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Women in Early Śākta Tantras: Dūtī, Yoginī and Sādhakī*

SUMMARY: Rather than studying various manifestations of the “divine feminine” in Hindu tantric texts, this paper proposes to examine the ritual role of women in the earliest (seventh to ninth centuries CE) scriptural sources that teach the cult of goddesses and other divine females (*yoginīs*). Women have three main ritual roles in these sources, which often overlap: they may be (1) consorts in sexual rites (*dūtī/śakti*), (2) witch-like semi-divine *yoginīs*, who transmit the doctrine and help practitioners to obtain supernatural powers, and (3) female practitioners (*sādhakī/bhaginī*), who are initiated in the same way as male ones. Concerning the last category, it is shown that women had the right to receive full initiation according to early *śākta* scriptures (which was not the case according to mainstream *śaiva* Tantras) and were able to practice the same rites for the same purposes as men.

KEYWORDS: female practitioners, *yoginī* cult, women in early medieval India, women’s rights to perform ritual, tantric ritual, Hindu *śākta* scriptures.

Women and Tantra

Much has been written about the role of the “divine feminine”, goddesses and other female divine or semi-divine beings in classical India.

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Such studies, whether they explicitly stated it or not, also intended to shed more light on the history of women and their role in India, a subject that is difficult to explore in many ways, most importantly because our sources, mainly in Sanskrit, were written by and concentrate on men rather than women. This paper therefore attempts to examine the role of actual flesh-and-blood women rather than various (divine or less divine) manifestations of “the female,”¹ and to do so in a particular type of texts: in the earliest *śākta* scriptures or Tantras that teach the cult of *yoginīs*.²

A large amount of work remains to be done, most importantly editions of the texts, in order to study this question in the whole of tantric literature in a chronological perspective. In the present state of research, it seems more reasonable to try to give an overall view of how women are represented in a limited corpus, which, in this case, is dateable between the seventh and the ninth centuries CE, and which forms the earliest layer of this literature.³ This does not imply that references to other texts should be excluded, but the main sources for this study will be the *Brahmayāmala* and the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, the former teaching mainly cremation ground practices involving the cult of Kapālīśa, Caṇḍā Kāpālīnī and an associated pantheon of various enneads, the latter prescribing the tantric cult of a triad of goddesses, Parā, Parāparā and Aparā. Both texts include long sections on the ancillary

¹ Patton 2002a: 4 emphasizes the problem inherent in creating a single, inventorial category of “female.” In connection with goddesses and women, it is nevertheless of interest to see that women may have been, at least in some contexts, more devout worshippers of goddesses than men. See Orr 2007, who points out that proportionately, more special offerings were made to goddesses by women than by men in medieval Tamil Nadu.

² The role of women in mainstream Hinduism, especially in more recent periods and in contemporary India, has been studied more extensively, see e.g. Leslie 1992, Patton 2002 and Pintchman 2007.

³ For a study of particular women, namely female poets, in the *śaiva/śākta* tradition belonging to various periods and regions, see Gupta 1992.

cults of other deities and divine beings, most notably the cult of witch-like semi-divine creatures called *yoginīs* or *yogeśvarīs*.⁴

It must also be pointed out that no matter what kind of information appears about women practitioners in these texts, it cannot be taken to represent historical or social facts. Just as most religious writings in India, these texts are normative and describe an ideal state of things, which can sometimes appear even fanciful.⁵ This, however, does not need to prevent us from examining the ways in which women are represented in them.

Finally, given the limited sources this paper uses, its purpose is to show a few examples and contexts in which the role of women could be examined in tantric texts, and to incite others to explore more about the subject. It is to be hoped that with more research in this direction, we shall be better equipped to assess the situation of women in classical India.

For practical purposes, I distinguish between three major ritual roles that early *śākta* tantric texts assign to women.⁶ As we shall see,

⁴ Let us remark here that these and most other, related tantric texts of the period cited in this paper are written in a non-standard Sanskrit most often called *aīśa* “belonging to the Lord” in the exegetical literature. For a description and analysis as to how these irregularities are related to linguistic phenomena that can be found in Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit and in Middle Indic, see Törzsök 1999: xxxv–xlvi. The irregular forms shall not be pointed out or analyzed in this paper, for it would take up much space and such a linguistic analysis is not directly relevant to the argument presented here. Moreover, when citing MSS, I have refrained from correcting obvious spelling mistakes or orthographic variants, such as the confusion of nasals and sibilants, omission of *visargas* and *anusvāras* etc.

⁵ On the limitation of what normative texts can tell us, see Sanderson 2013: 215–16.

⁶ This paper does not deal with all the roles and representations of women in tantric texts; therefore the prescriptions of ritual to attract women will not be dealt with, nor the thousands of women populating various paradise-like places in the universe.

these three categories are rather fluid and their boundaries are not necessarily clearly fixed. Their names and their functions often overlap; nevertheless, it seems useful to distinguish between them.⁷

The first category is the female ritual partner who is used by the *sādhaka* (male practitioner) in his ritual. She usually acts as the instrument to accomplish ritual action. The second category covers human *yoginīs*, women who possess supernatural powers and are worshipped to bestow them. They often play the role of the object of ritual in the sense that it is their worship the *yoginī* cult primarily teaches; but they also serve as useful means, sources to obtain impure substances. The third category is the female practitioner, who is very rarely mentioned. She is the female equivalent of the *sādhaka* and is therefore the subject who performs the ritual. Since the first two categories, which are more frequently encountered, have often been examined in the secondary literature with reference to other texts, I refrain from analyzing all the details concerning them (which would be impossible in the case of *yoginīs* anyway). The third category, that of female practitioners, occurs much less frequently and it is especially this category the present paper concentrates on, in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of the sources.

1. The female ritual partner (*dūtī/śakti*)

A female ritual partner, most commonly called *dūtī* (“female messenger” or “mischief-making woman”) or simply *śakti* (“female power”), is not necessary for all *śākta* tantric rituals. The *Brahmayāmala* prescribes the use of a partner only for the *tālaka* type practitioner, who nevertheless seems to be the most advanced in his nondual ritual practice, in which he is to transcend the duality of what is considered pure

⁷ There are other possible ways of distinguishing between different females. See e.g. McDaniel 2007, who lists the following three categories found in textual sources: incarnations of goddesses, consorts for sexual rituals and female gurus. However, the sources used in McDaniel 2007 are different, for they include only much later, *kaula* scriptures.

and impure according to orthopraxy. The definition of such a female partner is as follows:

When the *sādhaka* has acquired a charming *dūtī*, then, his body purified, he may commence the *tālaka* Path. [She can be characterised as one who] has received the guru's instructions, is beautiful, is endowed with [all] auspicious features, has mastered the sitting postures, is of heroic spirit, steeped in the essence of the Tantras, is loyal to her guru, deity and husband, has conquered hunger, thirst and fatigue, dwelling always in non-duality, she has no qualms (*nirvikalpa*), is non-covetous, knows [how to reach] Samādhi, knows Yoga, knows Knowledge [i.e. this doctrine], and has accomplished her ascetic observances (*saṁśritavrata*).⁸

This *dūtī*⁹ figures prominently in several chapters (22, 24, 40 and 45) which belong to the earliest textual stratum of the *Brahmayāmala*. It is chapter 24 that prescribes rites concerning the “secret nectar” (*guhyaṁṛta*), which denotes the mingled sexual fluids to be obtained with the help of a *dūtī/śakti*.

