Any consideration of the Devī must face the scandalous and repulsive aspects of extreme tantric practice. Can these be explained away as the fancy of an overheated imagination? Is the goddess to be interpreted into irrelevance? This question is all the more penetrating when we consider that Abhinavagupta, one of the major figures in Indian thought, gives full weight to an extreme tantric practice, the Kula ritual.

Abhinavagupta, the major author of the tradition we are considering and the leading figure in Kashmir Saivism, proposes an interpretation of the goddess which aims at both preserving the horror of the practice and allowing it authentically to be accepted. He wishes to enable the practitioner to take up intelligently and wholeheartedly the ritual which the right-minded people of his day dismissed as an aberration and to arrive at supreme consciousness—union with the goddess.

This study acts as a counterweight to the many corruptions of tantra so well surveyed by Hugh Urban (2003). It also avoids the other extreme—the mitigation of the Kula ritual proposed by Lilian Silburn (1983). This chapter neither defends the indefensible nor condemns or justifies. It only attempts to clarify practices which must be considered in any full presentation of Devī.

Sanderson, in his study of the history of the tantric traditions (Sanderson 1988), notes a progressive shift away from the worship of the god to the worship of the goddess and away from reputable Vedic practices to extreme ‘unlawful’ rituals. The Kula and the Kaula traditions are to be listed among these extreme rituals (Sanderson 1995:23, 79). According to White, they constitute the ‘sole truly distinctive feature of South Asian Tantric traditions’ (White 2003:13).
Sanderson holds that the Kula tradition belongs to ascetics who are linked to the Kāpālika (skull-bearers) and yoginī cults and to the cults of the cremation ground, whereas the Kaula tradition is an adaptation that allows for the householder (Sanderson 1985:214 n.110). If the ordinary person undergoes the same experience as the Kāpālika, but more simply and indeed more powerfully, his domestic ritual is to be deemed at least equivalent. The terminology of the Kāpālika or yoginī cult could then be transferred to the domestic context and the externals of those cults could be justifiably abandoned as superfluous.

The actual word kula has a plethora of meanings, which cross-refer. It first relates to the family or grouping of the yoginī and of the ‘Mothers’. It also refers to the human body, to the body of power, to the cosmic body, and even to the totality of things. The practitioner is already, in his own body, the embodiment of the ‘Mothers’ and of the cosmos, but, by being initiated into a particular ‘Mother’ and by entering into a ‘family’, he also enters into one or other level of his own body and becomes master of the powers identified with it. By piercing all the circles of his body he is master of all and attains the central deity that is the true self of the worshipper of whom the eight ‘Mothers’ are the projections.

Abhinava, in his presentation of the Kula ritual in Chapter 29 of his encyclopaedic Tantrāloka (Light on the tantras) in which he surveys all the tantras of his day and reinterprets them in the light of the Trika school to which he belongs, presents the goddess first of all at the supreme level of consciousness and then in the more limited form of lesser goddesses and female figures, at the subtle level of speech in its various forms, and at the gross level of the sexual fluids. He then outlines rituals that allow the practitioner to move up and down these various levels, which imply and flow from each other. Each aspect is to be seen in the context of every other aspect.²

Theoria and praxis involve each other. An adequate understanding of an extreme tantric practice, which is the purpose of the following pages, requires both a presentation of the basic concepts and a description of the ritual. Indeed, it is only in the practice of the ritual that the tantric attitude is actually experienced.

The following pages, therefore, cover several major aspects of the Kula tantric ritual:

1. What is the nature of the goddess (Devī) and her more frequent emanations according to the Kula tradition? After all, the goddess is the ultimate object of worship. Who is she? How is she manifested?
2. The goddess is supremely embodied in her mantra (vidyā). Which are the principle mantras of the Kula traditional and what do they mean? It is by reciting them, even more than by performing the ritual activities, that the goddess is enjoyed and her powers secured.

3. Particular emphasis is given to the substances, the three Ms, of the Kula tradition, in which the goddess is embodied.

4. A further section sets out the basic, daily (nītya) ritual and the central ritual with an external śakti (female sexual partner) as described in Chapter 29 of the Tantrāloka. These rituals show how, in fact, the Kula tradition was lived and how it achieved its purpose.

SECTION A: THEORIA

Part 1—Devī

Devī as consciousness

Abhinavagupta teaches that consciousness, ‘I am’, is the highest reality and since it cannot be ignorant of itself, consciousness is self-illuminating. If Śiva is considered to be consciousness, the goddess inseparably joined to Śiva is the ‘consciousness of consciousness’. Indeed, it is this ‘consciousness of consciousness’ that is the particular focus of the rituals described in this chapter. In other words, it is the goddess who is above all worshipped and whose powers are sought.³

The union of Śiva and the goddess is not a monism since there is a distinction between consciousness and its self-knowledge. This distinction is not, however, a dualism, for they are not separate. The usual comparison is that of the fire and its capacity to burn. The philosophy is neither monistic nor dualist but non-dual (advaita)

The idea of Devī as consciousness takes the reader out of the usual presentations to be found in myth and imagery. She cannot ultimately be described or imagined; she is not to be associated with any particular place or associated with any ritual to the exclusions of others; she is all and contains all and is in all. She is not the subject of discourse so much as an experience that cannot be named.⁴

This self-revelation is the supreme word (paravāc)—which is the supreme goddess, the supreme mantra—of which all other words and revelations, powers and substances, realities and persons, are the lesser manifestations
so that the goddess is surrounded (āvaraṇa) by lesser manifestations or lesser goddesses, which eddy in ever broadening circles to the point of inertia (jadatā). But since the goddess, even in her lesser manifestations, is never without her ‘male’ counterpart, there are circles upon circles of gods and goddesses paired in sexual union.

