practice receive further elucidation in this chapter’s creative taxonomy of accomplished women. Appended to chapter 14 is a notable passage classifying the *yoginīs* who possess mastery of the *khecarīcakra* (BraYā 14.260c–266). This threefold classification differs in both premise and detail from the text’s threefold typology of *sādhakas*. Among the three categories of *yoginī*, the *āgantukā* (“adventitious” or “newcomer”) likely represents the normative female practitioner who attains awakening through ritual means. In the other two cases, notable by its absence is formal initiation: the *jñānagarbhā* (“wisdom-in-the-womb”) *yoginī* and

siddhim āpnuyāt || 3 || *deva uvāca* || *vistaraṃ kathītan devi sādhakānāṃ hitāya vai | adhunā sampravakṣyāmi yoginīnāṃ mahodayam* || 4 || *yāgakramavidhiṅ caiva tan me nigadataḥ śṛṇu | sadā karmaratā yās tu yena siddhiṃ labhanti tāḥ* || 5 ||.

⁹⁸ Cf. the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*’s mantra *KHPHREM*, the “heart of the *yoginīs*” (*yoginīhrdaya*), which, as TÖRZSÖK (2014: 361) points out, is described as particularly efficacious for women.

⁹⁹ See especially BraYā 14.193–260. Concerning these techniques, see *nāḍyudāya*, *pañcāmṛtākaraṣaṇa*, and *parakāyapraveśa* in *Tāntrikābhīdhānakośa*, vol. III.

¹⁰⁰ BraYā 14.230–235; this is called *kṣaraṇasya prayogaḥ* in 235cd. Upon completion of rite, the woman in question “being agitated, assuredly approaches and follows after the *sādhaka*, afflicted with passion” (234d–235b: ... *kṣubhite madanāturā* || *upaviśyati sāvaśyaṃ sādhakam cānugacchati* |; understand *upaviśyati* as active in sense; cf. EDGERTON 1953, vol. I: §37.22–23).

¹⁰¹ *haṭhamelaka* is treated in BraYā 14.204–217. The maleness of the subject in this section of the text is explicit in the aforementioned passage on “love magic,” 14.230–235.

kulodbhavā (“clan-born”) *yoginī* both learn the *kulavidyā* mantra directly from their mother, either in the womb or after birth, experiencing the awakening of wisdom (*jñāna*) later in life. This transformative gnosis defines them as *yoginīs*, a designation which slips here into its double-sense of both female tantric adept and tantric goddess:

*kauliko ’yaṃ vidhiḥ*¹⁰² *prokto yoginīkulanandanah* || 260 ||
*yasyāś*¹⁰³ *cakrasya saṃprāpti -m- avāśyaṃ tasya jāyate* |
*kulavidyā*¹⁰⁴ *ca deveśi tāṃ śrṇuṣva samāhitā*¹⁰⁵ || 261 ||
*jñānagarbhā bhaved yā tu tathā caiva*¹⁰⁶ *kulodbhavā* |
*āgantukā*¹⁰⁷ *tu yogeśī*¹⁰⁸ *prāpnuvanti na saṃśayaḥ* || 262 ||
jñānī mātā pitā caiva jñānagarbheti kīrtitā |
*garbhashthāyās tu vai mātā*¹⁰⁹ *kulavidyāṃ*¹¹⁰ *samarpayet* |
*ardhatrayodaśe varṣe jñānaṃ*¹¹¹ *prāpnoti sā dhruvam* || 263 ||
parijñānavatī mātā nādhikārī pitā smṛtaḥ |
*sā bhave*¹¹² *tu kulotpannā mātā tasyās tu kārayet* || 264 ||
*karṇajāpan*¹¹³ *tu jātāyāḥ ṣaṇmāsaṃ kulavidyayā* |
*caturviṃśatime*¹¹⁴ *varṣe jñānaṃ tasyāḥ*¹¹⁵ *prajāyate* || 265 ||
*caruṇā yāgamārgena*¹¹⁶ *amṛtasya tu prāśanāt*¹¹⁷ |
*yasyā jñānaṃ*¹¹⁸ *prajāyeta āgantuh*¹¹⁹ *sā prakīrtitā* || 266 ||
*anena kramayogena jñānakośa*¹²⁰ *suvistarāḥ*¹²¹ |
*siddhāḥ*¹²² *siddhiṃ gamiṣyanti yoginyo nātra saṃśayaḥ* || 267 ||

