Cracow Indological Studies
Vol. XXI, No. 1 (2019), pp. 69–106
https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.21.2019.01.04

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Many Shades of *bhakti*: A Devoted Second Wife and Self-decapitated Bhairava

SUMMARY: The aim of this paper is to discuss the usage of two *bhakti*-related metaphors intended to represent self-surrender: the metaphor of marriage and the metaphor of self-decapitation. The explored narratives—one about Narasiṃha marrying Ceñcatā (a Ceñcū huntress) and the other about Bhairava who cuts off his own head for the sake of Narasiṃha—are connected to the Śrīvaiṣṇava center of Narasiṃha worship in Ahōbilam. As I will try to demonstrate, even though both served to convey the message about Narasiṃha's final acceptance of strangers who loved him unconditionally, the employment of different symbolism may point to the fact that each of these tales originated in different circles, which, although linked to Ahōbilam, at the outset were occupied with different matters and interested in different targets: Vijayanagara rulers who supported the site to extend the kingdom's boundaries and local temple priests eager to increase the number of pilgrims.

KEYWORDS: Ahōbilam, *Ahobilamāhātmya*, Bhairava, *bhakti*, double-marriage, self-decapitation, *muṇḍo bhairava*, Narasiṃha, Ceñcatā, *Vāsantikāpariṇayam*, Vijayanagara Empire

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* The research is conducted within the frames of the project funded by the National Science Centre, Poland (NCN) on the basis of decision no. 2013/11/D/HS2/04521.

I would like to thank the peer-reviewers for their valuable comments concerning the paper. A draft of the third paragraph was delivered at the international seminar Pandanus '18 on Nature in Indian Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual, Institute of South and Central Asia, Charles University in Prague, 27–29 September 2018.

Introduction

The present paper focuses on two tales connected to the center of Narasiṃha worship in Ahōbilam which through employing variously conceptualized metaphors representing self-surrender may be seen as falling into the category of South Indian narratives that reflect the ways of accommodating outsiders into Vaiṣṇavism under the umbrella of *bhakti*. Despite their obvious low historical credibility, narratives of this type are considered to touch on the themes which were important to Vaiṣṇava devotees in a certain milieu, with searching for the methods of entering into relation with a Vaiṣṇava god as their basic aim (Davis 2004: 146). In the case of the myths researched in the present essay devotion to Narasiṃha is a tool to validate the appropriation of both Ahōbilam autochthonous inhabitants and Śaivas. Whereas the former process is mirrored in the old pattern of the god's marriage to a local huntress, the latter one seems to be depicted in the so far critically unexplored (to my knowledge) *Ahobilamāhātmya*'s (AM hereafter) episode of Bhairava who cuts off his own head to tame the local Bhavanāśinī river, an epitome of Viṣṇu's *śakti*. My attempt is to show that involvement of two similarly aimed yet distinct metaphors, both of which served to convey the message about Narasiṃha's final recognition of those who despite their origin from beyond the Vaiṣṇava fold love him unconditionally, may point to the fact that these tales originated in different circles. Even though linked to Ahōbilam, these spheres—Vijayanagara rulers and local temple priests—pursued different objectives.

Devotion of the second wife

The religious and social history of Ahōbilam, a small town situated against the backdrop of the Nallamala Hills in the Karnūl district of modern Andhra Pradesh, is usually discussed in reference to its tribal substratum, and thus from the perspective of bidirectional processes leading to mutual appropriation reflected in the ancient motif of a recognized god who takes a local girl for his second wife, widely used (or rather creatively reused) in the times

of the Vijayanagara Empire for the sake of politics aimed at 'marrying' various groups which potentially could form the state. The Vijayanagara rulers' policy of extending power into new territories through association with temples and religious institutions, especially along its constantly questioned northern border (Stoker 2016: 97), affected the establishment of the Ahōbilam *maṭha*, which determined the site's development as a Śrīvaiṣṇava pilgrimage centre of a regional appeal.[1] The shrines scattered between the Lower and Upper Ahōbilam,[2] some of them displaying features of the Cāḷukya or Kākatīya style yet significantly reconstructed and expanded during the Vijayanagara period (Vasantha 2001: 70–71),[3] occupied the space inhabited by the Ceñcū hunter-gatherers, who originally worshipped their jungle-deities there (Sontheimer 1987: 149). Due to the associations with martial skills, the Ceñcū were seen by Hindu kings as the community which could possibly reinforce the Vijayanagara army. Additionally, with time passing, they were granted some rights which allowed them to participate in the temple organization.

Having established close links to the Vijayanagara rulers—it was already Sāḷuva Narasiṃha (reigned 1485–1491), the founder

[1] According to Arjun Appadurai, the predecessors of its first heads were the superiors (*jīyar*s) of the Vaṇ Śaṭakopaṉ *maṭha* at Tirupati, who relocated to Ahōbilam and by the end of the 16th century had gained control over the local Narasiṃha temples (Appadurai 1977).

[2] The nine temples are: the Ahobilanarasiṃhasvāmī temple of Upper Ahōbilam (situated on a hill, with the *garbhagṛha* in a natural cave), which hosts the self-manifested (*svayambhu*) fierce (*ugra*) Narasiṃha as the Lord of Ahōbilam ripping apart the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu; the Bhārgavanarasiṃha temple; Yogānandanarasiṃha temple; the Chatravātanarasiṃha temple; the Karañjanarasiṃha temple; the Pāvanannarasiṃha temple; the Mālolanarasiṃha temple; the Vārāhanarasiṃha temple; the Jvālānarasiṃha temple. The tenth temple, excluded from the major scheme probably because of its later construction, is the Prahlādavarada temple of Lower Ahōbilam with Lakṣmīnarasiṃha as the presiding deity, situated at the foot of the hill.

[3] Vasantha estimates the time of construction of several cave-shrines at Ahōbilam very early, circa 3-4th century AD (Vasantha 2001: 70).

of the Sāḷuva dynasty, who was glorified as born out of the grace of Narasiṃha from Ahōbilam and had his agent in nearby Tirupati (Appadurai 1977: 62–63)—the *jīyar*s of Ahōbilam became the leaders of the Vaṭakalai sect of Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition[4] in the Andhra region (Appadurai 1977: 69–71).[5] However, Ahōbilam has been associated with a hard-to-reach *divyadeśa* localized in the wild frontier zone much earlier. As a distant sacred site situated on the boundary of Tamil influences it was probably known to Vaiṣṇavas from the poem 1.7 of the *Periya tirumoḻi* composed by Tirumaṅkai Āḻvār (ca. 8th–9th century), who despite his vivid description of the site most likely did not reach the site but expressed the desire to see it (Young 2014: 347). Mutual permeating of tribal and pan-Indian elements, the mixture of which at the level of mythology and iconography contributed to the maintenance of Narasiṃha's ferocious facets and, possibly, influenced the localization of Hiraṇyakaśipu's death in Ahōbilam,[6] created the site's particular ambiance which despite time passing has been perceived through the lenses of wilderness.[7]

The widely diffused story of the marriage of Narasiṃha and the Ceñcū huntress associated with Ahōbilam,[8] which symbolically

[4] According to Rajagopalan, the shift took place ca 1800 (Rajagopalan 2005).

[5] Some scholars claim (Raman 1975: 80; Rajagopalan 2005: 49) that the first Superior of the Ahōbilam *maṭha*, Ādi Vaṇ Śaṭakopaṉ Jīyar, could have been appointed by Kṛṣṇadeva Rāya (reign 1509–1529) in the first quarter of the 16th century as he was the *guru* of Allasāni Pedanna, the poet at the court of the Tuḷuva dynasty.

[6] The motif of destroying the demon is usually interpreted in terms of strategies to legitimize royal power over tribal areas: Narasiṃha is a king and tribals are a demon, who through his death gets the chance to be released/to become integrated to the state.

[7] The autochthonous beliefs have been actually never fully integrated into the mainstream Hinduism the *maṭha* along with Pāñcarātra priests claimed to represent. At the folk level Narasiṃha maintained his locally contextualized features pertaining to his predatory nature (Sontheimer 1985: 146–149).