Many goddesses are named in Chapter 29 and its viveka (Dupuche 2003:Appendix 5) and can be understood as persons or personifications. They variously refer to the supreme goddess or to her attendants, but it is the following women who chiefly claim our attention.

Devī as a woman

1. patnī

The Kula tradition has been handed down from the divine realm to the perfected beings (siddha) and from them to humans such as the guru who transmits it in turn to his disciple. The Kula ritual itself is defined (Tantrāloka 29.2) essentially as the worship of lineage of the siddhas and their wives (patnī). Thus the listing (Tantrāloka 29.29ff) of the perfected beings also names their wives. These are arranged in a maṇḍala which need not delay us here (cf Dupuche 2003:203ff). There is a certain ambiguity in the Kula tradition, which is handed down both by the guru and by the śakti.

2. dūtī

The term dūtī, referring to the female sexual partner in the Kula ritual, does occur in Tantrāloka Chapter 29, but Abhinava prefers the term śakti, for which reason the major emphasis in this section will be given to the description of the śakti.

3. yoginī

De Mallmann (1963:169–82) has given a full description of the characteristics of the yoginīs. However, even though these fantastic creatures provide a basis for the role of the yoginī in Tantrāloka Chapter 29 and its investigation, the yoginīs of Chapter 29 and Jayaratha’s commentary are vastly different. Although he uses the terminology of the Kāpālika and yoginī cults, Abhinava demythologises the yoginīs who cease to be the wild hordes of terrifying females needing to be placated with what is most precious—blood and semen. Instead, they become the sexual partner who, nevertheless, destroys the sense of the ego (aha kāra), which constitutes the essential stain (mala). This is disconcerting, for the limited individual clings
to division and its cravings. The loss of egoity is profoundly feared and resisted. The domestication of the Kula ritual by Abhinava means that the female sexual partner is invested with all the imagery of another era. She has the essential role of the mythical yoginī but not her outward appearance. To be associated in sexual rites with the female partner is effectively to enter the cremation ground and to join the company of the perfected beings (siddha) and the yoginīs. Instead of acquiring the yoginīs’ magical powers, the Kula practitioner attains the transcendent powers of consciousness and bliss from which the cosmos derives. To become Śiva is to possess śakti (śaktimān).

While Abhinava prefers the term śakti to describe the female sexual partner in the more private and domestic context, he also mentions the yoginī whom the Adept will visit on his tour of the sacred sites. She will recognise him as belonging to her own section within the broader range of Kula practitioners and will perform the ritual with him, granting all that can be obtained from her ‘mouth’.

4. śakti

The Kula ritual focuses above all on the śakti who must therefore be described more fully. From the goddess who is the self-revelation of consciousness, all other revelations derive; and from the goddess who is śakti and the primordial manifestation of Śiva, the universe in all its aspects is emitted. Thus the cosmos is an array of innumerable śaktis streaming out from the one śakti, the one consciousness.

Abhinava gives long descriptions of the internal or imaginary śaktis, where they live, their names, how they are arranged around the central and presiding śakti, the goddess from whom they emanate. In this way the goddess has ‘personality’ but this description is not at the heart of the Kula ritual which concerns the ‘external śakti’, that is a real woman. Śakti can be internal, consisting of the whole range of emotions and interior experiences. Indeed, the practitioner is to consider his own self as nothing; he is only an expression and a conglomerate of śaktis (Tantrāloka 29.64).

Because a woman is able to give birth, she is the particular manifestation of the unlimited power that gives rise to the universe. She also provides the sexual fluid. Because the male (śaktimān) does not have this capacity, he is the particular manifestation of Śiva, who is inactive and by himself ineffective.

The female sexual partner in the Kula ritual, the ‘external śakti’, is not the practitioner’s mother, sister, daughter, or wife etc (Dupuche
2003:129–34). She is a woman who takes on the position of a consecrated female in relationship to the practitioner and grants him every boon and gift, ‘bestowing both enjoyment and liberation’ (Tantrāloka 29.103b).

She is brought to the ritual and consecrated to that purpose. Abhinava quotes Kallaṭa: The guru ‘should ritually prepare [the śakti] because by her very being she is superior to his own body’ (Tantrāloka 29.123b). The śakti is female by her very nature (sva-bhāva) and is the source of the sexual fluid (kuḍagolaka). Her body is superior to that of the guru because she is female and is the means of maithuna. But she must also be ritually prepared (bhāvitām) by him.

