

‘Field work on the Kula ritual in Orissa’

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Introduction:

During the Golden Age of Kashmir one thousand years ago, Vasugupta (c.875-925 CE) ‘discovered’ the *Śivasūtra* which established a non-dualist school of thought which is now called ‘Kashmir Shaivism’. In his massive *Tantrāloka* (‘Light on the Tantras’) Abhinavagupta (c. 975-1025 CE), the leading writer of that school, reviews all the tantras of his day and reinterprets them in the light of his tradition which is properly called ‘Trika’ meaning three since all reality is understood as a series of triads which are in fact non-dual. In chapter 29 of the *Tantrāloka* he describes the most extreme of the tantras, the Kula ritual, which André Padoux, one of the major authorities of Kashmir Shaivism, describes as ‘an important element, in many respects the essential element, of tantrism’. The Kula tradition was the object of my doctoral research.

The Kula ritual of chapter 29 and its commentary by Jayaratha refer to many sacred sites, twelve of which are located two thousand kilometres away in the cultural band that sweeps across the modern states of Orissa, Jharkhand, Bengal and Assam. The question arises, therefore, does some special connection exist between the Kula ritual and this area of India? In his edition of the *Kaulajñāna-nirnaya*, Bagchi concludes that Matsyendra founded a new sect of the Kaula School whose chief seat was Kāmarūpa in modern day Assam. This is in keeping with Jayaratha’s commentary on *Tantrāloka* 1.7 that Macchanda, aka Matsyendra, founded the school in Kāmarūpa. Padoux states that Bengal is the region of India where tantra is most frequently found in our day.

The question then arises: to what extent is the Kula tradition still practiced in that part of India? It was to answer this question that I have done some field work over the last five years, during my annual vacation in Orissa.

Saumya, a Brahmin, was invaluable in this research as he speaks Hindi, Bengali and English as well as his native Oriya. According to family legend an ancestor, Krutibash, a Brahmin from Birapurusottampur area, 18 kilometres from Puri, had been invited by a king of the Gaṅga Dynasty to officiate at a temple dedicated to Krishna in one of the four villages constructed on the four sides of a great pool, Kaushalya Lake, 300 acres in size, which the king, Chodaganga, in the 12th century CE, had built in memory of his conquest of Orissa. The four villages refer to the four Vedas, Saumya’s village, Uttara, on the northern (*uttara*) side, being dedicated to the *Samāveda*. In remuneration for this service, Krutibash was endowed with considerable parcels of land some of which are located on the battleground where Asoka, the first emperor of India, after an horrific victory over the king of Kalinga, had converted to Buddhism.

It was on a couple of acres of this land that in 2004, Saumya and I started to build a small ashram. He provided the land and I provided the buildings: a house each for Saumya

and me and a small shrine to the goddess Kālī.

To the west of the ashram, half an hour's walk across the rice fields, are the Aśokan rock inscriptions and the hill of Dhauli where the Japanese Buddhists have built a pagoda in memory of Asoka's conversion. One hour's walk to the east is an exquisite circular hypaethral tantric temple built in the 9th century dedicated to the sixty-four *yoginis*. Fifty kilometres to the south, at Puri, is the temple of Lord Jagannath, the greatest of the four sacred sites in India. Ten kilometres to the north is Liṅgarāja, the temple of Śiva, which is also called Ekāmra.

I The Kula tradition

The tantric Kula system is vast. This paper will confine itself to the following major themes and show that the Kula in these essential aspects can be found in modern Orissa.

1. 1. The Kula is a non-dual system whose aim is to attain that state of consciousness of which the deities are but the expression.
2. 2. Whereas the unenlightened mind distinguishes between good and evil, pleasure and pain, pure and impure, heaven and earth, the non-dual mind sees that all these things coincide.
3. 3. By reconciling the opposites, the practitioner rises above all limited things and discovers liberation even while still living (*jīvanmukta*).
4. 4. Initiation is fundamentally important, since the ritual is the expression of the bliss that is given through initiation.
5. 5. The Kula tradition makes use of the 3 M's: meat (*māṃsa*), wine (*madya*) and intercourse (*maithuna*). The last, *maithuna*, is the most important, and can be done either by using the ritual sexual partner (*dūtī*) or by using the fluids that come from intercourse. Substitutes can also be used.
6. 6. The whole world becomes an expression of the practitioner; all springs from him and all returns. Ultimately the practitioner can say the celebrated phrase: "The whole world is his śaktis".