The female partner must be made immobile and delirious with intoxication. The appropriate mantras, representing the pantheon, should be placed on her genitals at the time of orgasm (*kṣobha*). She must also have her period, in order to produce the required substances.¹⁰

⁸ *yadā tasya bhaved dūtī sādhakasya manoharā || tadā tālakamārgam tu śuddhakāya samārabhet | guru-m-ādeśasamprāptā śobhanā lakṣaṇānvitā || jītāsana mahāsattvā tantrasadbhāvabhāvitā | gurudevapatibhaktā kṣut-pipāsājītaśramā || advaitavāsītā nityaṁ nirvikalpā hy alohupā | samādhijñātha yogajñā jñānajñā saṁśritavratā ||* 45.185c–188. Edition and translation by Csaba Kiss (forthcoming: 266). I have slightly altered the translation on two points. I translate *nirvikalpa* as “has no qualms” rather than “is non-reflecting” and I understand *saṁśritavrata* to stand for *saṁśritavrata* in the sense of “one who has accomplished her observance(s)” rather than “she who practices observances.” On the *dūtī*, see also *Tāntrikābhīdhānaśāstra vol. III*.

⁹ For other senses of *dūtī*, see the entries *dūtī* and *dūtīcakra* by Csaba Kiss and André Padoux in *Tāntrikābhīdhānaśāstra vol. III*.

¹⁰ 24.8c–9d: *nīśceṣṭāṁ kārayec chaktiṁ kṣare' ca madavihvalāṁ || kṣobhakāle tu nyastavyaṁ śaktipīṭhe mahāyase | anyam cāpi prayoktavyam*

After ritual intercourse, the practitioner must wash the *śakti*'s genitals and gather the liquid in a receptacle. He is then to make a "rice offering" (*caru*) with that, which implies (although the procedure is not explained) that he uses the liquid either to incorporate it in an offering or to cook the rice in it to make the offering.¹¹ This offering (*naivedya*) is divided into three parts, of which one is given to the fire, one to the deity, one to the performers of the ritual,¹² for both, the *sādhaka* and the *śakti* eat from the offering.¹³ The *śakti*'s "supreme nectar" (*parāṃṛta*) is praised in this context as something that bestows all desires.¹⁴

kṣobhayet kautukena tu || rajasvalā tu yā śakti bhavanti ritavodbhave{t}.
It is also stated that the *śakti* should not have the need to pass urine (24.118c–119b): *na caruṃ sādhayet tatra guhyāṃṛtavidhiḥ prati || kalpakāle yadā śakti āvasyakasamutsukā |* For ritual purposes, the *sādhaka* must always use his own urine or feces when these substances are prescribed. It seems that at some point the male practitioner may cause her to have orgasm, or may cause another woman to have orgasm, simply out of desire (*kautuka*). This could imply that the female ritual partner has a function that normally goes beyond the satisfaction of his desires. The text uses the neuter (*anyam ... prayoktavyam*), but it is difficult to see who or what could be meant in the context. Cs. Kiss suggests that *anyam* denotes another *nyāsa* (*hṛnnyāsa*) or is corrupt for *aṅgam* or *añjanam*. It is possible, but less likely, that this neuter stands for the feminine and that another woman is meant here, who should be used to satisfy the male practitioner's desire.

¹¹ Since the washing water is included, it should provide enough liquid for the cooking of the rice.

¹² 24.11c–14b: *kṣobhayitvā tato śaktim yoniṃ prakṣālayet tataḥ || kṣālanam bhāṇḍake grhya aśeṣam raktasaṃyutaṃ | pūrvvoktena vidhānena carukaṃ śrāvayet tataḥ || tena dravyeṇa mantrajño jñānoghe pūjitena tu | tenaiva tu vidhānena tribhāgam kārayed budhaḥ || devyāgnau tu tato datvānaivedyāni tu dāpayet |*

¹³ 24.14c–15b: *devīnām agrataś caiva saha sakyā tathaiva ca || praśayīta caruṃ divyaṃ pūjitaṃ vimalātmake |*

¹⁴ 24.53c–54b: *parāṃṛtaṃ yathā śakteḥ sarvasandohalakṣaṇam || guhyāṃṛtavibhāgan tu sārāt sāratarāma mahat |*

Concerning the types of female ritual partners, it is also mentioned that the *dūtī* is a mother, sister, daughter or wife. In another passage we find a much longer list of *śaktis* which involves various other female relatives, and perhaps even male ones.¹⁵ It is, however, unclear how these terms should be interpreted: 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. It is also pointed out that a pregnant woman should not be caused ritually to have orgasm,¹⁶ but the wife seems to be an exception to this rule.¹⁷

The whole ritual is said to be prescribed for the advanced *tālaka* practitioner, who must always use a guest *śakti* or a stranger (*āgantū*),¹⁸ and who should not make his *śakti* have intercourse with someone else.¹⁹ Here, the prescription of a “guest *śakti*” seems to imply that the previous list does not involve relatives of the practitioner himself.

In spite of the previous prescription, the practitioner is to lend his *śakti* to someone who asks for her at the time of worship, and a guru must also lend his *śakti* to his disciple without feeling any greed or jealousy.²⁰

¹⁵ This list seems to be rather incoherent and not fully understandable (24.68–71): *bhaginī putrinī bhāryā ādyākāle vidhiḥ smṛtaḥ | mātāmahī pitāmahī tathā mātṛ svasām api || pitṛbhrātus* tathā bhāryā bhrātu bhāryās tathaiva ca | bhāgneyī tu snuṣā caiva pautṛdohiṭṛkān tathā || mātulasya tathā pitṛ mātṛ svasā tathā pitṛn | bhrātā tathā pitā vāpi putram bhrātaras tathāpi vā || evamādi tathā cānyā śaktayaś caiva kārayet | mātuḥ svapatnī mātē vā śaktiyā vai kārayed budhaḥ || (*pitṛbhartus] em. Kiss, pitṛbhrātṛs MS).*

¹⁶ 24.60cd: *garbhīnī naiva kṣobhīta dravyārtham sādhakottamaḥ ||*

¹⁷ 24.61ab: *bhāryām āhnikavarjyā tu garbhīnīm api kṣobhayet |*
The text is unclear.