She is chosen for the ritual without regard to caste or age. What is required is not that she possess every feminine quality, but that she identify completely with her male partner. This point is made at length by Jayaratha in his commentary. He first quotes a text describing a woman with every sexual quality and every aspect of beauty, the seductress par excellence. He quotes the description of another type of woman who is demure, dutiful, observant and attractive in another way. He notes that these contradictory qualities make it impossible to find a woman who has every quality. How then can any single woman portray the feminine in all its aspects? To this question Abhinava provides the answer—the sexual partner must have the essential quality of identity with her partner; she is to be śakti to his Śiva. ‘The characteristic quality of a śakti is that she is in no way separated from him who possesses her. Let him, therefore, bring [a śakti] of this sort, but without regard to castes etc’ (Tantrāloka 29.100b).

And since the primordial śakti is the source of every other śakti and every aspect of femininity, the female partner with the characteristic quality, whether she be old or young, beautiful or ugly, is ‘everywoman’. ‘The Kula ritual can also involve an adulterous union with the wives of, an outcaste, a krṣṇa, a Bowman, a butcher, a tanner, a eunuch, a bone-splitter, a fisherman, a potter’ (Tantrāloka 29.66), who are ritually impure since they are involved in dealing with impure substances. Union with such women, which can in part be explained as a reaction to the respectability of Brahmanism, allows the practitioner to transcend the divisive concepts of pure and impure and to reach supreme consciousness.

Abhinava does not go into further detail on the attitude involved. It is Jayaratha, his faithful commentator, who explains that the focus of the practitioner is not to be on a passing orgasm but on eternal bliss. He quotes:
He should enjoy a beautiful woman for the sake of achieving steadiness, never because of lust (Tantrāloka vol 7:3363 line 5).

The aforementioned perfect expression of sexual desire, as it is called, is not to be performed for the sake of enjoyment. [It is to be performed] for the sake of considering one's own consciousness: is the mind steady or fluctuating? (Tantrāloka vol 7:3363 lines 4–5).

In this way the practitioner transcends the divisive concepts of aversion and desire, beauty and ugliness. He goes beyond orgasm and time to the abiding transcendent state of Śiva and śakti joined in eternal maithuna.

In the face of this most scandalous aspect of this extreme tantric practice, questions naturally arise. How can such abuse of women be a means to the highest spiritual state? What sort of goddess is she, if she allows her representative to be used in this way? That, of course, is precisely the point. The extreme tantric ritual intentionally contravenes all the Vedic views of dharma. The practitioner rejects the dharma. Indeed, the true dharma consists in not being troubled by dharma. The practitioner is completely free. He will drink of the forbidden alcohol and mate with women of forbidden castes and eat proscribed meat and fish. To him nothing is fundamentally repulsive or attractive. Being permeated by consciousness; indeed, being consciousness itself, he is at the source of everything and, therefore, does not distinguish between pure and impure, good and evil, righteous and unrighteous. These mental constructs have no meaning for him. Or again, he wishes to enter into the paradox of clean and unclean and arrive at its source. He does not depend on anything yet is involved in everything.

The supreme goddess, consciousness, is attained precisely by union with a woman of the lowest caste whose husband is involved with the slaughter of living beings and the production of alcohol—an adulterous woman. The goddess is not apart from such a woman but is expressed in her and is attained by means of her. Thus, the lowest of the low is in fact divine. This teaching is intended to be liberating, for it means that what others despise is, in fact, to be infinitely esteemed, for she is the expression of the goddess and grants every good. The goddess is to be found everywhere. Far from being repelled by such a woman, the goddess identifies with her. She is the mūrti of the goddess. Far from being angry with the practitioner for ‘abusing’ the woman, the goddess draws close to him and grants him all her powers, the greatest of which is her bliss.

Such a woman is, in fact, the ‘personality’ of the goddess. Consciousness does not have any aspect since it is the source of every aspect. The goddess, therefore, is not to be imagined in the usual forms of iconography, beautiful,
crowned, smiling, seated on the lotus, holding various instruments. There is no appeal to iconography in the Kula ritual for the simple reason that the śakti, even in her repulsiveness, is the image of the goddess.

The reconciliation of these contradictions—the use of the low-caste woman and the worship of the supreme goddess—means that all mental constructs must be abandoned in favour of what surpasses them all—consciousness itself.

How can one accept the demeaning of such a woman and, therefore, of all women? Is this ritual not an unendurable offence against the rights of women? Is not the practitioner profoundly abusive of such a creature, poor, despised, unprotected by a husband who has no rights just as she has no rights? Is the practitioner not using her as a vehicle for his own purposes, without regard for her own needs? How can such a practice be termed in any sense ‘spiritual’? Does it not open the door to every abuse? Is not such teaching a distant echo of the sadism of Justine (de Sade 1969)? To which the answer must surely be ‘yes’.

