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Review of Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson

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► **To cite this version:**

Andrea Acri. Review of Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson. Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2021, 107, pp.382-387. <halshs-03919618>

HAL Id: halshs-03919618

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03919618v1>

Submitted on 20 May 2025

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Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Acri Andrea. Dominic Goodall, Shaman Hatley, Harunaga Isaacson & Srilata Raman (eds.), *Saivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson*, Leiden–Boston, Brill (Gonda Indological Studies 22), 2020. In: Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient. Tome 107, 2021. pp. 382-387;

https://www.persee.fr/doc/befeo_0336-1519_2021_num_107_1_6383;

Fichier pdf généré le 23/02/2024

Dominic GOODALL, Shaman HATLEY, Harunaga ISAACSON & Srilata RAMAN (eds.), *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions: Essays in Honour of Alexis G.J.S. Sanderson*, Leiden–Boston, Brill (Gonda Indological Studies 22), 2020, xxxiv + 598 pages – ISBN 978-90-04-43266-6 (hardback); 978-90-04-43280-2 (e-book)

This edited volume revolves around the figure of Alexis Sanderson, formerly Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at All Souls College in Oxford. It programmatically bears the title of the seminal article—“Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions”—published in 1988 by Sanderson, a pioneering piece of work that provided for the first time “a model of how the various parts of the vast and complex corpus were related and hierarchized by followers of a major current of Indian religion” (p. xxvi), and which can be rightly regarded as being “without a doubt the single most influential article on Śaivism of the twentieth century” (p. 16). The volume showcases the impact that the work of this extraordinary scholar and his students has made on the field over the last three decades. Partly stemming from a symposium held in 2015 at the University of Toronto in his honour, it includes contributions by many of Sanderson’s direct students as well as of scholars who have been influenced in some way by his scholarly legacy, on both sides of the Atlantic as well as in Asia. Primarily focused on the analysis of medieval texts in Sanskrit, but occasionally opening up to other disciplines and historical periods, this volume reflects the currently dominant trends in the field of Tantric Studies.

The volume is opened by “A Note on Alexis Sanderson and Indology” by Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson, which praises the honorand not only as a scholar whose work is at once pioneering, magisterial, broad in scope, and quantitatively monumental, but also as a gifted and inspiring teacher. On p. xxx, the authors characterise the scope of the papers gathered in the book as revealing “some of the many ways in which Alexis has been influential, their authors showing us in the mirrors of their own bright intellects some reflections of the radiance, the *prakāśa*, of Alexis Sanderson.” Spanning 15 pages, it describes Sanderson’s career and contribution to the field of Tantric Studies from the perspective of former students and colleagues; containing many interesting anecdotes, it makes a lively and entertaining read. In the Introduction by the editors, two paragraphs occupying less than one full page are dedicated to introducing and contextualising the subject matter of the volume, the remaining ten containing short summaries of every chapter.

The ensuing twenty-three chapters of the volume span multiple fields of Indology and tackle various aspects of medieval Śaiva and Buddhist Tantric traditions. Part I (Early Śaivism) includes three contributions focusing on the Atimārga and early Mantramārga traditions of Śaivism, i.e. a *Māhātmya* of Vārāṇasī and Atimārga sources (Bisschop), Śaiva and non-Śaiva sources containing accounts of the Kāpālikas (Törzsök), and the *Niśvāsattattvasamhitā* and other early Siddhāntatantras (Goodall). Part II (Exegetical and Philosophical Traditions) contains chapters dealing with