II Stories

Point number 1:

1. The Kula is a non-dual system whose aim is to attain that state of consciousness of which the deities are but the expression.

Bhagavan is an artist attached to the Jagannāth Temple who specialises in the production of *maṇḍalas*. As we sat on the wide beach at Puri, he stated that the goddess Kālī is 'Lord of the World' (*jagannāth*), seated at the centre of the *maṇḍala* and surrounded by other tantric deities such as Ugratārā. Kālī is manifested in every aspect, good and bad, life and death, beautiful and horrific.

All these deities, including Kālī, in whatever way they may be understood and described, are in fact just projections of the Self (*ātmā*). Similarly, every human being is

essentially a manifestation of the Self, not of the individual self but of the universal Self. According to Bhagavan, even the sand of the beach on which we sat is really the Self.

These points were developed by Fakir Mishra, Bhagavan's guru, and Saumya's maternal grandfather, who lived in Puri for some 85 years and has served at the Lord Jagannāth Temple.

He stated that there are five principal deities: Ganesh, Vishnu, Śiva, Ambikā (Kālī), and Surya. One of these five, whichever one is chosen, is seen as the central deity and the other four are attendants. The central deity, is worshipped with the appropriate mantra. Since deity and mantra are identified, it is by reciting the mantra that the practitioner achieves union with the deity and acquires all its powers.

Fakir Mishra explained this more fully in the following way. The practitioner focuses on the chosen deity and sees it as the embodiment of the *kuṇḍalinī śakti* dormant at the base of the spine. If an inappropriate deity is chosen – inappropriate for the practitioner – there will be no rising of the *kuṇḍalinī*. The *kuṇḍalinī* rises and makes its way through the various chakras to the crown of the head and unites with Śiva leading to a sense of universal consciousness, an identification with all that is.

If Kālī is one's chosen deity, she can be worshipped as mother (*mā*), consort (*dūtī*) or child (*kumarā*). It is up to the individual to choose. In all three cases the ritual and the mantra are the same. What counts is the emotion which is brought to it. If the practitioner wishes to worship Kālī as consort he must not understand this worship in sexual terms.

Points number 2 and 3:

2. Whereas the unenlightened mind distinguishes between good and evil, pleasure and pain, pure and impure, heaven and earth, the non-dual mind sees that all these things coincide.
3. By reconciling the opposites, the practitioner rises above all limited things and discovers liberation even while still living (*jīvanmukta*).

Kiran, an *aghorī*, has been living at a cremation ground in Puri for about 8 years. He smokes a lot, including 'grass', and drinks alcohol. He officiates at a small temple dedicated to Mahākāla, a form of Śiva. In an annex beside the temple he constantly tends a fire which is fed with wood taken from the cremation pyres, and which he venerates as a mother since fire is the origin and end of all things.

The term '*aghorī*' means 'not fearful'. To the question is he frightened of anything he said "no"? He said that as an *aghorī* he wished to achieve that mind where stool and food are equally acceptable and equally indifferent to him. To the question 'did he in fact use these things', his answer was evasive. He emphasised that what counts is the attitude of mind, not the actual eating. To the question, were people afraid of him, he said simply that they had no reason to be. To a question about his purpose for living in the cremation ground, he replied that it was the true place of rest. He has been in a cremation ground in a past existence; he is here now and he will come again to the cremation ground in a future incarnation. It is his real home. Why should he not be happy?

Indeed, he seemed very happy. He looked calm and aware. There was a luminosity about him and a smile in his face and eyes.

Madhava is interesting for the simple reason that while he claims to be an *aghorī* he

seems to be quite the opposite. Why should he live alone with a few servants in a large house at the base of Dhauli? How can he afford them? Is it through securing certain questionable results by the clairvoyance and clairaudience which he claims to have acquired through his practices? Is he just a charlatan?

Madhava does not believe in any deities or gods. For him, most human beings are just animals. He focuses on the mind, the one single mind which is the goal of all differentiated individual minds. Since the mind can do all, the aim is to acquire the mind.

To the question, 'Is he happy?' he replied that he is neither happy (*sukha*) nor sad (*duhkha*). When pressed further he said that happiness and sadness are passing things and so he wishes to have neither. On being pressed further again he admitted that he had bliss and was at peace; he had stability.

He looks forward to the time when the Kālī Yuga will come to an end and the world will be purified in a dramatic and violent way at the hand of the tenth incarnation of Viṣṇu. This violent end, however, must be understood as simply a state of mind, not as something external.