While ritual and morality are distinct, they do relate. Indeed, ritual is performed as the expression of insight; and, conversely, ritual introduces the practitioner into the essential revelation. One leads to the other. If morality and ritual do not imply each other, the ritual is emptied of meaning, while morality is relegated to the internal forum. Ritual, insight, the internal and the external forum all constitute a whole. The philosophical underpinning of the Kula and its practice cannot be divorced from each other. That is precisely the reason why the Kula is problematic.

At the same time also a note of caution must be added. The moral value of an act cannot fully be assessed if it is perceived simply and only in another moral context. Anachronism is an uncertain guide. For example, the tradition of slavery, which is now acknowledged to be intolerable, was accepted as normal right into the 19th century. Democracy and universal suffrage were unimaginable only a few generations ago. From another angle, Jayaratha, the faithful commentator, takes greater pains to justify the use of wine than to explain the use of women; he provides 25 quotations to explain it (Tantrāloka vol 7:3299–3304). He does not even attempt to justify the use of women. Nor was there any problem with the existence of the devadasīs of Puri, for example, who were disbanded only last century (Marglin 1985). It is more than likely that future generations will look back on our times and stand aghast at our lack of moral perception on some issues.
Part 2—Devī as mantra (*vidyā*)

Since the highest goddess is the supreme word, she is also, nondualistically, her phonic manifestation. She is her word and is found in her word. The *vidyā*, which expresses her, is also the means to invoke and claim her. For this reason, the *vidyā* is an all-powerful tool and its divulgation is surrounded by secrecy, indeed obfuscation, in order to ward off the unauthorised.

The worshipper receives his particular *vidyā* from the initiating guru who himself belongs to a tradition stretching back to the supreme goddess who is the supreme word from which all traditions and scriptures and mantras descend. The *vidyā* received in initiation introduces the disciple into his particular *kula* and, by worshipping the *vidyā*, he arrives at ultimate reality.

While there are hierarchies of *vidyā*, just as there are hierarchies of goddesses, the Kula ritual emphasises the following:

1. Mālinī is an arrangement of the 50 Sanskrit phonemes where vowels and consonants are mixed as a garland (*mālā*) and, since the vowels are understood as seed and the consonants as womb, their mingling produces the emission (*visarga*) of the universe so that Mālinī is primarily emanating and is focused on the world of objectivity.

2. Parā, whose phonic form is SAUḤ, is called ‘the seed of the heart’ (*hṛdaya-bīja*) and ‘the seed of the nectar’ (*amṛta-bīja*). It is also called ‘trīka’ because it consists of three phonemes and because it encapsulates the system called Trika that dominates the outlook of Kashmir Saivism. When Parā is recited in the direction of reabsorption, ‘S’ represents the objective world, ‘AU’ the three energies of will, knowledge and action, and ‘Ḥ’ the supreme *brahman* which emits the universe. When Parā is recited in the direction of emission, ‘S’ symbolises Śiva as the highest *brahman*, ‘AU’ retains its meaning as the three energies of will, knowledge and action, while ‘Ḥ’ represents the emission. Abhinava also interprets SAUḤ as referring to the liquids of the Kula ritual. In his commentary on verse 18 of *Parātrīṃśikā* he points out that, just as the knowledge of SAUḤ alone is sufficient to secure every supernatural power (*siddhi*), so too the mere consumption of the liquids is to attain the fullness of power (*Parātriṃśikāvivaraṇa* 1985:266 lines 4–9).

3. Mātrṣadbhāva is also called Saṅkarṣaṇī and Kālāntakī and Kālaṅkaśaṅkarṣaṇī. ‘Mātrṣadbhāva’ originally meant ‘The Essence of the Mother Goddesses’
but Abhinava interprets it to mean ‘The Essence of (All) Agents of Cognition’. Her phonic form is the one syllable KHPHREM. Thus the supreme deity, consciousness itself, is feminine. In Mātrṣadbhāva the reabsorptive aspect is more prominent, so that by reciting this vidyā the practitioner achieves the ultimate state of total absorption.

4. Mātrkā. The term mātrkā originally designated the mythological figures called the ‘Seven (or Eight) Mothers’. However, in the phonematic speculation of Kashmir Saivism it refers to the set of 50 phonemes in their normal order, from A to KṢA. Mātrkā and Mālinī are associated. In Mātrkā the subject predominates and therefore Mātrkā is absorptive and ‘fiery’, whereas in Mālinī objectivity predominates so that Mālinī is emitting and ‘cooling’.

5. Rudra-śakti, which consists of Mālinī enclosed (saṃpuṭa) by either Parā or Mātrṣadbhāva. It is a means of acquiring both liberation and enjoyment, since Mālinī is principally concerned with objectivity and enjoyment, while Parā and Mātrṣadbhāva are primarily concerned with subjectivity and liberation.

6. Śakti-bīja—ĪṂ or HRĪṂ—contains all the power of śakti. To know the vidyā is to have its power. Its communication confers jurisdiction. According to whether the practitioner wishes to achieve one or other effect, he will use one or other phonic form of the goddess. Śiva is powerless without śakti; the practitioner is all powerful if he has received the vidyā of her who is the supreme revelation.