the philosophies of Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha II (Watson), Utpaladeva (Ratié), and Abhinavagupta (Wallis), as well as the Buddhist exegete Vāgīśvarakīrti (Szántó) and *stotra* literature on Rāmānuja (Raman). Part III (Religion, the State, and Social History) contains essays on the figure of Vasiṣṭha in the *Raghuvamśa* (Dezső), *dhāraṇī* literature and state-protection Buddhism (Hidas), the Śaiva exoteric initiation called *lokadharmiṇī dīkṣā* (Mirnig), social and religious change in Kashmir in the light of the writings of post-scriptural Śaiva authors (Nemec), and the development of the Navarātra festival in India (Sarkar). Part IV (Mantra, Ritual, and Yoga) contains six essays on the Kashmirian Tantric deity Śārikā (Hanneder), a hymn of praise (the *Kāmasiddhistuti*) to the Goddess Nityā Sundarī by eighth-century King Vatsarāja (Acharya), the integration of inner and outer ritual in the *Brahmayāmala* (Hatley), the Tantric Buddhist *Amṛtasiddhi* as *Haṭhayoga*'s source text (Mallinson), a sexual ritual in the South Indian Kubjikā-Tripurā-oriented Tantric yoga text *Matsyendrasaṃhitā* (Kiss), and an analysis of textual sources on Haṭhayoga from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Birch). Part V (Art and Architecture) contains papers on the structure of the buildings of early Śaiva Maṭhas (Mills), the parallels between the Tantric Buddhist *Kriyāsaṃgrahapañjikā* and Śaiva Pratiṣṭhāntras (Tanemura), Mañjuśrī as Ādibuddha in the light of early Western Himalayan Buddhist Art and *Nāmasaṃgīti*-related texts (Tribe), and the interpretation of the *Citrasūtra* in the light of twentieth-century art historical discourse and critical theory (Dave-Mukherji).

Being unable to do justice to all the papers in a volume of such magnitude here, I shall only take up a handful of essays that I feel qualified to comment on and conclude this review with some general remarks.

Chapter 1 by Peter Bisschop (“From Mantramārga back to Atimārga: Atimārga as a Self-referential Term”) argues—somewhat counter-intuitively with respect to its title—that the term *atimārga* was *not* a self-referential term, but rather reflects an emic division of Śaivism from the viewpoint of the Mantramārga. It is never used in original Pāśupata sources, but only in the proto-Saiddhāntika *Niśvāsa* and other early Mantramārgic texts, which were familiar with that tradition and its technical terminology. Bisschop’s argument revolves around a passage of the twelfth-century *Māhātmya* of Vārāṇasī that appears to be “the only known non-Mantramārga source that uses the term Atimārga” (p. 24). The author discusses the precise and coherent references to Atimārga terminology and doctrines found in this passage, as if to imply that it must have been appropriated from an Atimārga source itself, yet he also pinpoints similarities and precise textual parallels with the Mantramārgic *Svacchandatantra*—a text that reflects the appropriation and redaction of Atimārga (or Atimārga-influenced) material, of the kind also found in the *Niśvāsa* and the *Mataṅga*. Thus, the passage may very well have been appropriated from an early Mantramārga source, even though the *Māhātmya* admittedly never uses the term *mantramārga*. Bisschop concludes that “the author of the text does not seem to have felt the need to contextualize the Mantramārga from which he has adopted the term in the first place”, and that “the author had knowledge of the Mantramārga” (p. 28).

This being the case, the characterisation of the *Māhātmya* featuring this passage as “the only non-Mantramārga source to use the term Atimārga” needs to be relativised after all.