[8] I summarize the findings regarding the motif of Narasiṃha's double marriage recently discussed in Dębicka-Borek 2016.

reconciles the two traditions they represent, derives from the tribal-lore and is still transmitted in Telugu folk songs. For the pan-Indian audience linked to Brahmanic circles it was eventually presented in the form of a drama of the *nāṭaka* type entitled *Vāsantikāpariṇayam*, composed in Sanskrit and Prakrit, and attributed to the 7th *jīyar* of Ahōbilam *maṭha*, Śaṭakopaṉ Yatīndra Mahādeśika (ca. 16th century).[9] The myth clearly falls into the wide spectrum of South Indian double marriage myths that tell the story of two opposite brides of the same, recognized god: one belonging to the Hindu pantheon, fair and of high status, the other local, of dark complexion and lower origin. Such myths, as demonstrated by David D. Shulman, not only point to the bipolar nature of the goddess, but also, more importantly, from the perspective of Tamil *bhakti* myths reveal "the divine love between the lowly believer (the soul in its exile) and God" (Shulman 1980: 293–294). Or, a tribal/local woman may indicate a *bhakta* sought after by the god (Sontheimer 1985: 146). Although the oldest myths of the god's human wife come from the Śaiva domain—they regard Kumāra and Vaḷḷi—the motif appears to be the most consistently used in the case of the Vaiṣṇava tradition, to recall such additional Viṣṇu's consorts as Āṇṭāḷ, Kaṉakavalli married to Viṣṇu at Tiruvaḷḷūr, local wife of Veṅkaṭēśvara (Shulman 1980: 165) or a Muslim princess linked with four important Śrīvaiṣṇava temples: the temple of Viṣṇu Raṅganātha at Śrīraṅkam, the temple of Vīrarākava Perumāḷ at Vaṇṭiyūr in Tamilnadu, the Nārāyaṇasvāmī temple at Mēlkote in Karnataka, and the Veṅkaṭēśvara temple at Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh (Dutta 2003). Ceñcatā (a Ceñcū huntress) is also not the exception as far as tribal descend of the second bride

[9] R. Vasantha estimates the date of its composition to 1579 (Vasantha 2001: 3). This opinion is possibly determined by the circumstances of Ahōbilam's recapture from the hands of Muslims and Haṇḍē chiefs, the 7th Jīyar of Ahōbilam is usually credited with. In view of Madabhushini Narasimhacharya these particular circumstances might have inspired the author to refer to a locally known story in order to encourage all strata of society to cooperate in times of Muslim invasion (Narasimhacharya 1989: 231, Vasantha 2001: 72–73).

is considered. Both the Keralite consort of Viṣṇu at Kāñcī and Uṟaiyūr Vaḷḷi at Tiruccirappalli display non-Brahmanic origin (Stein 1980: 233–239). Integration of these eventually deified consorts, even if they were seen as subordinate to a husband representing the Vedic tradition, was possible due to the openness of *bhakti*. According to Stein these developments began from the 13th century onwards, when either new shrines of the consorts of Viṣṇu were built, or simply added to the already existing temples of the male deities (Stein 1980: 239). Crucial for spreading the concept of *bhakti* as against caste rhetoric were Śrīvaiṣṇava temples and *maṭha*s, in the premises of which the presence of non-Brahmanic communities has been observed since the times of Rāmānuja's reforms after the 12th century AD (Dutta 2003: 159–162).

In Ahōbilam's case, composition of the Sanskrit version of the myth concerning the local bride of Viṣṇu-Narasiṃha was supported by the inclusive character of the Vijayanagara Empire, under the patronage of which local temples had a chance to develop. The reworked variant of the vernacular motif depicts a reconciliation of both domains 'from above' and on Hindu terms, possibly with intention of being enjoyed by the high and educated stratum of society. The coexistence of both traditions at the site had been already voiced through the myth's local retellings, which possibly served as the point of reference for the author of the drama.Yet, the perspective of the former ones was reversed for they attributed much more independence to the huntress, therefore, in their light it was Narasiṃha who was supposed to adjust to the hunter-gatherers' mode of life and prove that he was a proper suitor for Ceñcatā, learning, for instance, how to collect honey (Murty 1977). In line with the strategies of legitimization of a specific place by Hindu emperors, in the Sanskrit version it is however her along with her co-tribesmen who has to conform, although by the power of mutual love and with acceptance of all Hindu gods, to the standards embodied by her beloved.

The *Vāsantikāpariṇayam* contains a number of conventional elements addressed by the Sanskrit drama theory, which, in this case,

facilitate the realization of its ultimate aim from the superiors' point of view. Rendering the oral myth into the form of a Sanskrit play makes the story—as such rather a novel work designed for a new audience—more vivid and hence, perhaps, more attractive to wider, educated circles (although we do not know if it was ever staged). It is this typical structure of a happily ended love-story, infused with a *śṛṅgāra* mood and culminating with a wedding—even though contextualized locally—and not the body of the re-used ancient vernacular legend, which allows the Sanskrit audience to follow the plot. The setting of the drama mirrors the landscape of the hardly accessible area of Ahōbilam, including such natural landmarks as Garuḍācala Hill[10] or the Bhavanāśinī river (both praised extensively in the *Ahobilamāhātmya*). The action moves from the imagined palace of Narasiṃha, the Lord of Ahōbilam (Ahobileśa), situated in Ahōbilam itself, to the surrounding forests, where a local tribe lives. The obviously hinted Ceñcūs are not designated by their proper name—typically for Sanskrit literature they are referred to as Śabaras, Kirātas or Puliṇḍas (Zin 2008: 376). Being depicted as both a heroic king and a god with extraordinary powers, Narasiṃha fulfills the characteristics of a hero established by the theoreticians of Sanskrit theatre. The heroine's identity is twofold as it comprises a tribal princess, called Vāsantikā, and a Gandharva girl. The explanation of her identity is given very soon, in Act 1, scene 2. As a result of Lakṣmī's curse a Gandharva girl was re-born in a hunting tribe since she dared to ask the goddess, delighted with her artistic skills, to give her her own husband as a reward. In turn, the nature of Lakṣmī, Narasiṃha's legal wife, whose acceptance of the second bride is crucial for the plot, is purely divine. All this together serves the propaganda aimed at the integration of the community epitomized by the second spouse, with a great role played by the justification of her tribal descent through involving her into Brahmanic concepts achieved for instance by the means of the motif of a magical spell

[10] The toponym Garuḍācala refers to the locally contextualized myth of Garuḍa, who practiced penances on the hill where Ahōbilam is situated.

(Shulman 1980: 289, Zin 2008: 377). This purpose transpires also through the words of the actor who at the beginning of the drama introduces the audience to its theme openly alluding to the *bhakti* concept as excusing socially improper relationships and annihilating the shortcomings of *dharma* (Davis 2004: 143):

> Actor: (gladly) Most probably, this is a rule of love that is able to unite a man and a woman: it does not take into account a virtue, it does not know a caste, it does not think about suitability. (VP, p. 20, trans. Dębicka-Borek 2016: 332)

Narasiṃha falls in love with Vāsantikā not knowing her origin. During his royal hunt-trip he observes her from a distance while she is paying homage to a forest deity. Such an enchantment with a tribal girl is not a novelty in Sanskrit literary traditions. As Monika Zin observes, they happen to mention the members of high castes captivated by the beauty of female inhabitants of a jungle they visited (cf. Śakuntalā), the motif being possibly another device of kingdom's politics aware of indigenous communities' value for the state (Zin 1999: 376). And indeed, the *Vāsantikāpariṇayam* shows the Śabaras as relatively advanced people. They constitute a well-organized society ruled by King S/Śūrasena, where since childhood one learns how to use bows, hunting nets and a hollow stick (*nāladaṇḍa*). Their advanced martial skills make them potential warriors so precious for the army. However, emphasizing the combat talents of Śabaras could be also interpreted as intended to create a possibility of the King's encounter with a girl who comes from a forest tribe and thus shares his inclination towards hunting (Dutta 2003: 172). In the context of mediaeval South Indian policy such an encounter, in oral traditions strongly permeated with eroticism, may reflect subduing a local community by a ruler, who as a consequence of sexual intercourse absorbs the powers of the forest embodied by the local huntress (Sontheimer 1997: 291–292).

The love of Narasiṃha and Vāsantikā is marked with suffering from separation (*viraha*), an inseparable ingredient of devotion. Yet, when it comes to a happy ending there is however no compromise on the orthodox side. Lakṣmī justifies her acceptance of Vāsantikā by strengthening her own wedding vows, namely providing the beloved

husband with young girls to satisfy him. Vāsantikā, in turn, has to conform to the norms of the society she enters, abandoning her traditional garment and changing it into silks and jewelry on the day of the wedding, symbolically starting her new life. Nonetheless, this relationship is possible due to mutual and powerful love. At the end of the play Brahmā, one of the gods invited to the wedding, says:

> Brahmā (having said so, taken the god's hand and joined it with a hand of Vāsantikā): The affection for a beloved between each of you is indeed powerful. Let this mutual [love], uncommon for other people, grow. (VP, p. 210, trans. Dębicka-Borek 2016: 331–332)

The tribal girl joins a patriarchal Hindu society, hence the metaphor of marriage is used also in this case to enhance her subordination: Vāsantikā's father reminds her to be devoted to her divine husband, for it is due to his love and grace that she is accepted:

> Śūrasena: You have adorned my family, gem among girls. [Knowing that] you have been favoured by [the Lord] wearing yellow garments, I will be never disheartened by giving you to your husband's house. [One should strive] to be obedient, not otherwise. Be pleased with being obedient to your husband. The Master of the World has no father or mother. Once again, I am addressing you: always be subordinate and fearful of your husband. (VP, p. 211, trans. Dębicka-Borek 2016: 332–333)

To quote Davis, "[b]hakti is a force that overcomes exclusions based on social identity. Relationships that would be improper under conventional standards of dharma may be justified, and indeed rarefied, by the countervailing standard of bhakti" (Davis 2004: 143). Yet, what the Sanskrit version of this particular folk story seeks to convey is that Vāsantikā, as well as her tribesmen, enters into the relationship with the god, but predominantly, with the King who, although he reciprocates her love, demands unquestioning obedience. From this perspective, the message about the acceptance of Ceñcūs within the net of religious and political relations mingling in Ahōbilam seems to serve particular aims of indicating the extension of royal sovereignty of the Vijayanagara Empire over the newly integrated territory; nonetheless, it is done through the association with the religious institution represented by the Ahōbilam *maṭha* and its *jīyar*s.