Part 3—Devī as bodily substances

Preliminary considerations

While all objects are manifestations of the supreme goddess, women are the more perfect symbol since they give birth and thus symbolise in their very being the emanation of the universe, as we have seen. The sexual fluids, which are considered in this part, not only issue from the yoni as the symbol of emanating power, but also arise from the experience of sexual pleasure (bhoga) and so manifest the bliss of Śiva and śakti.

The following comparison is instructive since it provides the link between mantra and substance. Jayaratha quotes, ‘As a result of savouring everlasting bliss, the [sound] ‘HĀ-HĀ’ occurs in the throat [of the sexual partner]’ (Tantrāloka vol 7:3400 line 8). The cry of pleasure (sīt) and the fluids that arise from pleasure serve the same purpose. Just as the yogī, by attending
to the sound that results from the experience of bliss, is himself drawn into that bliss, so too, by coming into contact with the sexual fluids, the yogī is taken into the pure consciousness that produced them.

One may ask, given that as the phonic expression of the goddess the vidyā contains all the powers of that deity, what need is there to consume the substances? Is this not especially the case if the Trika, the single vidyā SAUḤ, which is more exalted than the Kula ritual, makes ritual unnecessary? True, but some find the Trika too exalted and must use methods more suited to the level of grace (anugraha) given to them.

The three Ms

The Kula ritual uses not the five Ms (pañca-makāra) of other tantric rituals—mudrā (parched grain); māṃsa (meat); madya (wine); maithuna (intercourse)—but the three Ms (tri-ma) of meat, wine and intercourse.

Abhinavagupta makes the point that the three Ms are for ritual use only; one must not fail to use them during the ritual nor abuse them outside the ritual, for to do so is to be a ‘bonded animal’ (paśu). Jayaratha gives a telling quotation:

Without a guru, without a deity, like dullards, O Parameśvarī, forever consuming wine and meat, they are ‘bonded animals’. There is no doubt about it (Tantrāloka vol 7:3357 lines 3–4).

In other words, the use of these substances is not for the purpose of acquiring a state of consciousness that does not exist but to express externally what is already present internally. Jayaratha makes this clear:

Therefore the [set of three Ms] is to be utilised by the person who has entered upon the Kula path for the reason that he is in every way committed simply to manifesting his own bliss. [The set of three Ms] is not [to be utilised] out of greed. If that were the case, how would [the use of the three Ms] differ from worldly usages? (Tantrāloka vol 7:3357 lines 7–10)

Meat gets scant mention in the ritual. Wine (madya) is preferred over the ‘manufactured’ (kṛtrima) alcohols (ālī, āśava), such as grain-alcohol, mead and rum, since it develops naturally from the grape itself, just as the sexual fluids arise naturally from the body. The significance of alcohol in the Kula ritual lies in its ‘divinising’ effect, but equally in its sinfulness, for even a small amount, even a whiff, is gravely wrong. Indeed the Laws of Manu enjoin extremely severe penances for any contact with it (Manusmī 11.91–98, 147–151).
In the first instance, the term *maithuna* refers to the act of sexual intercourse, but is extended to include the substances that are produced during intercourse, the male (*retas*) and female (*rajas*) sexual fluids. These can be used either in their liquid form or, more practically, as a powder or granule.

A whole series of words is used to describe the substance. Abhinava identifies *amṛta* with *kunda-golaka*. The term *vāma* can mean ‘on the left-hand side’ (where the consort sits), or ‘improper’ (as in ‘sinister’), or ‘beautiful woman’, or ‘emitting’. The ‘nectar-of-the-left’ (*vāma-amṛta*) has all these meanings: it is the ‘unclean’ female sexual fluid. Menstrual blood (*rakta, puṣpa*) can also be used in ritual. The word *aruṇa* (menstrual blood) also refers to the female procreative sexual power. Since in the human life cycle intercourse is the first (*ādi*) act (*saṃskāra*), the ritual which produces the fluids is called *ādi-yāga*, the ‘primordial sacrifice’.

The three Ms are also called ‘oblation’ (*caru*) which ordinarily refers to boiled rice etc, but in the Kula ritual consists of the ‘five jewels’ (*pañca-ratna*) which are not the traditional five jewels of gold, silver, coral, diamond, pearl (Monier-Williams 1983:864.3) but ‘male urine, semen, menstrual blood, phlegm, faeces’ (*Tantrāloka* vol 7:3420 line 7). It is taken as the human equivalent of the *pañcagavya*, the five products of the cow, namely milk, curd, ghee, urine, and dung. If goddesses take the form of cows (*Tantrāloka* 29.16a) such that the *pañcagavya* are sacred, are not the bodily products of the deified human also sacred?

But what is the point of using such a horrific concoction? The answer is given quite simply: Śiva transcends pure and impure, licit and illicit, pleasure and horror. He is not governed by such divisive concepts for he contains all in himself and, through his śakti, gives rise to all. Indeed, what some consider to be impure, such as wine or bodily fluids, are most pure ‘because of [their] proximity to consciousness’ (*Tantrāloka* 29.128a and cf. *Tantrāloka* 15.164cd–167ab). By producing them and even consuming them, the practitioner shows that he has the mind of Śiva, indeed is Śiva.