Point number 4:

4. Initiation is fundamentally important, since the ritual is the expression of the bliss that is given through initiation.

Saumya's principal colleague is Kahnu who traces his spiritual lineage back to Ramakrishna. Each year, on 24th of January, he celebrates the anniversary of that occasion when Kālī, the essence of all the deities, materialised herself to Kanhu's father in the form of a child.

This materialisation was of major importance. In fact, during all this field work, whereas I questioned people on theological systems of thought, they asked me what emotions, what visions I had had. This was disconcerting. It is one thing to talk about ideas, quite another to speak about experiences. Time and again they would speak of the long periods of mortification they had undertaken which led to manifestations and miracles. Take the case of Banamali whose father was a devotee of Śiva's consort, Parvatī. Banamali's mother was childless even after many years of marriage. One day, when Banamali's father had reached the age of 52, a hibiscus, symbol of male genitalia, materialised out of the air. He gave it to his wife who ate it and conceived and gave birth to Banamali. At the age of 17 Banamali himself had a vision of the same Parvatī who told him to help those who came to him, and that he should just ask her what he should do. He runs a small *ayurvedic* clinic.

The question arises: how much of all this is real? The experiences recounted during this field work: are they just figments of the imagination? On the other hand, if it does not matter which god or goddess is worshipped as long as the state of universal consciousness is achieved, does it matter if the boundaries of real and imaginary are uncertain? Is their religion a form of art? Charles Taylor, in his book, *Secular Age*, remarks:

“A love song evokes our being moved profoundly by some love story with the new absolute music, we have the response in some way captured, made real, ... but the object isn't there. The music moves us very strongly,; But what at? What is the object? Is there an object?”

The attitude of the group under consideration seems surprisingly modern. What seems to count for them is the effect of the worship, not the object of worship. Is the West simply catching up with them?

A group has gathered around Kanhu: an outer group of many devotees, an inner cohort of about 24 disciples which meets 6 times per year to perform ceremonies and to discuss various matters. Within this cohort there is an inner circle of 4 consisting of Kanhu, my friend Saumya, Kasi, who is the official priest of the group, and Ananta.

At the end of 2009, Saumya decided that the time had come for me to be initiated into this group. It was the culmination of a period of probation that had lasted about 6 years. Indeed, after our first meeting, Kanhu had asked the goddess Kālī about me. She replied to him in a dream saying “He is one of us, he belongs”. Ananta, whose father had initiated Kanhu, said “he should have come [to this ashram] a long time ago”; “he has reached a level of consciousness where Kālī is everywhere present to him”. Bishwambar, a professor of Veda and Rituals in Veda and Karmakand College in Puri and a priest of Jagannāth Temple said that I should have been born in India since I am really a Hindu and a *śākta*. There must have been some *karmik* influence from a past life to explain why I was born in Australia. What am I to make of all this?

Therefore on New Year’s Eve, at the full moon, I was initiated into the spiritual clan (*gotra*). Kanhu’s mother, Bidyut, took on the role of officiating Guru on behalf of all Gurus of this clan and was worshiped as both Guru and Kālī. Indeed from time to time she is possessed by Kālī and gives utterances. The initiation was performed by Kasi who asked what fruit I wished to gain from the initiation. I replied that I wished to be brought into union with Kālī and so come to full realisation. He accepted this and proceeded to perform the ceremony.

It was near Kanhu’s village that Graham Staines and his two sons were burnt to death in a car because he had tried to detach his Christian converts from their Hindu customs. By contrast, this Catholic priest was being initiated into the Hindu tradition without departing from his Christian heritage.

Saumya informed me later that the predecessor gurus of the *gotra* were invisibly present during the ritual: Ananta Maharaj, Sri Hari Maharaj, Narahari Maharaj and Anandamayee Maa together with their consorts. Other members of the *gotra* were also invisibly present with their consorts.

During the course of the night there was an eclipse of the moon. Curiously, two weeks later, during the great festival of *mahāsankrānti*, there was an annular eclipse of the sun. Thus in the space of two weeks, there was a full moon and an eclipse of the moon, a full sun and an eclipse of the sun.

Points number 5 and 6:

5. The Kula tradition makes use of the 3 M’s: meat (*māṃsa*), wine (*madya*) and intercourse (*maithuna*). The last, *maithuna*, is the most important, and can be done either by using the ritual sexual partner (*dūtī*) or by using the fluids that come from intercourse. Substitutes can also be used.
6. As a result, the whole world becomes an expression of the practitioner; all springs from him and all returns. In the end he can take on the celebrated phrase: “The whole world is his śaktis”.