[260cd] This [aforementioned ritual] is called Rite of the Clans (*kaulika vidhi*), [for it] gives delight to the clans of *yoginīs*. [261] She who obtains

-
- ¹⁰² vidhiḥ | Ms. B (paper); vidhi Ms. A (palm-leaf).
¹⁰³ yasyāś | B; yasyā A.
¹⁰⁴ °vidyā | °vidyāś AB.
¹⁰⁵ samāhitā | *em.*; samāhitāḥ AB.
¹⁰⁶ caiva | *em.*; caiva tu AB (*unmetrical*).
¹⁰⁷ āgantukā | *em.*; āgantukān AB.
¹⁰⁸ yogeśī | B; yogesī A.
¹⁰⁹ mātā | B^{pc}; mātām AB^{ac}.
¹¹⁰ °vidyāṃ | *em.*; °vidyā AB.
¹¹¹ jñānaṃ | B^{pc}; jñānām AB^{ac}.
¹¹² *bhave* should be understood as optative, with loss of the final consonant (cf. EDGERTON 1953, vol. I: §29.42).
¹¹³ karṇa° | A; varṇa° B.
¹¹⁴ °viṃśatime | B; °viṃśatime A.
¹¹⁵ tasyāḥ | A^{pc}; tasya A^{ac}.
¹¹⁶ yāga° | A; yoga° B.
¹¹⁷ prāśanāt | *cor.*; prāśanāt A; prā(sa)nāt B (*marked as error*).
¹¹⁸ jñānaṃ | B; jñāna A.
¹¹⁹ āgantuh | B^{pc}; āgantuh AB^{ac} (*unmetrical*).
¹²⁰ °kośa° | B; °kosa° A.
¹²¹ °vistarāḥ | *em.*; °vistarāḥ AB.
¹²² siddhāḥ | B; siddhā A.

the Wheel of the Clans ([*kula*]cakra) will assuredly gain [the mantra known as] the *kulavidyā*, O queen of the gods. [Now] hear of her, being well-composed. [262] She who is [known as] “wisdom-in-the-womb”, the one “born of a clan”, and the “newcomer *yoginī*” – [all of them] obtain [the *kulavidyā*], undoubtedly. [263] [One whose] mother and father both possess the wisdom, [and whose] mother would bestow the *kulavidyā* to her while in the womb, is known as “wisdom-in-the-womb”. At [the age of] half of thirty years she certainly obtains the wisdom. [264–265] The mother fully possesses the wisdom, [but] the father has no entitlement: she is [one] “born in a clan”. Her mother would whisper the *kulavidyā* in her ear for six months when she is born. After twenty-four years, the wisdom arises in her. [266] She in whom the wisdom would arise through [consuming] the oblation gruel (*caru*), through the path of deity worship (*yāga*), or through consuming the [secret] nectars, is known as the “newcomer”. [267] The perfected *yoginīs* shall attain *siddhi* in this order, without a doubt, possessing vast troves of wisdom.

A remarkable view of female tantric adepts emerges from this passage. While males seek communion with the goddess clans (*kulasāmānyatā*), or their mastery, women seek to awaken their identity as goddesses, or simply come to manifest this spontaneously. This calls to mind the girl Sattikā of the revelation narrative, who regained her lost divinity at age thirteen through devotional worship.¹²³ Apotheosis, either through ritual or by sudden awakening, is thus a key theme in the representation of accomplished women. As this passage indicates, their attainment may be congenital, predicated on birth to initiates (either the mother alone or both parents) as well as matrilineal transmission of the *kulavidyā*. This custom of informal, matrilineal transmission points toward the possible existence of female communities of practice only nominally aligned with the tantric lineages established through formal initiation.

The BraYā’s treatises on coded communication and “the characteristics of *yoginīs*” (*yoginīlakṣaṇa*) (chapters 56 and 74) provide glimpses of women as initiated ritualists operating beyond the constraints of coital ritual, though these representations are obscured by elements of visionary fantasy. Here the focus lies not on the “sister” initiate, mentioned mainly in passing, but on encounters with *yoginīs* secretly inhabiting the world (*martyasaṃgatāḥ*, BraYā 74.40d).¹²⁴ These living goddesses are represented as

¹²³ BraYā 1.29–30.