The headless Bhairava: self-decapitation as the highest form of devotion

Additional light on the processes which moulded Ahōbilam tradition is shed by observations of Madelaine Biardeau, who has noticed the presence of Śaiva elements there be it iconography or oral myths about the visits of famous persona associated with Śaivism (i.e. Śaṅkara) at the site. The most telling feature is however that the date of Ahōbilam Mahotsava is apparently determined by the date of Śivarātri held in nearby Śrīśailam[11] circa two weeks before. This creates the impression of deliberate attempts at attracting Śaiva pilgrims to the Narasiṃha centre despite their religious allegiances (Biardeau 1975). If so, as I would argue, the local religious tradition should be seen as the product of not only the efforts of Vijayanagara rulers to extend their power over the autochthonous inhabitants of the Ahōbilam area, but also of endeavors of local Vaiṣṇava priests to establish authority on the pilgrimage map of the region, which till the times of Vijayanagara rule had been dominated by Śaivas.

Although in line with the most common concept transmitted in the Andhra region, Ahōbilam along with other centers of various sectarian affiliation, namely Vaiṣṇava Tirupati, and Śaiva Śrīśailam and Kālahasti, lies along the body of Śeṣa snake imagined as the mountain range,[12] the Ahōbilam tradition promulgated by the temple priests treats the concept of a sacred space it belongs to slightly differently. The site's Sanskrit glorification, the AM, puts a certain effort to

[11] The distance between Ahōbilam and Śrīśailam, if traversed on foot, could have been covered within three days (Ramaswamy Ayyangar 1916: 37).

[12] Śrīśailam is his tail, Ahōbilam is on its back, Tirupati is on its hood, and Kālahasti at his mouth. The set of these four shrines received rich endowments with villages, land and other gifts from the Vijayanagara rulers between the 15th and 17th centuries (Parabrahma Sastri 2014: 381), hence constituted a pilgrimage circuit of the Andhra region, stretching from north to south (Eck 2012: 251–252, 317). As I was told in Ahōbilam, currently most pilgrims choose the route covering Śrīśailam, Ahōbilam and Tirupati.

establish the link with Śrīśailam. As is well known, *māhātmya*s were the medium of advertising the advantages of a given place among pilgrims. The process of their composition in the region of Andhra could have started after the 14th century, that is after the attempt to establish Muslim rule there (Vasantha 2001: 3, ref. to v. g. Krishnamacharyulu). In the case of the Rāyalasīmā area where Ahōbilam is situated it appears that their production accelerated from the 16th century onwards, along with the expansion of the Vijayanagara Empire into this region. Thus, in this case not only did the *māhātmya*s serve to extol the temples' sanctity but also to conciliate Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and tribal traditions among the variegated Vijayanagara society (Pachner 1985: 326). However, essentially, eulogies were meant to increase the number of pilgrims in a certain place by conventional means of exaggeration and idealization of its powers, mostly the salvific one (Jacobsen 2016: 354). The AM articulates the symbolical connection with Śrīśailam through various textual strategies, out of which the most recurrent is the motif of Śrīśailam being mapped as the extreme point within the religious landscape associated with Ahōbilam. It depicts the area between Ahōbilam and Śrīśailam onto which the elements of recognized myths referring to both Śiva and Viṣṇu in his Narasiṃha form had been imposed (AM 1.40–57). The oral legends which pertain to mutual links between those sites happen to take more substantial form, claiming that they are literally joined by the underground tunnel the entrances to which are situated in the Ahobilanarasiṃhasvāmī temple in Ahōbilam and in the *maṇḍapa* in front of the Mallikārjuna shrine in Śrīśailam (Biardeau 1975: 54). The similar concept is found in AM as well; it mentions the cave, spreading from Ahōbilam to Śrīśailam, where Narasiṃha resides (AM 9.61–62ab). As Biardeau notices while discussing oral legends of this type, their production most probably served particularly the aims of Ahōbilam, for the story on their connection is unknown in Śrīśailam (ibid.).

Certainly, Śrīśailam enjoyed the glory Ahōbilam could never compete with even in times of its prosperity, thus it appears natural that devotees heading to pay homage to Śiva became the target of Vaiṣṇava

priest, whose perspectives on drawing crowds to the remote site were limited. The relatively short distance between Śrīśailam and Ahōbilam, set on the same mountain range deemed hardly accessible due to the scarcity of walkable tracts and the danger of encountering tribes, predators or thieves, most likely affected the choices of pilgrims, who were prone to extend or remodel their route for the sake of security. One could imagine that travelling in groups along the circuit, even if extended, they could share all the hardships. Set to the north edge of the Nallamala Hills, Śrīśailam was known as the Sacred Mountain (Śrī Parvata). The *Mahābhārata* mentions it as a site sacred for Śiva and Devī, however, the earliest references to its shrine of Mallikārjuna are dated to the 7th century. Being acclaimed as one of the twelve sites where Śiva manifested in the form of *jyotirliṅga* as well as one of the *śaktipīṭha*s of Satī, the place attracted visitors from various corners of the subcontinent. By the half of the 7th century Śrīśailam had gained the fame of the centre of Tantric worship fostering development of various Śaiva traditions associated with extreme practices dedicated to Śiva in his Bhairava form, along with his consort. Kāpālikas controlled the place until the 11th century, when power was seized by Kālāmukhas. Vīraśaivas/Liṅgāyatas replaced the others by the 14th century. By this time Kāpālikas most likely had disappeared (Lorenzen 1991: 51–55, cf. Reddy 2014). Many early inscriptions were destroyed in Śrīśailam in the 14th century, however, it is known that the temple along with its satellites situated towards eight directions, all together constituting a sacred region, was the most important one in the inland Andhra of this era (Talbot 2001: 107). The record of Vikramāditya VI of the Western Cāḷukya dynasty dated 1124 AD mentions "Ahobalam"[13] as Dakṣiṇadvāram (southern gate) to Śrīparvata (Anuradha 2002: 162). This statement not only implies the possibility of pilgrims' circulation between Ahōbilam and Śrīśailam from the 12th century onwards, but also potentially illustrates the attempts at including Ahōbilam into the pattern of Śrīśailam sacred territory, possibly as an auxiliary point of departure for the pilgrims heading to Śrīśailam from south or south-west.

[13] The names are used optionally.

Both Ahōbilam and Śrīśailam belonged to the Reḍḍi kingdom (ca. 1325–1448 AD), thus the routes between those two and Tripurāntakam, the three being the famous centers of worship in the region of Andhra during Reḍḍi rule, must have been set a few centuries before the dynasty came to exist (Somasekhara Sarma 1948: 390). Tripurāntaka, the eastern gateway, was one of the most important pilgrimage centres of Andhra already in the times of Kākatīyas (1163–1323) (Talbot 2001: 107), whose last sovereign, Pratāparudra, frequented Śrīśailam and is said to have visited Ahōbilam in several local *kaifiyat*s (Talbot 2001: 203). A reference to Ahobilanarasiṃha in the Pāñcarātra *Vihagendrasaṃhitā* (4.11) suggests that the actual influence of Śrīvaiṣṇavas upon Ahōbilam began before the 14th century (Gonda 1977: 106). This seems to be corroborated by subsequent copper plate grants of the Reḍḍi dynasty alluding to the founder of the Reḍḍi kingdom, Prōlaya Vēmā's construction of steps to facilitate pilgrims' ascent to the temples of Śrīśailam and Upper Ahōbilam. Both fell into the territory where he revived the worship in many temples regardless of their certain sectarian allegiance, even though Reḍḍis themselves were Śaivaites (Somasekhara Sarma 1948: 84).[14] The custom of visiting the sites one by one and also their status as important pilgrimage centres in subsequent years are attested in the record on two slabs opposite to the Bhaireveśvarasvāmī temple at Pōrumāmiḷḷa in the Kaḍapa district, which refers to both Śrīśailam and Ahōbilam (1367 AD). Another one, dated to 1394 AD, states that the Vijayanagara king Hari Hara II constructed some *maṇḍapa*s at Ahōbilam after returning from Śrīśailam (Ramaswamy Ayyangar 1916: 31–32).