Again, the three Ms stand in relationship to each other: the meat and the wine are to intercourse as means to result. By consuming wine and meat, the practitioner experiences an exhilaration which leads to intercourse and its fluids. The Devī is expressed in these substances just as she is found in the woman of lowest caste.
Furthermore, by taking what has arisen from consciousness, the practitioner is taken back into consciousness. The vessel contains every value, from the most sublime source to the most material object and, to unenlightened eyes, the most repulsive. The rituals of the cremation ground, all the paraphernalia of skulls and ash, trident and corpses, are replaced by the natural symbols of meat and wine, intercourse and, above all, the fluids that arise from intercourse. They relate to art and theatre about which Abhinava has much to say in his Dhvanyālocana where he investigates the nature of resonance (dhvani), that is the power of suggestion in poetry. The three Ms, like theatre and poetry, can transport the practitioner to the highest state. Because they are natural, they are at once simpler and more powerful: they derive from and impinge on the very person of the practitioner. They have an immediacy and power which mere words and explanations do not have.

The ‘oblation’ is of particular significance in this process. Abhinava proposes four means (upāya), the most exalted of which is really a non-means (an-upāya) because in fact there is no path to follow; the goal is reached suddenly and totally, due to an intense descent of energy (śakti-pāta), an immense outpouring of grace (anugraha). There is no need for repeated practice or deeper understanding.

The revelation [of this Light] is given once and for all, after which there is no means (Tantrāloka 2.2b).

The reality of Consciousness shines forth by its own radiance. What is the value, therefore, of those [means to make it known]? (Tantrāloka 2.10a)

According to Jayaratha, the term ‘non-means’ (an-upāya) can also be understood as a ‘very reduced means’ (alpa-upāya) (Tantrāloka vol 2:312 line 13), or a ‘subsidiary means’ (parikaratvam) (Tantrāloka vol 7:3420 line 12). He lists a certain number of them.

The sight of the perfected beings and yoginīs, the eating of the ‘oblation’ (caru-bhajana), a teaching, a transition (?) (samkramaḥ), spiritual practice, service of the Teacher (Tantrāloka vol 2:312 lines 13–4).

This approach is not ‘aesthetic’ if this word is taken to mean ‘superficial’. It is ‘aesthetic’ if this term refers to the heightening of sensation and experience such that the ultimate reality is perceived and recognised. For the purpose and point of the Kula ritual is not to placate the yoginīs or to obtain their powers and the pleasure of intercourse with them but to attain the state of ultimate consciousness and the condition of Śiva and śakti united in supreme, eternal bliss (ānanda).
SECTION B: PRAXIS

Part 4—the ritual

It is one thing to contemplate the horrific ideas in theory and quite another to see them actually practised. Indeed, it is the actual practice which has provoked such scandal.

Chapter 29 of the *Tantrāloka* is carefully structured. The Introduction (*Tantrāloka* 29.1–17) and Concluding Rites (*Tantrāloka* 282–92a) enclose the two main sections: the Rituals for the Initiate (*Tantrāloka* 29.18–186a) and the Rituals of Initiation (*Tantrāloka* 29.186b–281) which interrelate to make the point that only the initiated can perform the rituals. In other words, the Kula is not just a point of view but a tradition; it cannot be learned from a book but must be communicated by gifted guru to worthy disciple. Indeed the ritual is the outward expression of what has already occurred within the disciple. The ritual and its elements are therefore understood only from within the tradition. Those who remain outside because the divine grace has not illumined them will be at best curious and at worst repelled. This indeed is the very purpose of the use of certain substances—to distinguish between those who, by Devī’s grace, stand within and those who are excluded from her *kula*.

This being said, Abhinava is not slavish in his presentation. He reinterprets the Kula ritual, which he respects, on the basis of his philosophy of the Trika, as he had done with other traditions. He wishes to show how the Trika can accommodate and surpass every other system. He does not reject or devalue but incorporates.

In the Introduction Abhinava lists the six ‘sacrifices’ or ‘supports’ which provide a solid framework for the many rituals he describes. Only two will be described: the first, the daily ritual and the third, the ritual with the external *śakti*.

The daily (*nitya*) ritual is given in shorter (*Tantrāloka* 29.18–23) and longer (*Tantrāloka* 29.24–55) forms. The shorter form gives the essence and basic pattern of all the subsequent rituals and consists of a few simple steps:

1. The practitioner enters the ‘hall of sacrifice’ and regenerates himself by placing (*nyāsa*) either Parā or Mālinī or Mātṛsadbhāva, the feminine mantras, on his body. By investing himself with the goddess by one of her mantras, he becomes Bhairava.

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2. Now that he is divinised, he fills the vessel with the substances.

3. He then performs an aspersion with the substances and consumes them. Just as the mantras, Parā etc, transform the practitioner who places them on himself, so too the contents of the vessel transform him when he uses them. Because he is the god he is invested with the goddess and acquires all her powers. By sprinkling the area around himself with the contents of the vessel and by drinking them the practitioner consecrates himself and all creation. The outer and the inner are one.