At the age of fourteen, at the age when boys were given in marriage, Chandan refused.

Intoxicated with God, he went in search of a guru and was eventually welcomed by a tantric practitioner, a 'bhairava', and his consort, a 'bhairavī', who lived in one of the cremation grounds of Calcutta.

After teaching Chandan many things, the *bhairava* told him to withdraw to a secluded place, near the temple of Kapilas in Orissa, to perform austerities there and obtain the appropriate result. This he did. Then at the direction of the goddess he searched further and finally came to the house of Kanhu's father, Shrihara Das, who told him that he need travel no more since he could find there all that he needed. Chandan stayed there for 12 years, serving his new master who then directed him to live the life of a *sannyasin* in a village of milkmen where he has lived now for some 40 years.

Chandan spends his day in contemplation of his guru and of Kālī. He speaks with intelligence and verve, accompanying his words with dramatic gestures which are natural and unaffected, interspersing his comments by singing quotations from the sacred texts. He has no ritual practice or any other formal sort of practice.

Chandan agreed that in rare cases the goddess may initiate directly without the means of a guru, as Abhinavagupta teaches, but even then a disciple must seek instruction because of the danger of ignorance. The word 'guru' must, however, be understood in a wide sense. For example, he received his first initiation at the hands of Harānandagoswami, his first guru, but as progress is made, Chandan said, the sky-gurus will lead the practitioner further into the ethereal realms, and eventually it is Kālī who leads to the ultimate stage, she who is in fact present at the beginning.

Indeed it is Kālī who gives the grace of the guru who in turn raises the *kuṇḍalinī* that leads his disciple to experience the state of divinity (*divyabhāva*). This allows the disciple to practice the left-hand ritual (*vāma-pūjā*) with a woman in a wholesome (*sahaja*) way. Kālī then manifests herself to the disciples as his guru. Chandan then went on to note that Kālī is ultimately a projection of the mind so that in the end there is no need for ritual, for all is within.

He also gave a warning: the word 'Kālī' means 'black'; if the practitioner does not have the right attitude, Kālī will destroy him.

Chandan, the old man who had led a life of detachment (*sannyāsī*), elaborated his points. He said there are three levels of union. The *paśu* – literally the 'bonded animal' – the person who lacks interior freedom, is concerned with objectivity, with things and acts, and has no control over his emotions. He is focussed on the emission which is short and soon forgotten. By contrast the *vīrā*, - the so-called 'heroic person' – is focussed on the interior senses. He has control over his emotions and he can withhold the emission and remain in the state of bliss (*ānanda*) for long periods of time. The M's – meat, wine and intercourse – belong to the *vīrābhava* stage and are used ritually. The *vīrā* has moved on from the *paśubhava* stage but is still involved with ego. He needs to take the third step into *divyabhava*, the 'divine state'.

Eventually, while in the course of utilising the 3 M's, the *vīrā* begins to realise his true self. He understands that he is not the limited self but is really Śiva. This realisation constitutes the crucial moment of transition to *divyabhava* where the sense of ego disappears and the bliss becomes completely interiorised. The practitioner realises that it is not he who is meditating or doing the actions: it is the deity who is active. Or to put it in other words, since the guru and the deity are transparent of each other, it is the guru who is meditating in him. To see the guru is to see the deity. To see the deity is to see the guru.

A whole new consciousness has begun to operate. The practitioner is no longer the agent, occupied in doing things; he becomes the witness, involved in everything but not tied to anything. He begins to live in the 'astral world', which is not visible. Pleasure is found within, intense and delicate, permanent and independent of any stimulus. There is nothing but bliss, not a sensation of bliss which might imply a distinction between the experience and the experiencer. There is simply bliss without distinction. The practitioner can continue in this state either with or without a woman. This state overflows into a general outpouring of happiness.

Chandan summarised this teaching by saying that the ordinary human being (*jīva*) must become Śiva and then Śiva must become a corpse (*śava*), only then does Kālī dance: *jīva-śiva-śava-kālī*.

Saumya added that, given the difficulty of obtaining a suitable sexual partner, other techniques have been developed such as the male and female breaths and so on. Siddhānanda, as we shall see now, uses substitutes and a diagram on the ground to achieve the same result.