¹⁸ 24.87: *āgantūnām vidhi hy eṣā śaktīnām tālakasya tu | tālakaḥ śaktihīnas tu devakarman na kārayet ||*

¹⁹ 24.89ab: *nānyasaṅgamaśāncārāṃ śaktiṃ kuryād vicakṣaṇaḥ |*

²⁰ 24.92cd–95: *prārthitena svayam vāpi yāgakāle na saṃśayaḥ || sāmānyasyāpi dātavyā srotaśuddhiprapālanā | sva{m}śiṣyāpi* hi dātavyā ācāryeṇa mahāyase || svayāge śiṣyayāge vā nirvikalpena cetasā ||*

The *tālaka* type practitioner has two subtypes: one who has only one *śakti*, the other who has several *śaktis*.²¹ Both types should have intercourse with the *śakti* on the prescribed days of the lunar month.²² He who has one *śakti* should never be deluded by desire (for another woman) and abandon her; he should not covet other women. It is said that this is something difficult to do even for Bhairava himself and that such a practitioner can attain supernatural powers immediately.²³ He must not unite with *yoginīs* who may want to seduce him either.²⁴

The full description of the *tālaka*'s ritual with the *dūtī* can be found in chapter 45, edited and translated by Csaba Kiss, who gives the following summary of the procedure (forthcoming: 46–47):

The basic ritual [...] includes ritual bathing (*snāna*), mantric installation (*nyāsa*), [the *tālaka*'s] 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 dishevelled, naked, his body covered in ashes. His female partner should be standing, naked, her *pīṭha*, i.e. her genitals, are to be worshipped, and installation of the pantheon (*nyāsa*) should be performed on it.²⁵ 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

*svatantrasamayo hy eṣa bhairaveṇa prabhāṣitaṃ | karttavayā siddhikāmeṇa
īrṣyā varjiteṇa tu | tatkālan tu mahādevi pralobhaṃ naiva kārayet ||*(* I assume
a corruption from *svaśiṣye 'pi*, understood in the sense of *svaśiṣyasyāpi*.)

²¹ 24.96c–97b: *tālakas tu dvidhā proktā ekaśaktiparigrahaṃ || bahu-
śaktiparigrāhī atha vā jāyate sadā |*

²² 24.98–99: *dūtī muktṅvā na cānyatra na gacchet kāmamohitaḥ | eka-
śaktiparigrāhī eṣo vai samayaḥ smṛtaḥ || tālakasya mahādevi dvidvidhasyāpi
sobhane | tithau tu gamanenaiva grhyate śaktipālanaḥ |*

²³ 24.110–11: *ekaśaktiparigrāhī āśuḥ sidhyati tālakaḥ | duścaraṃ
bhairavasyāpi ekaśaktiparigrahaṃ || svaśaktin tu parityajya nānyāḥ kuryāḥ
kadācanaḥ | manasāpi hi devesi ekaśaktiparigrahe ||*

²⁴ 24.112: *yogīnyo yogasiddhās tu yadā tā icchayanti hi | tābhiḥ
sārdhan na karttavayaṃ saṅgo vai siddhim icchatā ||*

²⁵ Or, perhaps “in it,” according to Harunaga Isaacson’s suggestion (personal communication to Csaba Kiss).

substances such as cow flesh. He inserts his *liṅga* in her *pīṭha*, and finally *homa* of meat is performed.²⁶

What transpires in these prescriptions is that the female ritual partner is used as a means (*karaṇa*) or a substrate (*ādhāra*) of worship. In a way, this use of her is reflected in her most common appellation: she is almost invariably called *śakti* or [female] power (the word *dūtī* is used very rarely). The female partner is worshipped as a potential source of this power and she does not do much by herself or for her own benefit. She remains a mere embodiment of the source of divine omnipotence.

Although the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* does not give any details of such rituals, it prescribes the obtainment of the (impure) *caru* from *yoginīs*. In this usage, *śakti*, *dūtī* and *yoginī* become synonymous to denote women used to produce the mingled sexual fluids, which seems to be the main purpose of the ritual that culminates in the offering of these substances.²⁷ Or rather, it can be assumed that human *yoginīs* could also be used as female ritual partners (*śakti/dūtī*), and were perhaps considered more powerful ritual partners than ordinary women.

2. Women endowed with supernatural powers (*yoginīs*)

Human *yoginīs* form a subtype of the general category of *yoginī*. *Yoginīs* or female spirits possessing superhuman powers are said

²⁶ This is a summary of a long section of the text. For the Sanskrit version, please consult Kiss's forthcoming edition. In fact, as Kiss forthcoming: 46ff. points out, there are three versions of this rite, of which the "mediocre" one (*madhyama*) is rather different from what is summarized above, for in that case, the practitioner must move his *liṅga* only slightly during ritual intercourse and should practice *avagraha* or semen retention, while reciting the prescribed mantras. Mantra recitation is envisaged in the other versions only after orgasm.

²⁷ For the fact that the main purpose of pre-*kaula śākta* ritual copulation was to produce the mingled sexual fluids for the offering, see Sanderson 1988: 680.

to be divine or human,²⁸ but, as I argued elsewhere,²⁹ one could in fact distinguish between three subcategories of *yoginīs*:

1. divine *yoginīs* who are identified with mantra syllables, visualized (through *dhyāna*) and worshipped in a seated position, arranged in a circle (*maṇḍala* or *cakra*); they are usually offered mantra recitations (*japa*) and fire offerings (*homa*);
2. witch-like semi-divine *yoginīs* who are invoked and appear flying in the cremation ground, and are offered blood in a skull for a guest offering; they often have animal features;
3. human *yoginīs* who are said to belong to lineages or clans that bear the names of the seven or eight mother goddesses, they must be recognized and worshipped on certain lunar days, provide ingredients for the impure *caru* offering and transmit tantric teachings orally.

It is also possible to define *yoginī* as a general category, as done in Hatley (2013), with a polythetic approach. However, the above given three types are described in different ritual contexts and in different ways, therefore I suggest that a distinction between them would be useful to maintain. In the end, the definition of these three types results in the same list of features as the polythetic definition. But whichever typology is preferred, the textual sources deal with human *yoginīs* as a clearly separate category, which makes the present inquiry concerning their role legitimate.

Not only do our sources distinguish between divine and human *yoginīs*, but human *yoginīs* are usually described in a separate chapter or section of the respective texts, with a rather precise typology. The basic typology³⁰ lists seven types of human *yoginīs*, who must be recognized and identified through particular features. The seven

²⁸ *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 22.5, using the categories *devatā* and *manuṣyā*.

²⁹ Törzsök 2009: 77ff.