Chapter 2, “Why are the Skull-Bearers (Kāpālikas) Called Soma?”, by Judit Törzsök, discusses the possible meanings of such expressions as *somasiddhāntavādin*, *somajana*, *soma/saumya*, etc., used as alternative names of the Kāpālikas in premodern India. Analysing inscriptions, Purāṇic sources, and dramatic literature, Törzsök presents a rich investigation of the intricacies of this post-Atimārga movement that could have led to the adoption (or attribution) of these appellatives and offers various plausible explanations. To begin with, she rejects the semantic analysis offered by Indian commentators of the word *soma* as meaning *sa-umā*, namely “with/accompanied by Umā” (i.e., *umayā sahitaḥ somas tasya siddhāntaḥ*),¹ probably derived from the fact that male Kāpālika had consorts, just as Śiva has Umā. She considers this understanding rather forced, for “female Kāpālikas or tantric consorts are not normally called Umā and this interpretation does not seem to figure at all in earlier sources” (p. 34), and also because the element *-soma* is difficult to make sense of in female initiation names (such as Devasomā). This is certainly the case; and yet, following Lorenzen,² one may argue that this interpretation seems to have been widespread and relatively early too, judging from the fact that it was adopted in a number of sources, including the eleventh-century *Prabodhacandrodaya* (III.16) by Kṛṣṇamiśra: “One who has the appearance (*vapus*) of the Moon-crested (Śiva) and amuses himself in the embrace of his wife, the image of Pārvatī, is (truly) liberated.” Since many Śaiva practitioners of the Atimārga conceived their practice as enabling them to become “embodiments” of Śiva, the Kāpālikas could have had in mind this “eroticized” aspect. As rightly noted by Törzsök, “it is possible that the Kāpālikas themselves intended to make full use the natural polysemy of the word Soma, although it is less likely that such polysemy was intended from the very beginning” (p. 44). It may thus be hypothesised that for certain Kāpālika groups the word *soma* could point to their goal, i.e. liberation conceived as a state of blissful and perpetual sexual union homologous to that of Śiva and Umā. An echo of this concept appears to have been preserved in the Balinese Śaiva tradition (especially the most esoteric level of knowledge that is the preserve of the Śaiva high priests), where the ritual process of *nyomya* (from the base *somya* [= *saumya*], which in Sanskrit means “auspicious”, “cool”, “gentle”, “happy”, etc.) is meant to transform the demonic aspects of Śiva and Umā, namely Kāla and Durgā, to their original benign forms, i.e. to reunite them as a divine, happy couple. Thus, both aspects of purifying/transforming to a gentle form and reuniting Śiva and Umā as the primordial divine couple could be simultaneously implied.

1. See D.N. Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas and Kālamukhas: Two Lost Śaivaite Sects*, 2nd edition, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1991, p. 90.

2. See D.N. Lorenzen, *The Kāpālikas and Kālamukhas*, pp. 85, 91–92.

Chapter 3, “Dressing for Power: on *vrata*, *caryā*, and *vidyāvratā* in the Early Mantramārga, and on the Structure of the *Guhyasūtra* of the *Niśvāsātattvasaṃhitā*” by Dominic Goodall addresses the usages of such words as *vrata*, *caryā*, and their various derivatives in early Mantramārga sources. On the basis of a close reading of the various layers of the *Guhyasūtra*, Goodall argues that the term *caryā* (in the tetrad *jñāna*, *kriyā*, *caryā* and *yoga*) in origin did not mean “conduct” (p. 53), but rather denoted the performance of timed religious observances and preparatory rituals for mantra-propitiation (*vidyāvratā*), as is also clear from post-*Niśvāsa* pre-tenth-century Śaiva texts (p. 66). He then provides a detailed analysis of how the terms *vrata* and *caryā* (as well as the compounds *vratācaryā* and *caryāvratā*) underwent a semantic slippage over time. While the discussion reaches an unprecedented level of linguistic precision and textual richness, an aspect that might have been explored more in detail is the pre-history of the term *caryā* in pre-Tantric sources of the Atimārga (e.g. Pāñcārthika Pāśupata texts), where the term *vidhi* seems to be often understood as a synonym of *caryā*, which in turn denotes the practice of the prescribed ascetic regimen comprising the observances of *bhasmasnāna*, etc.³