Siddhānanda is an interesting example of a *vīrā*. At the age of about 20 he left home to wander in search of a guru. In Allahabad, after three years of wandering, he had a vision which showed him in some detail where he would find his guru. After two more years he found him in Assam, near Kāmākhyā. He stayed with his guru for five years, serving him, and was then initiated by him.

His guru then designated a Brahmin lady to be his ritual sexual partner (*dūtī*). He goes to see her in Kāmākhyā about four times in the year for one or two months.

In his ritual practice, Siddhānanda consecrates his *dūtī*'s body with a mantra, in imitation of the standard ritual that transforms an idol into the deity. He then enters her and stays there for a long time without ejaculating. He can do this because he has mastered the technique of projecting the sexual force upwards to the crown of the head. This produces the sense of being Śiva.

Even while away from his *dūtī* he maintains his sense of being Śiva by means of breath control and recitation of the mantra. That is, he makes the breathe move up and down the *suṣumna* in a thrusting movement. Or again, he will use a substitute *yantra* on the ground and substitute materials.

He also spoke of the 'hero's ritual' (*vīrācāra*) where, seated on a corpse in the cremation ground he meditates with regard to the individual on whose corpse he is sitting.

He admitted he has not reached this stage of the 'divine ritual' (*divyācāra*) which, in his words, he described as a state of 'general indifference'

So far the practices that have been described are either solitary or with a *dūtī*. There is also a ritual performed in a group and which is called the 'circle sacrifice' (*cakrapūjā*).

The basic patterns of the Vaishnava *cakrapūjā* and the Shaiva *cakrapūjā* are the same but the approach is different: the Vaishnava is mild on ritual and strong on emotion; the Shaiva is strong on ritual.

Saumya has witnessed the following Shaiva 'circle sacrifice'.

It is performed by small groups several times during the year, not during the great feasts but in connection with certain days of the lunar month, such as the new moon. The participants are always the same group of people, both young and middle aged. There are no distinctions between the members of the group.

It takes place late in the evening, in a circular building under a thatched roof and surrounded by trees. A *cakra* is drawn on the ground and a wine pot is placed there. The statue of the goddess is located on an altar adorned with flowers. There is also a fire pit in which wood and sandal paste are burnt.

The group gathers and gives presents to the Kaula guru. He may have his consort with him but they do not have intercourse.

From among the group the Kaula leader selects a man who is to be the *bhairava* and a woman who is to be the *bhairavī*. They are led to the altar and worshipped in their new capacity. The guru then offers them wine which has been sanctified with mantras. He also drinks some wine himself and invites all the participants to start drinking and to become gradually intoxicated. He also offers them meat and fish. The Kaula guru will use his own mantras and variations of the ritual.

The guru then pours wine into the mouths of the *bhairava* and *bhairavī* which flows out from their mouths as *vāma* and *prasad*. The participants drink that wine. The leader then invites the participants to start singing *bhajans* while offerings are made into the fire. There is also the ritual sacrifice of a goat.

The whole ceremony is a ritual done in a controlled way whose purpose is to lead from the *pāśu* stage to the *divya* state. The *bhairava* and *bhairavī* do not unite but remain separate. The participants, however, do unite but without emitting. If they do emit then the ejaculate is placed in a pot whose contents will be consumed during the ritual. These fluids may be unclean to the followers of the Veda but are sacred for the practitioners of the circle sacrifice for the fluids are synonymous with energy and power.

Things continue in this way till about 3 or 4 in the morning. Then the Kaula leader formally dismisses the divinised couple. The *bhairava* and *bhairavī* revert to being ordinary people and the group disperses while maintaining strict secrecy concerning what has happened.

III Conclusions

The people I met in Orissa were perfectly aware of the term 'Kaula' which they used with a degree of awe and excitement. Is the ritual still practiced? The answer is yes and no. Many of the elements and attitudes found in chapter 29 of the *Tantrāloka* still exist, but the elaborate ritual described by Abhinavagupta is not found, as far as I can tell. Is Abhinavagupta's presentation in chapter 29 in fact his own reworking of elements that were available in the many Kaula schools of his day, for it was and is still expected that a guru would develop his own rituals? Padoux strikes a note of caution:

when former tantric elements survive, they do so in a new context, that of today which is different from that of ages past, a fact which modifies them in their form and usage as well as in their meaning. Modern day tantra cannot be exactly as it was in former times, which in any case had itself evolved considerably during the course of the centuries, since a living tradition is in constant mutation.