Two consecutive myths in the AM are crucial for attempts at projecting Narasiṃha of Ahōbilam as worthy of Śaiva highest devotion and the site itself as providing salvation for Śaivas, both with the obvious aim of enticing Śaiva pilgrims. This is a local variant of the Puranic

[14] According to Vasantha it was Anavēmā Reḍḍi who constructed the steps as recorded in the copper plate grant dated 1378, issued from Pedapalakalūru (Vasantha 2001: 69–70).

story on Narasiṃha fighting Śiva in his Śarabha manifestation (chapter 8 of the AM) and the hardly known myth on Bhairava who pacifies the local Bhavanāśinī river through cutting of his own head (chapter 9), the latter being perhaps a thoroughly local production. As I will seek to demonstrate, the symbolism of self-beheading conceptualized within the wide spectrum of Bhairava's antinomian associations could be seen as endowing this localized story with a wide range of meanings unveiling again the process of making tradition by means of *bhakti*-oriented metaphors rendering total surrender. Taking into account that Vaiṣṇava tradition is perceived as rather reluctant to blood and impurity (with the exception of, significantly, Narasiṃha myth), the involvement of the auto-decapitation concept makes this episode especially worth consideration.

Contextualized within the frames of the river Bhavanāśinī's deeds (*carita*) (AM 9.1), the Bhairava myth basically revolves around two motifs indispensably connected—a river and death (Feldhaus 1995: 179). The passage smoothly complements the Bhavanāśinī's glorification (AM 3.32–144), which, in turn, foreshadows the events related to Bhairava, for among thirteen sacred water-bodies situated in Ahōbilam it mentions *bhairavatīrtha*, the twelfth one, presided by headless (*śirohīna*) Bhairava who frightens the world (*lokabhairava*). If one donates gold, bathing in this *tīrtha* will provide him with children and grandchildren (AM 3.141–142).

Very telling for this particular myth's interpretation is the Indian symbolism of rivers. Due to their life-giving and cleansing powers, rivers not only purify the soul but also ensure auspiciousness after death, with Gaṅgā serving as the paradigm. Their unpredictability manifested in drying up or flooding the banks is viewed as their anger which needs to be propitiated (Wagoner 1996: 149–150). The fierce current may symbolize the power of the washing off of sins, especially if we consider that murder or violence is a topic of most river glorifications (Feldhaus 1995: 176–179). Rivers are often believed to originate in the mountains, nearby *śivaliṅga*s, therefore they are closely connected to Śiva. They are also the goddesses who very efficiently connect the sites

they flow through as they allow the people to conceptualize the region they cross as endowed with religious value (Feldhaus 2003: 18). They nourish the world and they are fertile (Fuller 1996: 47). Many of these associations are found in the AM account, which, despite being transmitted within the Vaiṣṇava tradition, clearly draws on the Śaiva variant of the Gaṅgā myth. Contrary to its Vaiṣṇava Puranic version, which pertains to the Vāmana incarnation of Viṣṇu and does not treat an issue of death and salvation at all—Viṣṇu pierces with his foot the cosmic egg and releases the waters which flow down to the earth forming Gaṅgā—the Śaiva variation focuses upon providing the rites of death to Sagara's sons burnt by the sage Kapila. Bhagīratha's asceticism makes Gaṅgā descend from heaven. Her destructive flow is tamed by Śiva. She is set free thanks to Bhagīratha's plea and, having crossed the underworlds, eventually flushes off the sins of Sagara's sons (Stietencron 2010: 38–48). Since instances of killing a demon—implying in fact the killing of a Brahman by a god—are a common topic of river eulogies in reference to their capacity to wash off a killer's sins (Feldhaus 1995: 176–177), in the general context of Ahōbilam glorification the symbolical function of the Bhavanāśinī seems to be providing Narasiṃha with purificatory rites after he destroyed Hiraṇyakaśipu there, and to cleanse the site. And indeed, the initial chapters customarily praise the Bhavanāśinī as the best of all local water-bodies, the river a glimpse of which releases one from sins amassed during a previous life, the Gaṅgā which flows in three directions incarnated on the great mountain [of Ahōbilam] (AM 3.32–33). The sins possible to be eradicated by the bath in the Bhavanāśinī include the greatest crime that is killing a Brahman (AM. 3.41, 3.136). The river is said to be created by Brahmā who ordered Dharma to become liquid for the sake of purifying the world (AM 3.60–61). Moreover, the Bhavanāśinī is sanctified by the visit of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, who spent a few days on her banks during their journey through the region (AM 3.84–86).

However, the account of the AM 9 presents a picture saturated with much more intricate symbolism. Here it seems that the Bhavanāśinī's capacity to remove impurity and provide death rites serves to incorporate

the motif of Bhairava, whose presence, but only on the surface, is justified by his typical function as a guardian of the place (*kṣetrapāla*). Yet, by analogy with Puranic Śiva, who, in order to stop the uncontrolled Gaṅgā, catches her in his hair, Bhairava obstructs the Bhavanāśinī's flow by throwing his own head into her current. In spite of a number of common features linked to the symbolism of head and hair, the act of cutting off the head of the latter makes the metaphorical meanings of the AM myth different from those connected to the pan-Indian version of Gaṅgā's descent story. Whereas touching Śiva's hair by the river predominantly displays an erotic aspect, materialized in the iconography of Śiva which shows a white trickle on his high-piled coiffure (Storm 2013: 151–153), or is expressed in the stories of his second marriage to Gaṅgā, Bhairava's self-decapitation involves rather opposite notions concerning, in this particular context, his denial of sexuality and its control.

The AM 9 maintains the fact that the Bhavanāśinī embodies *dharma*—she is called virtuous (*dharmātmā*) already at the beginning of the passage (AM 9.2) and, further on, praised in this line by Bhairava (AM 9.25)—yet it is the fact of being born from the foot of Viṣṇu, on the Acchāyameru (AM 9.2), which is emphasized when the issue of her origin is treated. Her origin in this particular spot, traditionally associated with killing Hiraṇyakaśipu by Narasiṃha, from the outset implies her purificatory function. What is significant here, she is a Vaiṣṇava goddess who, if propitiated accordingly, endows people with her grace. The passage clearly betrays the strategy to conciliate various traditions, as it skillfully accommodates the story of a local river, most likely originally perceived as ferocious, into the Vaiṣṇava fold by the means of attributing her Vaiṣṇava rootage (alluding to Puranic stories on the descent of the Gaṅgā mentioned before), although she is coupled with antinomian Bhairava.

Indra, whose heavenly abode is threatened by the Bhavanāśinī's uncontrolled flow, learns that she is not a common river from Bṛhaspati when he approaches him in search for help (AM 9.5–11):[15]

[15] AM 9.5–11: *pravahaty ativegena pralaye sāgaro yathā | antarīkṣagatā ye ca ye ca gandharvakinnarāḥ ||5|| svarlokaṃ samanuprāptāḥ te ca śarma*

> She rushes with an excessive impetus like the ocean during the dissolution of the world. Gandharvas and Kinnaras and all those who pass the atmosphere, having arrived at heaven, did not gain protection, but along with all inhabitants of this sphere they set out for *maharloka*. Thus, when the severe hell has come justly, Indra said so to Bṛhaspati for the sake of prosperity of his kingship. "Bhagavān, how is it that the violent speed of this river agitates all worlds above and below the Earth? Is this a natural event? Is it brought by sages and others? Is it the power of Narasiṃha? Or is it the greatness of the place? How such a power of nothing else but a river can be regulated?" [Bṛhaspati]: "But she is not just a river, she was born from Hari's feet. Let us praise this river indeed. She will become gracious. What purpose this grief of people is intended for?"

Advised by Brahmā, Indra sets off to Ahōbilam to propitiate the angry goddess. However, his praises do not tame the Bhavanāśinī. Her fury grows. Apparently through her ancient watery associations with Sarasvatī, the remedy to Indra's concern finds Brahmā's consort, the Goddess of Speech, Vāc.[16] She recommends Indra to seek help from ferocious Bhairava, who is the guardian of Garuḍācala (Ahōbilam). Attempting to pacify the Goddess by kind words, Bhairava-Kapālin begins singing her praises. This is not enough to appease her as again she becomes even angrier (AM 9.16–25ab, 27–28):[17]

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na lebhire | tatratyaiḥ saha sarvais tu maharlokaṃ prapedire ||6|| evaṃ jāte mahāghore tena dharmeṇa dāruṇe | bṛhaspatim uvācedam indraḥ svendratva-siddhaye ||7|| bhagavān katham etad dhi nadyā vai saṃbhramo mahān | lokān sarvān bhrāmayati medinīm [corr.; *medanīm*] *adharottaram ||8|| kim etat sahajaṃ karma āho ṛṣayādisaṃbhavaḥ | prabhāvo vā nṛsiṃhasya kṣetramāhātmyam eva vā ||9|| katham etādṛśī śaktir nadīmātrasya kalpate |*[*bṛhaspatiḥ*]*: na hy eṣā tu nadīmātrā haripāda samudbhavā ||10|| stoṣyāmas tāṃ nadīm eva sā prasannā bhaviṣyati | lokasya paritāpo' yaṃ kimarthaṃ parikalpyate||11||*

[16] As Kinsley notes, in Vedas Sarasvatī is associated with the powerful Sarasvatī river, perhaps the earliest river-goddess in India; she cleanses and fertilizes. From the Brāhmaṇa period she becomes equated with the Goddess of Speech, Vāc. Medieval Hinduism emphasizes her relation to Brahmā, either as his daughter or consort (Kinsley 1988: 55–64).