³⁰ See *Brahmayāmala* chapter 74, *Tantrasadbhāva* chapter 16 and *Jayadrathayāmala* 3.38.35ff.

types, called lineages or clans (*kula*), are based on the names and traits of the seven mother goddesses: Brāhmī, Māheśvarī, Kaumārī, Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhī, Aindrī and Cāmuṇḍā,³¹ always in this order. After identifying a *yoginī* as belonging to one of these seven clans, she must be shown certain hand gestures that represent the divine attributes of her male counterpart (such as the disc, *cakra*, for Vaiṣṇavī), to which she will react in her particular way. On certain days of the lunar month, her attributes must be drawn on her/the practitioner's house (there is some ambiguity on this point) and she must be worshipped on these days. These human *yoginīs* are then said to bestow the ability to fly and other supernatural powers, just as other *yoginīs* or goddesses do, as well as to transmit the traditional teaching, *sampradāya*. Thus, they are certainly seen as more powerful than mere ritual partners (*śakti/dūtī*): although they too provide the needed substances for the impure *caru*, they also bestow supernatural effects (*siddhi*) themselves and safeguard the tradition.

All seven types are described in *Brahmayāmala* 74.41–80 as well as in a long chapter on various *yoginīs* in the somewhat later *Tantrasadbhāva* (16.247–285). The *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* (29.21–51) includes only the first five types, but the text probably has a lacuna here, for the typology follows the others in all other respects. The same *yoginī* types appear in later texts too, such as in the *Jayadrathayāmala* (3.38.35ff). The descriptions are partly stereotyped in the sense that they include common attributes of the male counterpart of each *māṭrī* lineage (those of Viṣṇu for Vaiṣṇavī etc.); but some particular human traits are also mentioned. The following example of Kaumārī taken from the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* (29.34–40) illustrates well the nature of these passages.

[The next type] has dimples on the cheek, she is fair-skinned³² and has greenish brown eyes. Her straight hair is squeezed in a turban

³¹ She is usually called differently, such as Mātṛnāyikā, Leader of Mothers.

³² Lit. “she is red-yellow/white.”

on the head³³ and a single line is seen on her forehead. Her neck is long, her limbs are long and she has red hair. She is always happy in red, yellow or dark blue clothes. She laughs and rejoices and then suddenly gets angry. [This kind of] woman is usually fickle-minded and gets excited in quarrels. Seeing this sort of woman, one should show her the spear gesture and then the bell gesture as the second, carefully.³⁴ To this, she replies with turning to the left.³⁵ The sixth day of the lunar fortnight and the days of the four changes of the moon are hers, who is born in the clan of Kaumārī. She comes from the clan of Kārttikeya, has the six [characteristic] faults,³⁶ bestows supernatural powers, and if she is satisfied (*tuṣṭā*), she gives you the traditional teaching (*sampradāya*) that leads to the fulfilment of all desires.³⁷

³³ The word *paṭṭa* may also denote a kind of headband rather than a turban. It is a piece of cloth to tie the hair with, and can be applied in many different ways.

³⁴ While the spear is commonly attributed to Skanda/Kumāra, the bell is rarely associated with him. Likewise, it is not usually an attribute of Kaumārī.

³⁵ It is clear from the other descriptions that the *mudrā* is here shown by the practitioner, to which the *yoginī* replies with a reply-*mudrā* (*pratimudrā*), although in Buddhist Tantras and other *śaiva* Tantra this may happen differently (see also *pratimudrā* in *Tāntrikābhīdhānakośa vol. III.*).

³⁶ These six faults are perhaps the six passions (*saṅgam*, cf. Apte's Dictionary entry), i.e. love (of sensual enjoyments, *kāma*), intoxication (*mada*), vanity/jealousy (*māna*), avarice (*lobha*), exultation (*harṣa*) and anger (*ruṣā*). Other groups of six faults are also known, such as drowsiness, exhaustion, fear, anger, laziness and procrastination (*nidrā tandrā bhayaṃ krodha ālasyaṃ dīrghasūtrātā. Hitopadeśa 1.34*). However, the mention of six entities is somewhat suspicious. The text may be corrupt and the original compound may have referred either to Skanda's adoption by the six Kṛttikās or to his six heads.

³⁷ *gaṇḍābhyāṃ kūpakau yasyā dṛśy[e]te vaktrasamsthith[au] | raktagaurā yadā sā tu haripiṅgalalocanā || kuñcitās ca samā[h] keśāḥ paṭṭaṃ dhārayate śire | lalāṭe tu yadā tasya ekā rekhā tu dṛśyate || dīrghagrīvā tu sā jñeyā dīrghāṅgī raktakeśa sā | nityaṃ hi ramate rakte pītavastre 'tha nīlake || hasate ramate caiva akasmāc ca prakupyati | calacittā bhaven nārī kalāheṣu ca rajyate || tīdṛṣī[m] pramadā[m] dṛṣṭvā śaktimudrāṃ pradarśayet*

For comparison, it is interesting to see that the *Brahmayāmala* (74.55c–59b) uses very similar terms and expressions for the same *yoginī*:

She is lean, fair-skinned with greenish brown eyes. She has much energy/splendour, her neck is long, she is hairy and has the hair of a barbarian.³⁸ She enjoys childish games, she always laughs and sings constantly, she runs, jumps and suddenly gets angry. She must always have a stick in her hand and a spear is written on [her?] house. The eminent practitioner must identify her as being born in the clan of Kaumārī, and worship her on the surface of the earth according to prescription, with a desire to obtain powers from her. Whatever enjoyments the *sādhaka* desires, she shall bestow it upon him.³⁹

This typology based on the seven Mothers, which seems to be the main one envisaged in the earliest *śākta* Tantras, becomes extended in later, more composite texts such as the *Tantrasadbhāva* (ch.16) and the *Jayadrathayāmala*, to include for instance *yoginīs* who are Born at Sacred Places (*pīṭhajā*), Born at Sacred Areas (*kṣetrajā*), Born of Matrixes (*yonijā*), Guardians of Entrances (*dvārapālā*), Perfected Yoginīs (*siddhayogeśvarī*) etc.

In fact, even the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* includes an alternative typology. First of all, it mentions the following list of *yoginī* types (in 28.20): Sky-Goers (*khecarī*), Dākinīs, Terrible Ones (*ghorā*) and

| ghaṇṭāmudrā ca dātavyā dvitīyā ca prayatnataḥ || parivartanaṃ tu vāmena pratimudrā[m] dadāti hi | ṣaṣṭhī tu parvaṇī tasyāḥ kaumārikulajāḥ striyāḥ || ṣaḍdoṣā siddhidā sā tu kārṭtikeyakulodgatā | sampradāyaṃ ca sā tuṣṭā dadate sārvaśaktikāṃ || Square brackets enclose what may be considered editorial hypercorrection. For the full text with apparatus, see Törzsök forthcoming.