The same basic pattern is repeated in Sacrifice 2, performed with the ‘internal śakti’, where the practitioner imaginatively places on his body the various sacred sites (pīṭha) so that he becomes the abode of the goddesses. It is his divinisation. He then enters the heart of consciousness and performs the oblation into the fire. But it is in Sacrifice 3, Abhinava’s preferred Kula ritual, performed with an ‘external śakti’, i.e. with a real woman, that the worship of the Devī and the use of the substances are most pronounced.

It is performed in terms of the Circle Sacrifices described in Tantrāloka 28.60b–111. These involve the guru seated in the middle with the disciples arranged around him. In a ritual expression of the emanation and re-absorption of the universe, the substances are handed out from the guru, as from Śiva himself, and passed from row to row as far as the outermost circle and then back again. By re-enacting the vibration (spanda) of the universe in this way, the participants become the cosmos and acquire its powers.

The Circle Sacrifice can be done in five ways: i) with the guru and his disciples only; ii) with these and their wives; iii) with these and choice courtesans; iv) with these and the wives of outcastes; v) with all these types mixed in together. Sacrifice 3 is a case of the fourth Circle Sacrifice so that the practitioner’s wife does not take part but the outcaste women do.

Having outlined these basic principles Abhinava goes on to describe a series of rituals organised according to the various triads of the Trika. Thus, Sacrifice 3 is structured in three parts or three ‘emissions’ (visarga)—‘emanation’ (sṛṣṭi), ‘re-absorption’ (samhāra) and ‘union’ (samghaṭṭa, melaka), some of which are further divided into threes. Moreover, these texts can be read on three levels: gross (sthūla); subtle (sūkṣma); or supreme (para). This chapter cannot describe the many rituals but will focus only on part of the first ‘emission’ which focuses on emanation (sṛṣṭi), and involves three stages: action (kalpa); thought (vikalpa); and beyond thought (nirvikalpa).
Abhinava gives the basic principle for the activity (kalpa):

And the sacrifice, viewed externally, is called ‘satiation’ (tarpaṇa); and as a result there is an expansion (vikāsa) (Tantrāloka 29.107b).

This is possible because of the interconnection between the many cakras and sub-cakras (anucakra); for the whole person is a network, a maṇḍala (wheels within wheels), of interconnected faculties which are arranged in such a way that the satiation of one cakra leads to the opening of another, as a lotus opens under the warming rays of the sun, until the principal cakra (mukhya-cakra) begins to function, namely the sexual organ which is called ‘principal’ precisely because it affords the greatest bliss (Tantrāloka 105b–106a) and because it is essentially related to supreme consciousness.

A whole morality is contained here, for the religious act is no longer a set of external rites whose observance will lead to blessing. Any act which leads to the attainment of Sivahood is religious. But, on the other hand, if a particular satisfaction does not lead to the expansion of consciousness, it is useless and its repeated application is proof of folly. Thus the emphasis is not on the act but on the experience.

Indeed, the emphasis is on the immediate, unreflective (nirvikalpa) experience of union with the śakti and the fluid she produces. Her very anatomy provides her with the ‘fully opening and closing central path’ (Tantrāloka 122a), her yoni, which makes her best able to lead the practitioner to consciousness. This central path (madhya-pāda) is also called: the yoginī-‘mouth’ (mukha, vaktra, vadana) or ‘śakti-cakra’; the ‘Picu-mouth’ (picu-vaktra), meaning the ‘lower mouth’ as distinct from the five other faces of Śiva which point north, south, east, west and upwards; the central-sacred place (madhya-dhāma); or womb (janma, janma-ādārā, -sthāna). The male sexual organ (linga, nala) is also called ‘mouth’. Both male and female sexual organs are called the ‘primary identifying mark’ (ādy-ādārā).

All three—consciousness, the ‘mouth of the yoginī’ and the sexual fluid it emits—correlate with each other. Consciousness is the ultimate reality (tattva) and from the female sexual partner the fluid (tattva)15 is emitted. This emitting is the ‘saying’ by the ‘mouth’ of the yoginī. Just as supreme consciousness cannot be described, so too the flow must be experienced and cannot be ‘put into writing’. Just as the mouth of the guru utters the mantra that leads to consciousness, so too the ‘mouth’ of the yoginī communicates the unique experience of consciousness, immediately. This sexual fluid results from consciousness and leads to consciousness. Just as the guru considers the initiate to be his son, so too the yoginī by her ‘mouth’ begets him into the family (kula) of the ‘Mothers’ and into the Kula tradition.16 Just
as consciousness is the pre-eminent circle because it produces the highest bliss, so too the ‘mouth’ of the yoginī is the principal circle because it gives the highest pleasure. When the practitioner joins his ‘mouth’ to the ‘mouth’ of the yoginī, when the sexual organs are joined, he comes to consciousness, he is tattva-jña,\textsuperscript{17} ‘one who knows reality’. Even to taste the fluid is to engage in ‘mouth to mouth’ and, therefore, to arrive at the union of Śiva and śakti. The practitioner is the ‘hero’ (vīra) who eats the ‘food of heroes’ (vīra-bhojya). Although Abhinava makes full use of the substances, he has shifted the emphasis from activity to awareness. In this way, perception and sensitivity predominate over the ‘magical’ powers of the substance or a crude ‘rubricism’.