[17] AM 9.19–25ab, 27–28: *garuḍācalabhūbhāge bhairavo lokabhairavaḥ | rakṣan samastabhūtāni tatrāste haritoṣakṛt || saṃrambhaṃ bhavanāśin-yāḥ sa tu kṣāmayituṃ kṣamaḥ ||19|| ity ukto vāsavas tuṣṇīm āmantrya tu*

> "On the Garuḍācala there is Bhairava frightful to the world, who due to-protecting all beings brings contentment to Hari. He is competent to pacify the fury of Bhavanāśinī". Having been said so, Indra silently summoned Kapālin and went to heaven. But, o sages!, Kapālin pondered: "I will pacify the Bhavanāśinī river through kind words. Otherwise, how this type of Śakti can be pacified?" Having thought so he praised the river in mind: "For the sake of rescuing [the world] from the torment, I bow to you, Bhavanāśinī, born out of Viṣṇu foot, protected by Viṣṇu, the form of Viṣṇu, emanating from Viṣṇu, praised in various *āgama*s. O Lotus-eyed goddess with the face bright like a lotus, please become tranquil! Incarnation of *dharma*, protector of *dharma*, the one who increases the accumulation of *dharma* […]!" Such a *stotra* has been uttered by Bhairava many times. Regardless of it, the goddess turned her flow to the western direction. With speed, she was destroying mountains overgrown with trees. It was not known whether it was the earth and sky, or intermediate space.

In the light of the above passage Bhairava's ferocious nature is meant as a counterbalance to the temper of the river goddess designated as Viṣṇu's potency (*śakti*). This term indeed denotes that she embodies the potency which enables her to act herself, often in a dangerous way (Fuller 1996: 45). The association of a local goddess with a *bhairava* in the sense of a corresponding frightful deity is known in Tantric traditions, in view of which he is both a guardian and an agent who uses the goddess's power to act (Wagoner 1996: 147). Through his links with the margins, Bhairava serves as a common guardian of the space protecting divinities considered to be pure (*kṣetrapāla*) and acting as the doorkeeper of their temples (*dvārapāla*), the function directly implied in the initial verses of the passage. In his eightfold manifestation,

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kapālinam | jagama tridivaṃ viprāḥ kapāli tu vyacintayat ||20|| śamayiṣyāmi sāmnā tu nadīṃ vai bhavanāśinīm | anyathā tādṛśī śaktiḥ kathaṃ śāmayituṃ kṣamā ||21|| iti saṃcitya manasā tuṣṭāva sa nadīṃ tadā ||22|| [bhairavaḥ:] namaste bhavanāśinyai narakottārahetave | viṣṇupādasamudbhūte viṣṇunā paripālite ||23|| viṣṇurūpe viṣṇumaye vividhāgamasaṃstute | prasīda devi padmākṣi prasannavadanāmbuje ||24|| dharmātmike dharmadhātri dharmasaṃcayavardhini | […] iti stotraṃ bahuvidhaṃ bhairaveṇa samīritam | anādṛtyā yayau devī (corr.; *devi*) *paścimābhimukhī tadā ||27|| utkhātayantī vegena parvatāṃs tarusaṃcayān | pṛthivyākāśayor madhye hy antarālaṃ na vidyate ||28||*

alone or coupled with a consort, Bhairava presides over such sacred cities as Vārāṇasī. However, the juxtaposition of the Vaiṣṇava goddess, customarily associated with vegetarianism and purity, with the "god of transgression par excellence", since Bhairava appears in pan-Indian Hindu tradition as the one who has committed the crime of Brahmanicide and hence is physically marked with his skull (*kapāla*) attached to his hand (Chalier-Vasuvalingam 1989: 157), seems rare and contradictory.[18] The AM story plays on the whole range of associations between the river and death to pair them convincingly. The method chosen by Bhairava to stop the river, that is, cutting off his own head, requires the presence of a cleansing power that would remove his and the site's impurity and grant salvation. As Anne Feldhaus notes, the Puranic story of Bhairava's severing the fifth head of Brahma, seen as an example of Brahman murder, is often involved in river glorifications through releasing him from the sin along certain rivers or localizing the decapitation along their banks, so that the skull can be removed from his hand finally (Feldhaus 1996: 176–77). This idea is traceable in the conceptualization of the AM story, which in spite of turning Bhairava's decapitation of Brahmā into the self-decapitation of Bhairava, maintains the epithet Kapālin alluding to the pan-Indian Brahmanic story, but also to Bhairava as the deity imitated by Kāpālika ascetics associated with a number of Śaiva temples of the Karnūl district. On the other hand, even if only temporarily, the Bhavanāśinī is depicted as angry, and hence she needs suitable propitiation to be pacified and controlled. Therefore, the cruel act of Bhairava is the ultimate means to mitigate her (AM 9.29–49):[19]

[18] Similar juxtaposition is found in the North Indian myth of Vaiṣṇo Devī worshipped in a cave-shrine near Katra, the Jammu district, yet this is the goddess who decapitates Bhairo, her guardian (Erndl 1989; Chalier-Vasuvalingam 1996).

[19] AM 9.29–49: *tadā tu bhairavaḥ kruddhaḥ kopasaṃraktalocanaḥ | devakāryam anusmṛtya karmāntara parāṅmukhaḥ ||29|| śamayiṣyāmi vegena sāhasenaiva karmaṇā | jvalitasya na toyena śāntiḥ kalpaśatair api ||30||*

Then, angry Bhairava, with furious red eyes, having recollected divine command turned to another action. “I will pacify [her] by a quick, rash act. The peace of a blazing person is not due to water but due to a hundred of prescribed practices”. Having thought so in mind, he cut off his head with a sharp sword and, with anger, threw it into the middle of the river. Because of this cruel act, she mitigated her speed. “What will happen to me?” [she thought] with a perplexed mind. She went to the Pātāla quickly where the best of snakes abides. The king of snakes having risen at once said with folded hands. “O Devī, the abode of fortune, what is the aim of your visit here? To whom this best body belongs? What is the reason of your bewilderment in mind? Who are you, the auspicious one? Whose

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ity ālocayatu manasā khaṅgena niśitena tu | śiraḥ kṛntvā svakaṃ kopāt nadīmadhye hy apātayat ||31|| sā ruddhavegā sahasā dāruṇenaiva karmaṇā | kiṃ me bhaviṣyatīty evaṃ cintākulitamānasā ||32|| pātālaṃ sā jagāmāśu yatrāste phaṇināṃ varaḥ | phaṇirāṭ sahasotthāya kṛtāñjalir abhāṣata ||33|| devi kalyāṇanilaye kima rthaṃ tvam ihāgatā | kasyāyam uttamaḥ kāyaḥ kim arthaṃ vyagramānasāḥ ||34|| kā tvaṃ bhavasi kalyāṇi kasya vā tvaṃ parigrahaḥ | nadī nadāḥ sāgarāś ca bhūloke kṛtaketanāḥ ||35|| śrutvedaṃ vacanaṃ tena śeṣeṇa paribhāṣitam | bhīṣaṇaṃ bhīṣaṇākārā vacanaṃ cedam abravīt ||36|| nṛhareḥ pādasaṃbhūtā mām āhur bhavanāśinīm| jalaughair (corr.: *jalaughai*) *ghaurasaṃkāśaiḥ pūrayantī jagattrayam ||37|| stutā bhagavatā sākṣāt sādaraṃ vajrapāṇinā | na śrotrapadavīṃ yātaṃ stotraṃ sattvānubhāṣitam ||38|| tatpreṣitena mahatā lokakaṇṭakakarmaṇā* (corr.: *lokaṇṭhakakarmaṇā*) *| stutāhaṃ bhairaveṇāsmin loke bhairavakarmaṇā ||39|| na śamaṃ gamitā kiñcit strīsvabhāvānubandhanāt ||40|| tataḥ krodhena* (corr.: *kraddhena*) *mahatā tarasā bhairaveṇa tu | śiro nipātitaṃ tena ruddhāhaṃ tvām upāgatā ||41|| ity evaṃ vacanaṃ ghoram āśrutaṃ devadānavaiḥ | śiraḥ prakampayan devaḥ śeṣo vacanam abravīt ||42|| na hy atra prasaro devi nadīnāṃ tu pravartate | bhūtalaṃ gacha tatraiva pravahasva yathepsitam ||43|| sarvaṃ sahā vasumatī sahiṣyati hi te ravam ||44|| iti śrutvā vacas tasya hy aṅgīkṛtya ca sādaram | punarjagāma bhūlokaṃ yatrāste tintriṇī taruḥ ||45|| karmaṇā kāyikenaiva taruḥ kaścid vijottamāḥ | tatrodbhūtā mahāpuṇyā lokapāvanapāvanī ||46|| yatrodbhūtā tu tatraiva tintriṇītarumūlake | bhairavasya śiraḥ puṇyaṃ sthāpayāmāsa pāvanī ||47|| tac chiraḥ pūjyamānaṃ tu janair iṣṭārthadāyakam | sā nadī kṛṣṇaveṇyās tu saṅgame hy avidūrataḥ ||48|| yojanadvayamātre tu gamitā sāgaraṃ prati | pṛthagbhūtā tu tatraiva bhartāraṃ pariṣasvaje ||49||*