¹²⁴ On the purpose of coded communication (*chomma*), and the distinction in this context between “sister” initiates and semidivine “*yoginīs*”, note especially BraYā 56.98c–102: *cchommakāḥ kīdrśā deva kulānām sādhakasya ca* || 98 || *prajñāyate yathā bhrātā bhaginī vā viśeṣataḥ* | *caryāyuktasya deveśa yathā jñāsyanti yoginīḥ* || 99 || *parasparañ ca vīrānām ekatantrasamāśrayām* | *ālāpārthe mahādeva kathayasva prabhāṣataḥ* || 100 || *bhairava uvāca* || *śṛṇu devi pravakṣyāmi cchommakānām tu lakṣaṇam* | *yena vijñāyate bhrātā bhaginī vā maheśvari* || 101 || *jñātvā ca yoginīṃ mantrī śivecchācoditātmavān* | *sādhakas tu tato dadyād vācikaṃ mudralakṣaṇam* || 102 || (“[98c–100] ‘O god, what are the secret signs of the [goddess] clans and *sādhaka* like, such that one may specifically recognize a brother or sister; such that one carrying out the observances (*caryā*) recognizes *yoginīs*, O lord of the gods; and for the mutual

potential sources of power and as guardians of esoteric knowledge, oral “lineage teachings” (*saṃpradāya*) which men may learn only by their propitiation.¹²⁵ This vision of tantric wisdom laying hidden within the circles of *yoginīs*, beyond direct access by *sādhakas*, undergirds a gendered ritual logic by which men seek out encounters with accomplished female adepts as well as goddesses. In this context the boundaries between women and divine beings readily collapse. *yoginīs* assemble in the sacred fields (*pīṭha*, *kṣetra*, etc.), but may also live inconspicuously in the village or town. In chapters 56 and 74 the BraYā delineates taxonomies by which *sādhakas* can recognize concealed *yoginīs* and identify their Mother-goddess clans (*mātrkula*), clans to which *sādhakas* themselves belong through initiation.

The distinguishing qualities (*lakṣaṇa*) by which one recognizes *yoginīs* span bodily appearance, comportment, food preferences, and the decorative emblems women draw on their homes. Take for instance the description of a *yoginī* belonging to the clan of the Mother-goddess Vārāhī (BraYā 74.61–65):¹²⁶

[61] [A woman] with full lips and large eyes, whose frontal locks have tawny ends, who is ever fond of the act of painting, skillful in dance and music, [62] always fond of spirits and meat, lusty and deceitful; she draws on her house the insignia of the fang, or else the staff or chain, [63–64] and she likewise draws a snout, an angle, or a cremation ground, a lotus, or pot. One should know her sacred day to be the twelfth of both lunar fortnights, O fair woman; both Vārāhī and Vaiṣṇavī are ever fond of the same sacred day. [65] She should be recognized [thus] by the best of

conversation of heroes who follow the same *tantra*? Tell [me this], O great god, by way of explanation (? *prabhāṣataḥ*). Bhairava spoke: [101] ‘Listen, O goddess; I shall teach the characteristics of secret signs, by which a brother or sister is recognized, O Maheśvarī. [102] Having recognized a *yoginī*, himself propelled by the will of Śiva, the mantra-bearing *sādhaka* should then give [her] a verbal message characterized by *mudrā* [names].’” For a discussion of the interpretation of this passage, see HATLEY 2007: 378–379.

¹²⁵ The idea of “attaining the lineage teachings” appears in the context of encounters with *yoginīs* in multiple sources, often expressed in similar terms; the phrase *saṃpradāyaṃ ca vindati* occurs as *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 27.16d and BraYā 3.230d, 45.295d, and 73.13b. Cf. *saṃpradāyaṃ na vindati*, BraYā 85.143b. Similar expressions occur in the *Tantrasadbhāva* (e.g. *dadante saṃpradāyakam*, 13.60b) and *Jayadrathayāmala* (e.g. *saṃpradāya[m] prayacchanti*, III, 28.21c).

¹²⁶ Text and translation from HATLEY (2007: 331, 412–413), with minor changes: *lamboṣṭhī ca viśālākṣī piṅgalāgrāgrakeśinī | citrakarmapriyā nityaṃ nṛtyagandharvapeśalā || 61 || māmsāsavapriyā nityaṃ lolupā sarpaśātvikā | svagrhe daṃṣṭramudrā draṇḍaśṛṅkhalam eva vā || 62 || likhate ca tathā ghoṇaṃ koṇaṃ vātha śmaśānakam | padmam vā karpparaṇ caiva ubhe pakṣe tu parvvaṇī || 63 || dvādaśī tu vijāntī tasyaḥ sā varavarṇṇini | vārāhī vaiṣṇavī caiva ekaparvvaratā sadā || 64 || jñātavyā sādhakendrena mantrāviṣṭena cetasā | tīrṣaṃ lakṣaṇaṃ dṛṣṭvā pratimudrānūsariṇā | māsaikāt siddhidā devi caryāyuktasya mantriṇaḥ || 65 ||*. In 62d, I have emended the unintelligible *sarvasātvikā* to *sarpaśātvikā*. As TÖRZSÖK (2014: 349–351) notes, highlighting the example of Kaumarī-clan *yoginīs*, descriptions of women belonging to the clans of Mother-goddesses are remarkably similar across *vidyāpīṭha* texts.