³⁸ The compound *barbaroruhā* is unusual. Its first word is *barbara* (barbarian), but in the second one, which must denote hair (*-śīroruhā*), the first syllable is missing and the rest has been merged with the end of the first word.

³⁹ *kṛśāṃgī raktagaurā ca haripiṅgalalocanā || suvarccā dīrghasamgrivā romasā barbbaroruhā | bālakṛīḍārātā nityaṃ hasate gāyate muhuḥ || dhāvate valgate caiva akasmāc ca prakupyate | daṇḍahastā bhaven nityaṃ śaktiṃ ca likhite grhe || kaumārikulasambhūtā lakṣayet sādhakottamaḥ | ārādhayed vidhānena bhūtale siddhikāṃkṣayā || yat kiñ cit prārthitaṃ bhogaṃ sādhakasya dadāti sā |*

Beautiful Ones (*rūpikā*). Then another passage (26.21ff) describes an alternative way in which one can encounter *yoginīs*, who are called this time “*ḍākinīs* etc.” (*ḍākinīyādyāḥ* and *śākinīs* in the parallel passage of the *Tantrasadbhāva* ch. 16) and who appear in a circle of fire.⁴⁰ The passage, which may be corrupt and even abridged,⁴¹ gives a very unclear account of these *yoginīs*, but their description is somewhat similar to the human ones:

Those who look downwards, or [whose eyes] have two reflected images [having double vision?] or those whose two eyes are different [being cross-eyed?] are known to be of this [Rūpikā] kind. She who, after crying out *hā hā*, goes out of her house, village, away from the public somewhere else outside is [also] known to be a Rūpikā. She who sweats on her forehead and trembles when seed-syllables are placed [on her] as [prescribed] before is a Vaiṣṇavī called Raudrī. She who does not step over a small trident written up [on the ground, in front of her] and makes obeisance to Bhairava who is of the same nature [...]⁴²

This alternative description, no matter how confused or confusing, is important in several ways. Firstly, it shows that the *yoginī* typology was not always based on that of the seven Mothers, in other words, *yoginīs* had an existence and identity independent of the Mātṛs, even if there are many shared features between them. Secondly, this short

⁴⁰ This suggests that they are not human, but their description echoes that of human *yoginīs*.

⁴¹ If we assume that the surviving recension of the text, which is shorter than what Abhinavagupta had in front of him (see Törzsök 1999: iv–v), is secondary, but that may not be the case. However, it is certain that this description of *yoginīs* is rather enigmatic and something may have been omitted by mistake.

⁴² *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 26.26–29: *adhomukhās tu ḍṛṣyante atha vā pratimādvayam | bhinne vā locane yasya vijñeyā sā tadātmikā || hāhā -d- eva kṛtaṃ pūrvaṃ grhād grāmān mahājanāt | aparatra bahir yāti vijñeyā sā tu rūpikā || lalāṭe sveda -m- āyāti vepathuś cāpi ḍṛṣyate | pūrvavan nyastabījais tu sā syād raudrī vaiṣṇavī || sūlaṃ vāmanam ālikhya na laṅghayati taṃ hi yā | namas tu †varititāṃ rūpaṃ† bhairavāya tadātmane*

description confirms the kind of behaviour *yoginīs* were supposed to have. For the former, longer passage mentions uncontrolled manifestations of feelings (laughing, singing, showing anger etc.), something that women were not supposed to do and that shows the uncivilized nature of *yoginīs*; while the latter passage describes them as leaving their community and home while shouting, which is not only considered uncivilized, but also situates them physically at the margins or even outside of society. Such a description of a woman leaving behind her social background and safety all alone is rare in Indian literature. It is perhaps not surprising that her behaviour was seen as requiring superhuman power.

Finally, the above cited short passage closes with a brief remark on heroes (*vīra*), male counterparts of these *yoginīs*.

The same prescription also applies to a man, in all cases.

Thus should one recognize *yoginīs* together with “heroes.”⁴³

Although no details are given, the verse clearly states that the same traits should be recognized in men, who are thus to be identified by *yoginīs* as partners. Apart from the surprising and unusual male-female symmetry of the prescription, it also implies that these men were supposed to be sought out by female practitioners. Therefore, it also raises the question of whether *yoginīs* were, at least in some contexts, also female practitioners, and under what circumstances.

3. The female practitioner (*sādhakī/yoginī/bhaginī/strī*)

The boundaries of divinised humans and gods are often blurred or non-existent in tantric cults as well as in many contexts of mainstream Hinduism. In the present context, this implies that divine and human *yoginīs* may be considered identical in some cases, and that the distinction between a *yoginī*, who is potentially divine, and a female practitioner (*sādhakī*), who is definitely human, is less clear than we would

⁴³ *evam eva vidhir yogyaḥ puruṣasyāpi nityaśaḥ | evaṃ devi vijānīyā[']*
yoginyo vīrasaṃyutāḥ || 26.30.

expect. Indeed, the word *yoginī* often simply denotes a female practitioner. In this sense, it forms a pair with *vīra*, “hero”, which denotes her male counterpart. Just as *yoginī* is an ambiguous term, so too *vīra* can also denote a type of male deity, otherwise often named Rudra, who accompanies goddess *yoginīs*, for instance on a *maṇḍala* or a *cakra*. Therefore, rather than insisting on the ambiguous nature of these terms, it may be more appropriate to say that they denote the tantric identity of practitioners, who become deified in their practice.

In spite of this, seemingly ambiguous, usage of the respective terms, it does make sense to try and find references to female practitioners, and in a number of cases it is very clear that texts indeed speak about them. Before looking at these references, it may not be useless to recall that according to the mainstream Śaivism of the Siddhānta, initiation is not to be given in its full form to women. Even in the *Svacchanda-tantra*, which is less mainstream in that it teaches the tantric cult of Bhairava using some impure offerings, women, along with children, the elderly, the sick etc., are to be given a so-called “seedless” initiation, which excludes the obligation to follow the post-initiatory rules (*samaya*).⁴⁴ The king, who is too busy to deal with these obligations, is also included in the list.

Children, fools, the elderly, women, kings and the sick—for these, initiation is seedless [i.e.] it excludes [the obligation to follow] post-initiatory rules etc.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See also the entry *nirbījadīkṣā* by Dominic Goodall in *Tāntrikābhīdhānakośa vol. III*.

⁴⁵ *bālabālīśavyāddhastrībhogabhugvyādhitātmanām || eṣāṃ nirbījikā dīkṣā samayādivivarjitā ||* (4.88) According to Kṣemarāja’s commentary, the word “etc” refers to other ritual obligations, such as the annual reparatory *pavitraka* rite (*ādīśabdāt pavitrakādividhis*). See the entries *pavitraka* and *pavitrārohaṇa/pavitrāropana* in *Tāntrikābhīdhānakośa vol. III*, where it is also pointed out that the earliest Tantras do not describe this rite. Thus, it is possible that the *Svacchanda*’s author(s) had something different in mind than Kṣemarāja.