> wife are you? Rivers, streams, oceans have their abodes on the Earth". Having listened to these words spoken by the Snake, the one with a terrifying form said these terrifying words: "I am known as Bhavanāśinī who originated from Narasiṃha's foot. Since I filled the three worlds with a horrible quantity of water, I was praised by Lord Indra himself respectfully, [yet] the hymn sung with purity was not heard [by me]. Through the great, dreadful act of a wicked-man, impelled by this, in this world I was praised by Bhairava. Due to the female nature, I did not calm at all. The head was thrown by great Bhairava irritated by my speed [into my current], by which I was stopped, and [then] approached you". Such terrible words were heard by gods and demons. The Divine Snake said these words shaking his head. "O Goddess, here the rivers do not appear. Go up the Earth and flow there according to your wish. The enduring earth will overcome, indeed, your roar completely". Having heard his words and accepted them respectfully, she again went to Bhūloka, where there is a tamarind tree. O twice-born! Certain tree [along] with bodily activities [made] the river which appeared there extremely auspicious and holy through [bestowing her with] the capacity to purify the world. [In the place] where she appeared, under the roots of the tamarind tree, the Pāvanī put the auspicious head of Bhairava. This head, granting the desired objects, is worshipped by the people. The river is not far from the confluence with Kṛṣṇaveṇī. After two *yojana*s she traveled to the ocean alone, where she embraced [her] husband.

As we could see, not only does the AM plot draw on the Śaiva Gaṅgāvatāraṇa myth in terms of placating the angry river by Śiva, but also in respect of her later descent into the netherworlds and, then, coming back to the earth. By analogy with Gaṅgā, the metaphorical crossing of the three worlds bestows her with a redemptive power (Stietencron 2010: 42). This passage, concluded with the Bhavanāśinī emptying into the ocean, a motif which usually closes river-glorifications as it implies the fulfillment of river's goals (Feldhaus 2003: 19ff.), provides some clues concerning Bhavanāśinī's anger. Interrogated by Śeṣa, who resides in the Pātāla, she excuses her uncontrolled behaviour with flighty female nature. Moreover, she does not answer the question regarding her marital status. As we learn further on, Ocean is her husband, yet until the moment of reaching it, they stay separated. In the light of C. J. Fuller's observations, a goddess's qualities oscillate between anger and mildness depending on whether she is unmarried

or "wifey" (Fuller 2004: 44–47). Being apart from her husband may explain Bhavanāśinī's ferocious form (*bhīṣaṇākārā*), for she is, at least for the present, single. As such she could be destructive, but also, through her unfulfilled erotic desires, productive. The case of river-goddesses is especially complex, as being usually local divinities they are closely connected to the soil that is fertilized by their waters. For this reason, they must exercise their power, even if sometimes dangerous. This issue is hinted at in the AM when Śeṣa is reluctant to believe Bhavanāśinī's appearance in the netherworlds, since, as he claims, she is bound to the earth. The transformation into a mild goddess without losing the capability to act and keep nourishing the world is possible through situating the river in a dynamic state between being unmarried and married, which, in a way, reveals the ambiguity of her nature, the strategy again clearly used in the AM. That is why it seems it is Bhairava, himself an archetype of ferociousness, and not her 'legal' husband, who successfully appeases her, as apparently she is too 'hot', to use Fuller's typology, in comparison with 'cool' male Vaiṣṇava deities (with an exception of Narasiṃha, who is actually seen as fierce). The extreme level of her anger is implied by the fact that like many local goddesses, mostly those connected to smallpox, she has to be placated by a bloody sacrifice. Originating from beyond the realm of Vaiṣṇavism, Bhairava is capable of offering such a sacrifice in its best form, that is self-sacrificing, without interfering with her true relationship, since, as already mentioned, the cutting-off of his own head can be seen as renunciation of his sexuality to Bhavanāśinī's advantage (Storm 2013: 151–155).

The way Bhavanāśinī deals with a severed head reveals another level of conciliating various traditions treated in the text. Having emerged on the surface, before she peacefully flows to the Ocean to embrace him, Bhavanāśinī puts Bhairava's head at the spot of her appearance, under the tamarind tree (*tintriṇītaru*). The same place turns into the site of his worship, where the head grants all desires to devotees. Whilst from the perspective of Puranic tradition her touch might be seen simply as implying washing off Bhairava's sin, this

episode carries also the meanings related to the motif, widely transmitted in the Deccan, which associates a tamarind tree with an origin of local cults. Often such a motif involves the presence of a termite mound, raised usually besides a tamarind tree (or tamarind forest) planted by Brahmā, and reflecting therefore the connection between tribals, forest and Sanskritic tradition personified by this particular god. This pattern explains the genesis of, for instance, worship held in Tirupati (Veṅkaṭēśa found in a termite mound under the tamarind tree), Śrīśailam (*śivaliṅga* found in a termite mound) (Sontheimer 1975: 131–132), or Penna Ahōbilam in the Anantapur district (Narasiṃha found in a termite mound) (Murty 1997: 187). Within the framework of such foundation stories a termite mound is often identified with a local goddess or Ādiśeṣa (Sontheimer 1975: 131). Being "a miniature mountain in the forested area", an anthill symbolically points to cults' original spatial separateness from inhabited areas. In Vedic sacrifice which, as proposed by Jan C. Heesterman, identified an anthill with the "sacrificial head", an element essential for sacrifice, the Sun or Agni was worshipped in an anthill by analogy with the Sun, which before daybreak was hidden (Heesterman 1985: 47, cf. Sontheimer 1997: 92). Whereas the *śrauta* sacrifice replaced Agni with Rudra, in folk traditions of Khaṇḍobā he is seen as Mārtāṇḍa Bhairava, who before his emergency resides in a termite mound (Sontheimer 1997: 92). Similar associations are found in reference to the New Year Festival (Biskeṭ) celebrated in Bhaktapur (Nepal), on the last day of which a pot substituting the severed head of Bhairava is symbolically offered to Bhadrakālī residing beside a cremation *ghāṭ*. Drawing on Heesterman's concept, a head-pot substitutes a termite mound, "a womb symbol of Agnicayana ritual" and thus makes the identity of Bhairava sacrificial (Chalier-Vasuvalingam 1996: 283). From this perspective, the episode of the Bhavanāśinī river reuses all the elements constituting the old motif, which gives an explanation of Bhairava's worship at the place and points to the deep bound between him and the river-goddess, both originally confined to Ahōbilam. If we perceive the head of Bhairava as a substitute of a womb, the act of killing himself and throwing his

head into the river's current may render his return to the primordial form and restoration (cf. ibid.).

Let us look closer at the reasons for the incorporation of the figure of self-beheading Bhairava in the account of the AM. As Heinrich von Stietencron observes, there is a close connection between a river and a religiously motivated suicide. The belief in the salvific power of Gaṅgā triggered the idea of religious self-offering as early as in the middle of the first millennium. Expecting to be released from mundane bonds, pilgrims headed for its banks and other sacred *tīrthas* to voluntarily end their life there (Stietencron 2010: 38–48). As already mentioned, Bhairava's self-beheading along the Bhavanāśinī's banks clearly denotes a self-sacrifice. Yet, the context of its entanglement into the Śrīvaiṣnava tradition poses many questions concerning both the nature of the sacrificer and sacrifice. The self-chosen death by self-beheading as its greatest form, is a topic of various Indian myths and iconography, which attests the spread of this custom, usually in the context of the ideal of heroism. In South India, the earliest stone sculptures representing devotees cutting their heads off to offer them to Goddess Kor̲ravai are from the 7th century AD (Storm 2013: 6–7). In the case of Andhra, most probably variously motivated self-destructive practices spread there from Cōl̲a country in the times of Kākatīyas. Due to the growing role of temple worship they replaced the cult of hero-stones. Self-beheading became a method of manifesting dedication to a god or goddess, which in a way still reflected respect for martial heroism deeply bound with the region (Talbot 2001: 71). In the medieval Rāyalasīma, where the highest number of hero stones and inscriptions referring to self-sacrifice were found, most instances point to socio-economic and political causes (Chandrasekhara Reddy 1994: 6–10, 60–61).[20] In parallel to the events in other parts of South

[20] The society inhabiting this region was exceptionally prone to such practices due to particular conditions: wars between certain dynasties, the clash of tribal and settled cultures in the Nallamala Hills, which resulted in cattle-raids, or the necessity to fight wild animals or robbers at the cost of life.

India, a shift towards religious suicide caused by a deep devotion to a god happened in the later medieval period (ibid.: 168–74). The taking of one's life in fulfillment of vows was often performed for the sake of Śiva Bhairava or Vīrabhadra, yet it was these violent aspects of the goddesses Kālī or Durgā which were most popular. It was believed that the sacrifice would secure the fulfilling of desires or appease the deity's wrath manifested by, for instance, a calamity (Storm 2013: 232).