sādhakas, his mind suffused by mantra. After one sees such characteristics, following the [appropriate] response-*mudrās*, after one month she bestows *siddhi* upon the *mantrin* carrying out the observances, O goddess.

This creative taxonomy reads the female body, comportment, and domestic art as potential signifiers of membership in matriarchal esoteric lineages. Though initiated into the same divine clans, which span levels of the cosmos, the *sādhaka* remains on the periphery by virtue of his gender and lack of ritual accomplishment. His preparatory period of wandering asceticism (*vratacaryā*) thus entails an almost voyeuristic fascination with women, whom he carefully observes for signs of concealed divinity.

Recognized and duly propitiated, the living goddesses disguised as women of the village or town may respond to *sādhakas* of their own initiatory clans. Exchanges of coded communication take the form of *mudrā* or verbal utterance, or may combine verbal and nonverbal codes. The living *yoginī* may bless the *sādhaka* by prognosticating future occult attainments, or enable a visionary, power-bestowing encounter with her divine clan sisters. The following exemplifies the liminal encounter envisioned between a *sādhaka* and concealed *yoginī*, who foretells his future attainments through gesture (BraYā 56.132–135):¹²⁷

[132] When [she] puts her hands on the tip of the nose and moves her head around, she in that way relates “[you shall attain] an encounter with the Nine [deities] in a vast forest”. [133] She who would look down and begin to draw on the ground [with her toes indicates], “[you shall have] an encounter with female beings of the netherworlds in a temple of the Mother-goddesses”. [134] She who gazes at her own tongue, and afterwards trembles, [fore]tells of an encounter with female beings dwelling in the waters. [135] She who shakes her hands from feet to head would indicate an encounter [with the goddesses] at whichever level of the cosmos (*tattva*) she abides, beginning with the *śivatattva*.

After receiving the prognostication, a *sādhaka* venerates the perfected adepts (*siddha*) of the past and wanders forth until he attains a power-bestowing, visionary encounter with the specified goddesses.¹²⁸ The embodied *yoginī* who dwells in the world, concealing her identity, hence forms a vital link between the male aspirant and the goddesses whose divine realms and powers he seeks. These encounters with worldly *yoginīs* paint a picture

¹²⁷ BraYā 56.132–135 (HATLEY 2007: 320–321, 385–386, with minor modifications): *nāsāgre tu yadā hastau kṛtvā cālayate śīram | navakasya tathākhyāti melakan tu mahāvane || 132 || adhomukhī tu yā bhūtvā bhūmilekhanam ārabhet | pātālacāriṇīnān tu melakaṃ mātrmandire || 133 || svajihvālokanaṃ yā tu kṛtvā paścāt prakampate | jalāntarvāsīnīnāṃ tu melakaṃ kathate tu sā || 134 || ā pādān mūrddhaparyantaṃ kṛtvā hastaprapampanam | yā sā śivāditatvasthā tatsthaṃ melakaṃ ādiśet || 135 ||*

¹²⁸ BraYā 56.136–137 (ibid.): *so 'pi mudrāpatih pūjya tathā manthānabhairavam | bhaktyā paryānaṃ kuryād yathātantraprabhāṣitam || 136 || namo 'stu digbhyo devebhyah pūrvvasiddhavināyakāṃ | datvārghaṃ parayā bhaktyā tato melāpakaṃ bhavet | tatsāmānyam mahādevi sarvvakalyāṇasampadam || 137 ||*

of autonomous, powerful living goddesses who straddle the female social world, communities based on initiatory kinship, and unseen realms. These representations, no matter how stereotyped and suffused with fantasy, may intimate the existence of female initiatory communities, oral teachings, and ritual traditions existing at some remove from the more official, male-dominated tantric lineages whose writings come down to us. This is precisely the scenario the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* intimates when it ascribes the “heart of the *yoginīs*” to women’s oral tradition, a mantra never before written down and only rarely mastered by men.¹²⁹

Gender, text, and tantric communities

Despite the BraYā’s large scale and detailed vision of its community of readership, the text provides only a limited window into the social dimension of one somewhat marginal tantric tradition. There are, moreover, severe limitations to our knowledge of the text’s social and historical contexts and the kinds of community which coalesced around its cult. As the preceding discussions have highlighted, the text nonetheless may have much to contribute towards understanding women’s involvement in early tantric traditions.