All these categories of people are considered to be unable to follow the rules of the community, therefore they are given an easier version of initiation, which is also less powerful. It follows from this that these categories of people, including women, are not supposed to become full-time practitioners (*sādhaka*, or *putraka* in the later terminology if they seek final liberation). Accordingly, scriptures of the Siddhānta as well as those of the Bhairava cult (such as the *Svacchanda*) do not normally have any particular teaching aimed at women.⁴⁶

It is nevertheless surprising to see that women are considered unable to follow the *samaya* rules. For the so-called *samaya* ritual, which is a preliminary to initiation proper (*dīkṣā*), can also be performed for women, which implies that they can observe the rules. It is possible that the “seedless” initiation was introduced only in the non-*śākta* tantric branches, while *śākta* scriptures maintained what was probably the original version of the *samaya* rite, meant to be performed also for women.

Whatever is the case, Kṣemarāja understands in his commentary that when initiates receive a new, *śaiva* name, according to the tradition of the *Svacchanda*, men receive one that ends with *-śiva* and women one that ends with *-śakti*. This may not have been the case according to the original rite at the time of the composition of the *Svacchanda*, for the text of the *Svacchanda* itself does not

⁴⁶ There are, however, some details of ritual in the context of which women are mentioned, to point out different ways of performing the same rite for women. At *Svacchanda* 3.164 for instance, Kṣemarāja mentions that according to some, the male initiand must hold the *pāśasūtra* in his right hand, the female in her left, raised to the top of the head. According to him, this is wrong, because the initiand has his or her hands kept busy holding the *darbha* grass functioning as (an extension of) his/her *nāḍīs*; therefore the *pāśasūtra* must be attached to the topknot (which, by the way, implies that he envisages male initiands, unless we assume that women also had some sort of *śikhā*): *tat sūtram pumān dakṣiṇena strī vāmena kareṇa mūrdhni dhārayed ity asad dīkṣyahastayor darbhanāḍīdhāraṇe vyāpṛtatvam ataḥ śikhāyām eva pāśasūtram lambayet*. See also 2.205 and commentary thereon.

specify this detail. However, a similar procedure seems to be prescribed in the *Brahmayāmala* (chapter 34). The text has a lacuna in the passage in which the basic naming procedure is prescribed (which probably concerns men), therefore the instruction remains unclear as to the ending of male initiation names. Then, however, this verse follows:

But when women [see the flower they cast on the initiation *maṇḍala*] fall on these [various] places,⁴⁷ they should receive a name by that lineage [depending on which deity their flower falls on the *maṇḍala*], with a name “Śakti”.⁴⁸

What the passage appears to say is that female initiation names should end with *śakti*, just as Kṣemarāja has it in the *Svacchanda*’s context.⁴⁹ The fact that initiands are divided primarily into these two categories, male and female, rather than into four *varṇas* as in the Siddhānta, is confirmed in the subsequent verse:

Whoever is [thus] established [as belonging to] this or that lineage, be it a “hero” [= a male practitioner] or a “*yoginī*” [= female practitioner], their clan will protect [them, who are] the Sādhaka and the female [practitioner].⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Lit. “when the fall for women happens at these places”, but the “fall” in this context is clearly that of the flower.

⁴⁸ *nārīnān tu yadā pātaḥ sthānesv eteṣu jāyate || tena gotreṇa tan nāmaṃ śaktisaṃjñam tadā bhavet | (Brahmayāmala 34.199cd–200ab)*

⁴⁹ It is to be remarked that in Trika Tantras, which are more *śākta* in that their pantheon is more dominated by goddesses, all initiation names end with *-śakti* (see *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 6.43 and *Tantrasadbhāva* 9.125).

⁵⁰ *yā yasmim saṃsthitā gotre vīro vā yoginī pi vā || svagotram rakṣayantīha sādhaḥ ca 'valā tathā | (200ab–201cd)* Since the accusative and the nominative are often confused in the text, it is not clear whether the male and female initiates will protect their clan or the clan will protect them. I understand *cavalā* to stand for *cābalā[m]* (the text may be emended). The reading of the end of the line was problematic (the problem is also indicated in Shaman Hatley’s transcription) because the ink is slightly smeared there, but thanks to new photos made by Jung Lan Bang, it is now certain.

A later chapter on the *samaya* pledges confirms that women can as properly take and keep the *samayas* as men. For after what is an initial mention of the *samayas*, the text says:

if a man or a woman obtains these, he/she shall be able to produce supernatural effects and be recognized [by fellow practitioners or clan members] at home or in the field even from a distance.⁵¹

That the initiation of both men and women, on an equal basis, continued to be a *śākta* tradition can be seen, for instance, in a remark made by Abhinavagupta in his *Parātriṃśikāvivarāṇa*.⁵² Commenting on a verse of the *Parātriṃśikā*, Abhinavagupta states that one can be initiated directly by the deity without the performance of a ritual. Such a directly initiated person can be a hero or *yoginī* (*vīro vā yoginī vā*), i.e. a male or female practitioner.

It is not only the *samaya* pledges that women were able to take in the *śākta* systems. In several passages that describe the obtainment of supernatural powers, women are explicitly mentioned as practitioners, along with men. The *Brahmayāmala*, before describing the mantra of a three-legged (*tripāda*) Bhairava, points out that if a man or a woman obtains his characteristic features (*lakṣaṇa*), i.e. if they are assimilated to this mantra–deity, they shall obtain eternal success [and possess all possible powers].⁵³

Similarly, the propitiatory worship (*sādhana*) of the goddess called Aparā is prescribed both for men and women in the *Siddhayog-eśvarīmata* (chapter 19). After the ritual burning of one’s mundane

⁵¹ *yām avāpya nara strīr vā siddhiceṣṭā[nu/na]marcchati | vijñāyate sa dūre pi gṛhakṣetre vyavasthitaḥ*. The text is somewhat problematic. *Yām* is understood to stand for *yān* (*samayān*), but the verb is perhaps corrupt or *aīśa* for *anvarjati* or something similar, possibly *metri causa*.

⁵² See the last paragraph of p. 275.