In this light, Bhairava's beheading himself as well as his motivation to calm the river could be interpreted as rendering the symbolical meaning of cutting off parts of the body by a devotee as a gift to a deity for the sake of avoiding natural disaster. Similarly to the ferocious aspects of the goddess to whom the offer is dedicated, Bhavanāśinī is angry. Having received the sacrifice from a devotee—namely achieving Bhairava's self-severed head—she mitigates her current. Not surprisingly, the sacred geography promoted by AM suggests that the metaphor aims to link Bhairava's act with Śrīśailam. The consecutive (and ultimate) verses of the chapter mention the long cave inhabited by Narasiṃha, which leads from the site of Bhairava worship at Ahōbilam to Śrīśailam (AM 9.61–62). The socio-religious milieu of medieval Rāyalasīmā must have impacted the conceptualization of Bhairava's sacrifice to the Bhavanāśinī, especially if we consider that the area which nowadays constitutes the Karnūl district, where both Ahōbilam and Śrīśailam are located, for centuries was connected to the extreme forms of Tantric Śaiva worship (Lorenzen 1991: 51–52), with its centre in Śrīśailam. An inscription dated to 1377 AD records construction of the hall dedicated to self-mutilations (*vīraśiromaṇḍapa*) attached to the Vīraśaiva Mallikārjuna Temple at Śrīśailam for the merit of king Anavēmā Reḍḍi's father-in-law, proving that in the medieval period such practices were common and patronized by the state. There the heroes (*vīra*) offered various part of their body to the goddess (Storm 2013: 119, 235). The exterior walls of this temple are engraved with scenes of decapitation, including the widely diffused story of King Śibi, who is about to offer his own head to save a pigeon (Sudyka 2015).

The images were possibly meant to inspire and support potential self-sacrificers, who during the circumambulation of the temple had them in front of their eyes (Storm 2013: 119). Mary Storm argues in this context that the way of killing oneself is as much symbolically important as its motivation. Self-decapitation implies not only sacrificial symbolism but also numerous meanings connected to the head and blood. The head implies individual identity, hence the self-sacrifice through beheading evokes self-denial and subjugation before the deity (ibid.: 146). It may be a metaphor for losing one's power and transferring it to the sacrifice's recipient (ibid.: 150).

What happens to Bhairava? After completing the passage on Bhavanāśinī's deeds, which concludes with announcing the place of Bhairava's suicide at Ahōbilam sacred, the text continues (AM 9.51–56):[21]

> Crippled Bhairava was cherished by Hayamedhas, but violent Bhairava did not accept another elegant and beautiful form given [by him] then. He said these words to the God of Gods, the Lord of Word: "Because the river has experienced a great misfortune, o Lord of the World!, the head given to the river is for protection of people. I will thus define the [state of being] the only vessel of your grace. Always [people] will address me 'a difficult task was realized by faultless Bhairava with a wish of the world's welfare'. My highest glory is that my body is merely cut (*muṇḍitaiva saṃsthiti*). Since today, this world will eulogize me as "Bhairava [whose head] was cut" (*muṇḍo bhairava*). There is no doubt, neither this is my wit".

The above passage suggests that eventually the AM transfers the emphasis from the river as the recipient of Bhairava's offer to Narasiṃha. This

[21] AM 9.51–56: *bhairavaḥ khaṇḍarūpas tu suprīto hayamedhasā | rūpalāvaṇyasaundaryaṃ dattaṃ mūrtāntaraṃ tadā ||51|| pratijagrāha naivāyam ugrakarmā tu bhairavaḥ | devadevaṃ jagannātham idaṃ vacanam abravīt ||52|| mahaty āpattis tu saṃprāptā nadyās tu jagadīśvara* (corr.; *jagadīṣvara*) *| śarmaṇe jagatāṃ dattaṃ śiras tu taṭinīṃ prati ||53|| aham evaṃ viśiṣyāmi tvatprasādaikabhājanam | māṃ vadiṣyanti sarvatra duṣkaraṃ karma vai kṛtam ||54|| bhairaveṇa supūrṇena lokānugraham icchatā | iyaṃ me paramā kīrtir yan muṇḍitaiva saṃsthitiḥ ||55|| adya prabhṛiti loko'yaṃ muṇḍo bhairava ity api | vadiṣyati na sandeho na me'sti parivedanā ||56||*

relegation is possible for the river-goddess has been already designated as potency (*śakti*). Being connected to Viṣṇu-Narasiṃha, as she emerged out of his foot, she could be perceived as representing his creative female aspect. Causing the flood which needs to be stopped, she metaphorically becomes the means of bringing Bhairava close to God, so that, while fulfilling his duties of a protector, he could become the only vessel of Narasiṃha's grace (*prasādaikabhājana*). His total surrender to Narasiṃha physically represented through his being headless—expressed quite euphemistically through the usage of the term *muṇḍa* (lit. 'shaved', 'bold', 'lopped' if an adjective, or 'head' if a noun)—vests Bhairava with the highest merit and glory. He rejects Brahmā's offer to restore his body with the other one as if to avoid acquiring a new identity. It is his self-beheading itself which denotes regeneration and renewal, therefore Bhairava's act grants him new powers: of the guardian of the place and a model for all whose practice is unstable and sinful, yet they display devotion (*bhakti*) to Narasiṃha, the latter pointing nevertheless to Bhairava's alien and transgressive origin (AM 9.57–60ab):[22]

> Having heard these words, Lord Narasiṃha said: "Bhairava, let it be in the world as you said. All the people acting alike, who display devotion towards me, they, full of affection, shall consider you as the guardian of the place. But to those people whose only intent is upon instability of conventional practice here, whose minds are sinful, you should be the best teacher". Having said so, the Lord disappeared from there.

The concept of Bhairava cutting off his own head makes the AM story perfectly fulfil the need of attracting Śaiva devotees to Ahōbilam through presenting them with a picture of the highest sacrifice offered by Śiva in his Bhairava form to Narasiṃha. At the same time, this story

[22] AM 9.57–60ab: *ity evaṃ vacanaṃ śrutvā bhagavān narakesarī | yaduktaṃ bhavatā loke tattathaivāstu bhairava ||57|| ye tu sādhāraṇajanā mayi bhaktiṃ prakurvate | te janāḥ prītisaṃyuktā drakṣyanti kṣetrapālakam ||58|| ye tv atra samayācāra laṅganaikaparāyaṇāḥ | teṣāṃ vai pāpācittānāṃ śāsanaikaparo bhava ||59|| iti sandiśya bhagavāṃs tatraivāntaradhīyata |*

reveals the complexity of tradition in which local and Brahmanic elements mingle under the umbrella of *bhakti* theology. Framing it within the deeds of the local river-goddess, whose originally ferocious nature is transformed into a peaceful one and therefore granted with the ability to provide death rites, results in Bhairava's transmutation. Simultaneously, her watery associations mitigate Bhairava's transgressive features arising from the mixture of Puranic and tribal associations that generate impurity. Among the preventive Śrīvaiṣṇavas introducing the motif of a bloody self-sacrifice was most likely justified by the violent nature of Narasiṃha, the deity which among the Vaiṣṇava pantheon, is indeed the most suitable one, if not the only one, to receive an offer implying auto-sacrificial blood. Currently, the Ahōbilam temple tradition seems not to especially engage in the still existing custom of worshipping Narasiṃha with animal-offerings by the folk and Ceñcūs, yet it must be not without meaning that such practices are confined, if happen at all, to the most remote Pavananarasiṃha temple. Once possibly the place of regular worship, which seems to be suggested by erection of *garuḍastambha* in front of it, nowadays the temple is considered the hardest to reach due to its localization in a dense forest in the distance of several kilometers from the Upper Ahōbilam in the neighborhood of Ceñcūs' hamlets (cf. Vasantha 2001: 10).