In reviewing the BraYā’s discourse on women, two divergent kinds of representation have come into view. These more or less map to the categories of *dūtī* and *yoginī*, and their respective ritual milieux: initiated women functioning as consorts in coital ritual, on one hand, and comparatively independent, potentially powerful women pursuing their own ritual aims, on the other. Both play essential, albeit contrasting roles in the *sādhaka*’s quest for supernatural attainment (*siddhi*). Depictions of coital ritual combine lurid detail with near silence on women’s subjectivity and ritual agency. Whatever the social reality may have been, the BraYā envisions ritual consorts (*dūtī* or *śakti*) as subordinate to the aims and authority of male *sādhakas*, despite partaking of tantric initiation. Contrasting representations of female practitioners emerge in discourse on *yoginīs*, who embody the possibility of a religious life neither defined nor constrained by ritual consortship.

These contrasting representations may of course obscure the real possibility that *yoginīs* were sometimes *dūtīs*: such divergent images of women are likely in some measure to be contextual. Much as the categories *yoginī* and *devī* (“goddess”) may blend to the point of being indistinguishable,¹³⁰ at the opposite end of its semantic field, *yoginī* overlaps with other designations for initiated women (*dūtī*, *śakti*, *bhaginī*, *samayinī*, *adhikāriṇī*, *sādhakī*). Despite these convergences, the BraYā’s contrasting representations nonetheless seem likely to intimate women of varied status and circumstance, and not merely different ritual roles. While the data is limited, the BraYā tends to portray consorts as belonging to the *sādhaka*’s immediate social world, if not family – women potentially under his own tutelage whose religious commitment could in some cases be limited to ritual consortship. In contrast, representations of *yoginīs*

¹²⁹ *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 28.41–42b: *puruṣeṇādhikāro ’sti asmin strīvidhikarmaṇi | strīyāyāḥ siddhido hy eṣaḥ kadācit puruṣasya ca || vaktrād vaktragataṃ strīṇāṃ na ca likhyati pustake |* (see TÖRZSÖK 2014: 361 for a translation and some discussion).

¹³⁰ Note also the overlap of *yoginī* with terms such as *mātrī*, *ḍākinī*, etc.; see the articles on these lexemes in the *Tāntrikābhidhānaśāstra*.

seemingly intimate independent female adepts and matriarchal lines of transmission beyond the *sādhaka*'s orbit and control. The extremes of these types – the kinswoman consort, and the *yoginī* as liminal, living goddess – may have disproportionate prominence in the BraYā on account of their essential roles in the *sādhaka*'s ritual life. In contrast, the text says little about the kind of initiated woman referenced, usually in passing, by *bhaginī* – the “sister” initiate who, valued neither as a source of sex nor of potent blessings, remains somewhat peripheral.

An enigma presented by the BraYā is its explicit embrace of women in its readership community and systems of ritual while simultaneously neglecting to articulate their perspectives. Its myopic focus on the *sādhaka* entails virtual silence on women's ritual aims and motivations, particularly in the context of sexual ritual. What were the respective roles of coercion and the allure of sexual or emotional fulfilment, social status, and ritual power (*siddhi*)? In chapter 14 – devoted, promisingly, to ritual for women – this silence becomes particularly conspicuous, for the predominant concern emerges as the revelation of *yoginīs*' inner secrets for the benefit of male *sādhakas*. Here the BraYā reveals itself as a text fundamentally *about* women, both human and divine, but rarely for them. Despite the rhetoric of female inclusion, the pretence of a mixed-gender community of readership, and pervasive references to initiated women, male concerns dominate: women feature primarily as vehicles for the *sādhaka*'s perfection. Nonetheless, in its narrative of the girl Sattikā's ascent to divinity and her role in revelation, in its matter-of-fact embrace of female initiation, in its teaching of a mantra-pantheon (*yāga*) specifically for women, in its imaginative anthropology of accomplished females, and in the very figure of the *yoginī*, who straddles the human and divine, the BraYā provides glimpses of an esoteric community in which women's participation was both normative and multiply enacted, and at least in some contexts not under male control.

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