⁵³ 28.57c–58b: *ataḥ param pravakṣyāmi bhairavasya tu lakṣaṇam || yāmya vāpya nara strī vā siddhi prāp[s]anti sāsvatīm |* I understand the second line to stand for *yāny [=lakṣaṇāni] avāpya naraḥ strī vā siddhiṃ prāpsyanti śāsvatīm*.

body and the creation of a bhairavic one, the practitioner must place the Aparā mantra in his or her heart and visualise Aparā's retinue of goddesses in a circle (*cakra*), with Bhairava and Aparā in its middle. Worship is performed with the usual offerings, but with the addition of meat (*māmsa*), and followed by mantra recitation and fire offerings, which include human flesh. Finally, the goddess appears in the middle of the sacrificial fire. She enters the practitioner's circle of deities and the practitioner becomes similar to her (*tattulyaḥ*). At the end of this description, some options are given: one can perform this rite alone (which may imply that the ideal place is the cremation ground) or at home, one can be a hero, i.e. a male practitioner, or a woman.⁵⁴

Another, later, Trika scripture, the *Tantrasadbhāva*, mentions female and male practitioners and uses the same wording in the context of a similar rite.

He who worships this circle [of deities], be it a hero [i.e. a man] or a woman, will become a *yoginī* after a year and enters an eternal body; [even] someone cowardly will become a hero, dominated by heroic sentiments.⁵⁵

Here the formulation suggests that powerless women (*abalā* also means the forceless, the weak) will become powerful *yoginīs*, while powerless men ("the cowardly" *bhīru*) will become powerful heroes (*vīra*). Such a formulation also occurs in the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, stressing the fact that women, who are by nature said to be devoid of force or power (*abalā*) become powerful.⁵⁶ It is to be found after an excursus

⁵⁴ *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 19.17cd–18ab: *ekākino yathoktena vidhinānena sādhanam || gr̥he vātha prakurvāṇair vīro vāpy athavābalā*

⁵⁵ *ya idaṃ pūjayet cakraṃ vīro vā yadi vābalā** || *vatsarād yoginī bhūtvā praviśec chāśvatām tanum | bhīrur vīratvam āyāti vīrabhāvair adhiṣṭitaḥ* || (*Tantrasadbhāva* 3.224cd–25) * Here I follow "Ms g" (*vābalā*) rather than the reading of the other Mss (*vābalaḥ*) followed in Dyczkowski's online edition. The edition in fact eliminates the female practitioner by its choice of variant.

⁵⁶ In an *aīśa* wording: *sādhako vīratām yāti abalām ca balām bhavet* (27.15cd).

on the imperative of keeping the teaching secret, which applies to both men and women.

While the most common way of mentioning male and female practitioners is to call them *vīra* and *yoginī* or *vīra* and *abalā*, it also happens that the terms *sādhaka* and *sādhakī* are used, as in chapter 10 of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*.⁵⁷ This chapter prescribes the *pūrvasevā* or preliminary observances, which must precede the propitiation of mantra deities for *siddhi*. The observances are somewhat reminiscent of the *pāśupata* observance, one of them is in fact called the *pāśupata* observance and refers to and cites the *Pāśupatasūtras*. All of them require that one must smear one's body with ashes (of various colours in the different observances) and wander about with various attributes, recite the appropriate mantra etc. Given that *pāśupatas* were supposed to be brahmin males, one would picture a male practitioner to accomplish such *pāśupata*-like observances of a wandering ascetic;⁵⁸ but the text remarks at the very beginning:

concentrating the mind on the mantra [to be propitiated], the male or female practitioner (*sādhakah sādhakī vātha*) should perform pantheon worship as prescribed and accomplish the [following preliminary] observance.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ The word may also occur in the *Brahmayāmala*, but the text is not secure at that point and the interpretation of the passage is not straightforward. The word in question (*sādhakīyau?*) may be corrupt and/or refer to the female partner (*śakti*) as belonging to the *sādhaka*: *guhyaṃṛtaṃ samākhyātāṃ guhyayāgaṃ prakalpayet | vandanāḥ prāsanañ caiva karttavyaṃ sādhakena tu || śaktyāpi sādhakī[yau] tu prāśitavyas tathaiva hi ||* (24.37–38b).

⁵⁸ It must be noted, however, that in spite of the *pāśupata* prescription which allows only “twice-born” men to follow the *pāśupata* observance, a 12th–13th century inscription from Mount Abu (*Indian Antiquary* 11: 220–223) mentions a female *pāśupata* who acted as a guru or superior of a *śaiva* monastery. See also Sanderson 2013: 213. Her name (Yogeśvarī) is, nevertheless, different from those of the male *pāśupatas* listed in the same text, for it does not end with the common *pāśupata* ending *-rāśi*.

⁵⁹ *sādhakah sādhakī vātha mantratadgatacetasaḥ | yāgaṃ kṛtvā vidhānena vrata Caryāṃ samācāret* (10.4).

All these mentions of female practitioners in very diverse ritual contexts suggest that they could be involved in any kind of tantric practice, which was probably the case, at least in theory. However, one particular ritual context seems to attract the mention of women more often: the recognition of male and female members of the same lineage. This context leads us back to the question of *yoginīs*, for female practitioners appear indeed in these passages as *yoginīs* endowed with supernatural powers. Thus, heroes and *yoginīs*, the latter called simply women (*abalā*), must recognize each other through the use of sign language (*chommakā*)⁶⁰ and identify each other as belonging to one of the *mātrī* clans. Since they belong to the same clan or lineage, the women are also called “sisters” (*bhaginī*) in these passages.⁶¹

In the above examined cases, women appear alongside with men as equally able agents in ritual. It also occurs, however, that women, although they are clearly allowed to perform rites of “magic” (*siddhikarman*), are explicitly mentioned as being weaker, for whom a particular, easier kind of ritual is proposed: “even a woman, or a man, [whether he is] an initiate into the *samaya* rules or someone who has

⁶⁰ *Tantrasadbhāva* 18.31: *teṣāṃ tu kathayiṣyāmi cchommakāḥ kulasaṃsthitā | kule sāmānyatām yāti vīro vāth ’abalāpi vā*. “I shall now teach you their sign language established in their clans [through which] a hero or a woman can be [recognized as belonging to] the same clan.” The goddess asks for the same teaching at the beginning of a chapter of the *Siddhayaogeśvarīmata* (27.4: *tvatprasādān mahādeva śrotum icchāmi tattvataḥ | kule sāmānyatām yāti yathā vīro ’balāpi vā*), but the chapter does not include a reply.