There are two outcomes: the male practitioner becomes supreme Bhairava so that he is universally present (vyāpti); if the yoginī conceives, her child will, since he is conceived while his parents are in that state, be ‘of himself a repository of knowledge, a Rudra’ (Tantrāloka 29.162a), and even in the womb he will be a yoginī-child (yoginī-bhū).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has tried to show that the extreme tantric practice called the Kula ritual, for all its weaknesses and limitations, especially in the eyes of the modern reader, cannot be simply dismissed as a perverse aberration. Abhinavagupta demythologises the fearsome yoginīs and replaces them with the sexual partner who nevertheless destroys the limited sense of the self. She eliminates the dualism of pure and impure, licit and illicit. The householder is the ascetic; the ordinary is extraordinary. Liberation and enjoyment coincide; the outer and the inner are one. All is valuable; all is a manifestation of the goddess and a means to attain the full expansion of consciousness. Even the repulsive is divinely revealing. What others consider unacceptable is, to the enlightened mind, the very means of spiritual advance. Far from being designed for persons of low character or undeveloped spiritual sensibility, the Kula ritual is designed for ‘the most advanced gurus and disciples’ (Tantrāloka 29.2a). The practitioner becomes Bhairava such that his every word is mantra and his every action is sacrifice. He achieves the goal of being ‘liberated while living’ (jīvan-mukta).
Notes

1. The history of the tantras and of the role of the goddess in this history is complex and uncertain. Chapter 2 of this volume, by Di Castro gives interesting insights into the way this history might be traced.

2. Greg Bailey's chapter on Ganeśa's mother, Parvatī, shows how the Ganeśapurāṇa ranges from presenting Parvatī as goddess to presenting Parvatī as simple mother, with neither emphasis excluding the other. Similarly, the various levels at which the Devī operates in the Kula ritual must be seen in relation to each other.

3. There is a certain ambiguity, nevertheless, as to whether the term 'consciousness' (saṃvit, cit, etc) applies primarily to Śiva or to Śakti, the goddess. Cf. the phrase: ‘The nature of consciousness, ie of the goddess’. (Tantrāloka 29.118a) ‘Supreme consciousness is called ‘the goddess’ (Parātriṃśikāvivaraṇa 1985:198 line 1).

4. Thus Devī in Kashmir Shaivism as in the Kula ritual differs markedly from the presentations of her given in other articles of this volume.

5. David Templeman’s study on the dākinī, in Chapter 7, helps fills out the idea of the yoginī who is in some way related and similar.

6. In the case of female deities the mantra is referred to as vidyā.

7. In Chapter 8, Effy George gives a present-day example of how the Goddess is still worshipped as ‘the supreme deity, the beginning and the end of the cosmos’.

8. The word amṛta occasionally also means ‘wine’.

9. He defines it as that which ‘…comes from the union of the heroes and their counterpart,[their sexual partner]. (Tantrāloka 15.166cd). Jayaratha confirms the point: ‘…the nectar is the so-called sexual fluid (kunda-golaka) which arises during the perfect fusion of the [hero and the yoginī]’ (Tantrāloka vol 6:2524 lines 14–5).

10. By metonymy they are also called ‘vessel' (argha-pātra) and perhaps even ‘lamp’ (dīpa).

11. Jayaratha expands ‘the five jewels' to 12: ‘Male semen, male urine, and menstrual blood, faeces and phlegm; human flesh, beef, goat's flesh, fish, fowl; onion and indeed garlic: these are the beautiful set of twelve ingredients.’ (Tantrāloka vol 7:3306 lines 4–6).

12. Perhaps the figure of the Lajjāgaurī, presented by JB Bapat in Chapter 5 of this volume, gives some idea of how the Kula ritual may in fact have been practised in the home, especially in the daily ritual

13. In this ritual the appellation ‘Bhairava’ is often preferred to ‘Śiva’.

14. It is not entirely clear whether Sacrifice 3 takes place in a group or in private.

15. The whole of reality consists of 36 categories (tattva). However, the knowledge of Śiva, the 'category' par excellence, produces bliss and a sexual flow, which thus signifies all the categories and grants access to them and to their powers. The sexual fluid is, therefore, also called tattva, 'substance'.

16. The Kula tradition was first taught by Ardhatryambakā, the daughter of Tryambaka who is considered to be one of the perfected beings (siddha) and
the founder of the non-dualist Śaiva tradition. She had a twin brother, hence her name ‘Half of Tryambaka’ (Ardhatryambakā).

17 The word *tattva-jña*, with its synonym *tattva-vid*, also refers to the person who has taken the ‘oblation’ (*caru*) and who has been absorbed into the highest category, consciousness itself.’