Nonetheless, taking into account that a Hindu paradigm for a self-beheading deity remains the goddess Chinnamastā, the Ahōbilam story of a headless Bhairava appears exceptional. In the context of its production within the framework of dynamic processes that shaped Ahōbilam tradition it might be important that a motif of Bhairava whose place of suicidal death through self-decapitation turns into the place of worship occurs in relation to the complex of Śaiva shrines connected to Kāpālika worship in Bhairavakōna/koṇḍa. The site is situated in the forests of the Nallamala Hills in the Prakāśam District of Andhra Pradesh, circa 160 kilometers from Ahōbilam by road. It comprises nine rock-cut *maṇḍapa*s excavated from one hill, eight of them dedicated to Śiva in his various aspects and one dedicated to the goddess. On the basis of inscriptions found on the spot it is dated

to the 8th century AD (Subba Reddy 2009: 54). In the only *maṇḍapa* which faces north, the images of Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahmā are enshrined (Rao 1988). It is also yet another spot where the affair of Narasiṃha and a Ceñcū huntress is localized (Bezbaruah 2003: 179). The name of the place derives from the cult of Bhairava, whose image is carved on a big boulder (Subba Reddy 2009: 51). Local legends reveal however that the cult developed in close coexistence with autochthonous beliefs. According to one of such stories, the number of cattle belonging to local herders increased so much that it was impossible to provide water for them. Seeing suffering cows, a herder named (Kāla)Bhairava Koṇḍayya took a bath in a local spring and prayed to the god that if he provides water, he will sacrifice his own head. The god fulfilled his wish immediately, hence Koṇḍayya, along with his family, worshipped him with animal offerings. When the family left, Bhairava Koṇḍayya hanged himself from a tree tying his hair to the branch. With a sharp sword, he cut off his body which fell to the ground. The relatives buried his dismembered body nearby the spring and to commemorate his altruistic death they installed a headless trunk in stone (*moṇḍi śila*). The image became the site of Bhairava's worship, nowadays visited mostly during the Śivarātri festival.[23]

In the particular context of Bhairavakōna, the motif of self-beheading evidently reflects the strategies of integrating tribal communities, here herders and shepherds, into the Śaiva fold with the help of Bhairava deity, originally connected to tribal domains. Although the Bhairavakōna story developed on the fringes of Śaiva tradition, it shares important elements with the Ahōbilam myth. In both cases, the reason for Bhairava's self-sacrifice arises from the need to avert calamity caused by water (its abundance or shortage), which later on becomes indispensable for annihilating impurity (river or spring) caused by suicide, committed by the same method implying total submission. The proximity of both places, which makes the circulation

[23] https://indiantemples.info/temples/bhairavakona-temple-bhairavakona.

of the story plausible, perhaps indicates that the AM myth could be situated in a broader ideological perspective, in which Bhairava who offers his own head out of his devotion to Narasiṃha epitomizes not only the total surrender of Śaivas but also of autochthonous population, with Narasiṃha claimed by the Brahmanic circles as the recipient of sacrifice (accoding to some inhabitants of Ahōbilam local tradition has it, that Bhairava who self-decapitated in Ahōbilam came from Bhairavakōna).

Conclusions

In the above analysis of the two myths connected to the Śrīvaiṣṇava centre in Ahōbilam—about Narasiṃha marrying Ceñcatā and Bhairava who self-decapitates out of devotion to Narasiṃha respectively—I hoped to discuss not only the uniqueness of localized Sanskrit myths used to convey the message about appropriation of strangers into the Vaiṣṇava fold, but also to propose that the diversity of metaphors aimed at showing this appropriation, even though in both cases determined by love to Narasiṃha, was the outcome of certain conditions, mostly by the concerns of the circles within which the motifs were transmitted.

In the *Vāsantikāpariṇayam*'s case it appears important to reflect upon the fact that the genre of drama, which was chosen to present the reworked version of autochthonous legend about Narasiṃha's second marriage to a tribal girl, was usually patronized by Hindu kings and thus strongly involved into royal matters. The myths which constituted the plots of dramas, often disclosing the actual concerns of a king, served chiefly as the means of boasting royal power, establishing dynasties or acclaiming royal allies (Tieken 1993: 104). Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the author of the *Vāsantikāpariṇayam* seems to be more preoccupied with showing tribals as decent and advanced people of combat skills than candidates for proper devotees of the Vaiṣṇava god. Taken that the double marriage metaphor may symbolically pertain to both the spread of spiritual and mundane power (Sontheimer 1985: 152), one could thus ask if the drama could

have been actually composed by one of the 16th-century Vijayanagara king's poets, who was eager to express legitimization of his benefactor's influences over a distant area, and not necessarily by a holy man, the 7th *jīyar* of Ahōbilam *maṭha*, as is believed, occupied with religious matters.[24] On the other hand, inscribing the authorship of the drama to the *maṭha*'s legendary head converges with strategies of Vijayanagara rulers to enhance their position over a newly gained region through association with religious institutions. Yet, even though these are the first *jīyar*s of Ahōbilam who are traditionally credited with taking care of uplifting the status of Ceñcūs (Vasantha 2001: 48), it does not mean that they were experts in Sanskrit drama, the genre rather confined to the court. The last advice given to Vāsantikā by her father, in the light of which the power of devotion towards her god/royal husband allows her appropriation (along with autochthonous community she comes from) into the orthodox Hindu hierarchical society, irrespective of their former social status, but under the condition of total obedience, seems to be crucial here. Mutual love leads to marriage, albeit this is the (inferior) wife who has to leave her former life behind. Interestingly, the message of the Sanskrit adaptation, which in a way mirrors the general policy of the Vijayanagara kings to support local religious centers for the sake of expanding borders through drawing indigenous, usually martial, communities leaving nearby, not entirely coincides with the message of sculptural representations of Narasiṃha and Ceñcatā situated on a pillar of the Prahlādavarada temple of Lower Ahōbilam and the Ahobilasvāmī temple of Upper Ahōbilam. Although the construction of the former one most probably started during the reign of Sāḷuva Narasiṃha (Vasantha 2001: 86), and the latter one was expanded during various phases of the Vijayanagara period, nonetheless, in contradistinction to the Sanskrit drama, the same size of figures sculpted on their walls as a hunter and a huntress, with bows and crowns, emphasizes the equal status of spouses. This 'slight' difference regarding the position of the husband and wife I would see as arising

[24] This suggestion I owe to Prof. Lidia Sudyka.

from the usage of a different medium addressed to different recipients of a tale, with the drama intended for highly educated circles ready to accept Ceñcatā, albeit on their terms, and the sculptures accessible for all visitors of the temple, including lower strata of society hungry for approval evoked by the spouses' equality.

The medium of transmitting the tale on Bhairava who cuts off his own head, that is, in turn, a textual genre of *māhātmya*, points to the pilgrims as the target of the story's message. The fluidity of religious boundaries in pilgrimage sites must have been instrumental for *māhātmya*s' ability to articulate the claims of various groups that depended on the gifts of pilgrims (Lochtefield 2010: 6, cf. Jacobsen 2016: 354ff). The genre might have been therefore used to influence popular imagery in regard to building the networks of links between certain places and recommending given routes. From the perspective of a temple as the institution relying on the generosity of inflowing devotees, the particular religious conditions of medieval Rāyalasīma, especially of the present Karnūl district, with, on the one hand, its numerous Śaiva temples following extreme forms of worship dedicated to Bhairava, among them the widely acclaimed Śrīśailam, and on the other, difficult tracts leading to sparse Vaiṣṇava sites, must have imposed on the priests of distant Ahōbilam the necessity to appeal to devotees searching for various fierce divinities. Narasiṃha's affinity to Śiva-Bhairava, both operating between the Brahmanic and tribal realms, provided such opportunities. The myth about alien Bhairava, who finally becomes the guardian of Ahōbilam, is very telling in many respects. Bhairava, who out of love for Narasiṃha self-decapitates to prevent a flood, is an excellent model for the devotees worshipping Śiva. However, in opposition to the tale about subordinated Ceñcatā, Bhairava is not required to transform his body; he refuses to accept a new form and is allowed to do so. This appears to reflect the ambiance of the medieval period, when for masses retracing pilgrimage tracts to experience divinity the adherence to one religious allegation was hardly significant and rather fluid (Orr 2005: 10–12). Or, as Diana Eck notes in the general context of Indian tradition of pilgrimage, the imagined

map of pilgrims' India is not an outcome of connecting a place to particular gods or saints, but, actually, of connecting places to one another through the people following local, regional or transregional routes (Eck 2012: 5). From this angle, even though the metaphor of auto-decapitation renders total surrender, the AM opens the possibilities for potential Śaiva pilgrims to remain themselves, provided their love to Narasiṃha has been proved. Last but not least, although the narrative in the form known from the AM appears to be produced with a particular aim of attracting Śaivas to Ahōbilam, nonetheless, likewise the legend about the Ceñcū huntress, it can actually derive from autochthonous domain. This is suggested when Bhairava is coupled with the local river-goddess, who, even though inscribed into Vaiṣṇava typology, is dangerous and unpredictable, and, what is more, single. Her decision to put Bhairava's self-decapitated head under the tamarind tree, which in line with the old pattern diffused in Deccan allows us to identify it with a termite mound, corroborates the notion that Bhairava and the goddess are bound to the same cultic place of folk origin. Similarly, although in the light of *bhakti* cults the AM is permeated with, Bhairava's self-decapitation metaphorically expresses Śiva's highest dedication to Viṣṇu-Narasiṃha, the motif itself, especially if we consider the absence of self-decapitated Bhairava in the Brahmanic tradition and reluctance of Śrīvaiṣṇavas to bloody offerings, could perhaps betray the oldest stratum of Ahōbilam beliefs, with Bhairava embodying ancient wild deities. The much earlier attested history of nearby Bhairavakōna, where tribal traditions greatly impacted its Bhairava worship, the reflection of which is found in the local motif of the self-decapitated shepherd Bhairava, may allude (though does not have to) to the place of the story's origin and therefore situate Ahōbilam worship in a wider perspective of local and regional influences within the framework of Vaiṣṇava tradition.

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