⁶¹ In the *Tantrasadbhāva*, the following passage (16.245–6) precedes immediately the typology of human *yoginīs* and their clans: *tat sarvaṃ prāpnuvanty etā vidhinānena suvrate | vīro vā bhaginī vāpi tatra dharmānuvartinī || phalaṃ prāpnoty asandehād yat tad iha vimarṣitam | hīnamadhyottamaṃ caiva svakīyāṃśavaśocitam ||* (The Muktabodha e-text writes *visarpitam* for *vimarṣitam*, but the MSS read *vimarṣitam*). “They shall obtain everything through this ritual, o virtuous one. Whether a hero or a sister following her *dharma*, he/she shall undoubtedly obtain the result that has been revealed here, of inferior, mediocre or superior quality, and according to the power of his/her own lineage.”

received full initiation but is unable to perform a *sādhana*, can accomplish the following ritual, o goddess”.⁶² The list of practitioners, which exceptionally starts with women (note that all the previous occurrences have the “hero” first), shows that women are considered, at least here, less able to perform *sādhana* and are put in the same category as various types of weaker male initiates who are unable to accomplish certain rites.⁶³

No matter how often women are called the “weak” ones, it also happens that they are the most ideal practitioners. This is the case when the use of a mantra syllable called the Heart of Yoginīs (*KHPHREM*) is prescribed.⁶⁴ It is praised as a particularly powerful mantra syllable, more efficient than all observances and satisfying all the female powers (*śaktayah*). Its efficiency, however, applies mainly when used by women:

A man can [also] have the right to perform this ritual act concerning women. For it [mainly] bestows success onto women, and sometimes also onto men. It has been transmitted by women from mouth to mouth and not written down in a book.⁶⁵

The passage continues to enumerate *yoginīs* in different cosmic periods (*yuga*) who transmitted the teaching and finishes by remarking that in the end the doctrine was committed to writing. This may be pure fiction as it stands; but it is notable that the tradition sees part of itself as an oral tradition originating with women and as something that is meant to be used by women in particular.

⁶² *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 25.2: *abalāpy athavā vīraḥ samayajño 'tha dīkṣitaḥ | aśaktaḥ sādhanē devi tadāyaṃ vidhim ācaret ||*

⁶³ In spite of this introductory verse, what follows does not seem to be so easy to carry out, for an elaborate cremation ground ritual is prescribed involving impure substances that are difficult to obtain.

⁶⁴ *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* 28.32–42.

⁶⁵ *puruṣeṇādhikāro 'sti asmin strīvidhikarmaṇi | striyāyā[h] siddhido hy eṣaḥ kadācit puruṣasya ca || vaktrād vaktragataṃ strīṇāṃ na ca lekhyati pustake |* (28.41–42ab).

Conclusion: The Power of the Powerless

It is a quasi-universal cultural phenomenon that women are associated with impurity and danger.⁶⁶ Their dangerous impurity can make them menacing and powerful, in the way in which tantric goddesses and *yoginīs* are depicted. As these powerful and impure goddesses and *yoginīs* make their way into the pantheon of *śākta* scriptures, actual women, whether they embody these divine females or not, also gain more presence in these works.

The first major step is that women, who are excluded from Vedic initiation,⁶⁷ can be initiated into the tantric systems, along with *sūdras*, who are also excluded from Vedism. Even if women can only receive the so-called “seedless” version of initiation in the mainstream Śaivism of the Siddhānta, this is a major innovation. But as we have seen, women appear as more important participants in the ritual system of early *śākta* scriptures.

Secondly, in *śākta* scriptures they are not only allowed to participate in rituals, but their participation as ritual partners (*śakti*) is often required, even if their role can be rather instrumental.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ This appears to be related to the fear of menstrual blood, see e.g. Guterman-Mehta-Gibbs 2007.

⁶⁷ As McGee 2002: 41–42 points out, women’s exclusion from Vedic initiation (*upanayana*) probably led to their gradual exclusion from Vedic learning and from the individual performance of *śrauta* rituals. She also shows that at the time of Jaimini, women’s access to Vedic learning was not yet an issue itself (while *sūdras* were definitely denied access to the Vedas). Nevertheless, women’s role in Vedic ritual was reduced, for they acted either as proxies (*pratinidhi*), partners (*dharmapatnī*) or designated sons (*putrikā-putra*). On women’s role in Vedic ritual, see also Jamison 1996.

⁶⁸ The presence of a woman, the *dharmapatnī*, is of course necessary in Vedic ritual too. This parallel is pointed out by Jayaratha, who seems to cite a scriptural passage commenting on the ritual involving the *dūtī*: *brahmaṇasya yathā patnī tayā saha yajen makhe | evaṃ dūtīḥ kulācārye jñeyā nityodite kule*. “Just a brahmin must perform sacrifice in the company of his wife,

Thirdly, in addition to goddesses and female spirits, actual women (in the form of *yoginīs*) are also considered to possess exceptional powers. They are therefore to be worshipped as repositories of these powers and are also said to transmit tantric doctrine.

Finally, women are also entitled to perform many *śākta* rites in the same way as men, on equal grounds. The examples demonstrate that women had the full right to perform ascetic observances (*vrata*),⁶⁹ propitiatory worship to use the power of a deity (*sādhana*), including pantheon worship (*cakrayāga*) combined with visualisation (*dhyāna*), mantra recitation (*japa*) and fire offerings (*homa*).⁷⁰ Although it happens that women are seen as less able to perform some rites than men, it also occurs that a rite or mantra (the *yoginīhr̥daya*) is said to be more efficient for them.

It remains a question whether women also had access to final liberation through these practices.⁷¹ I have found no explicit statement concerning this question,⁷² but it must be kept in mind that the texts

so too a female partner (*dūtī*) must be seen [as necessary] in the *kula* method, in/for the *kula*/body, which always exists.”

⁶⁹ It must be noted that these *vratas* are not of the same kind as those votive or *strīdharmic* observances that are still popular with Hindu women and which are examined in McGee 2002. The tantric *vratas* are often necessary preliminaries to *sādhana*, as mentioned above, and they usually require the person who observes them to live as a solitary ascetic. A similar meaning of *vrata*, implying ascetic practices, was apparently used in medieval Tamil inscriptions, even when women were involved. See Orr 2007.

⁷⁰ An outside source from the eighth century CE, Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava*, confirms that female practitioners had the same rights or *adhikāra* in these matters. For the *yoginīs* Kapālakuṇḍalā and Saudāminī are said to perform similar sets of rituals and also possess the ability to fly, see act 9 verse 52 and act 5.29 ff. See also Hatley 2007: 88ff.

⁷¹ For the fact that women's *vrata* may not lead to final liberation, *mokṣa*, in other periods and according to different sources, see McGee 1992.

⁷² Liberation (*mokṣa*) may be described in an indirect way; see e.g. in the above citation of the *Tantrasadbhāva* (3.224cd–5), which says

examined here concentrate on obtaining success (*siddhi*) in general, which included final liberation among the obtainment of various supernatural effects. Therefore their silence does not imply that women were excluded from final liberation.

Tantric scriptures (whose provenance and date are already difficult to establish with certainty) cannot be taken to provide us with hard data about the society of their place and time; but the roles and rights of women in religious matters in early *śākta* Tantras perhaps points to the fact that some important issues concerning women were involved. And, although these texts often employ the word *abalā* “forceless/powerless” for “woman,” one wonders whether this (just as the name Śiva) is not used as a euphemism to denote those who are, at least according to the *śākta* systems, more powerful than they seem.

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that both men and women enter an “eternal body.” This could mean that they become divine, i.e. liberated.

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