Chapter 7, “On Vāgīśvarakīrti’s Influence in Kashmir and Among the Khmer” by Péter-Dániel Szántó, is based on careful analysis of often difficult textual sources, focusing on the traces left by the early-eleventh-century Eastern Indian esoteric Buddhist scholar and *Guhyasamāja* exegete Vāgīśvarakīrti in Kashmir and mainland Southeast Asia. The master’s “signature verse” discovered by Szántó in the (*Guhyasamāja*-influenced) Sanskrit-Old Khmer Sab Bāk inscription (K. 1158) from Thailand strengthens the view that the esoteric Buddhist sanctuary of Phimai in contemporary Thailand must have been a centre of *Guhyasamāja* studies. Since Szántó notes that the inscription seems to report the words of a student of Vāgīśvarakīrti, who was probably two generations later than his *paramaguru*, and since there is circumstantial evidence that one of Vāgīśvarakīrti’s treatises, the *Mṛtyuvañcana*, was still read in Burma in the fifteenth century, it seems not too far-fetched to assume that the master himself visited mainland Southeast Asia during his lifetime and initiated one or more spiritual lineages. Szántó takes a cautious approach, limiting himself to closely reading the sources, and concludes that “Whichever scenario we accept as the most plausible, what seems to be certain is that by this date Vāgīśvarakīrti’s person and *Guhyasamāja*-related teachings were known in the Khmer lands” (p. 187). It will be the task of other scholars to use these findings to further our understanding of the mobility of Buddhist masters across Asia during the medieval period.

Chapter 13, “Toward a History of the Navarātra, the Autumnal Festival of the Goddess”, by Bihani Sarkar charts the chronological development of the Navarātra ritual in four phases, and sketches a preliminary geography.

3. See A. Acri, “The Śaiva Atimārga in the Light of *Niśvāsaguhya* 12.1–22ab”, *Cracow Indological Studies* 16, 2014 (pp. 7–49), fn. 26, 31, and p. 16, arguing that some instances of *caryā* occurring in the *Guhyasūtra* could be translated as “religious observance”, “ascetic regimen”, or “ascetic conduct” (in a Pāśupata sense, i.e. of one who follows the *vratas* prescribed for the Pāśupatas).

The author traces its earliest phase to the Gupta/Vaiṣṇava period and a pre-existing stratum of Vedic literature. In so doing, she apparently discounts the possibility of non-Vedic origins or influences, yet she does mention the association with the Goddess of the South Indian (Draviḍa) ascetic portrayed as a comical figure in Bāṇa's *Kādambarī* and its implications on account of the widespread worship of the goddess Korṛavai, later correlated with Durgā, in South India (pp. 332–333). She further notes that many salient elements of Durgā's rituals in East and South India, such as trance, possession, ecstatic dancing, self-sacrifice involving blood, etc. — which are also salient features of many so-called “indigenous” religions of India — are the earliest elements of the Navarātra, and correlate with elements of the older cult of Korṛavai described in the Old Tamil poem *Cilappatikāram* (p. 334). While she refers *en passant* to the view expressed by historian Kunal Chakrabarti, according to whom the late emergence of the Navarātra in Sanskrit literature from indigenous milieus is “the culmination of a long process whereby the Goddess was gradually brought into the Sanskrit sphere”,⁴ a more thorough discussion of these elements vis-à-vis the hypothesis that the origins of the Navarātra might lie in the practice of non-Sanskritic communities would have been in order.

Three chapters, namely “Reflections on the King of Ascetics (*Yatirāja*): Rāmānuja in the Devotional Poetry of Vedānta Deśika” (Chapter 8) by Srilata Raman, “Not to Worry, Viśiṣṭha Will Sort It Out: The Role of the *Purohita* in the *Raghuvamśa*” (Chapter 9) by Csaba Dezső, and “Life and Afterlife of *Sādṛśya*: Revisiting the *Citrasūtra* through the Nationalism-Naturalism Debate in Indian Art History” by Parul Dave-Mukherji (Chapter 23) do not directly deal with Śaivism and/or Tantric traditions. The first two, insofar that they discuss textual material that are related to, and relevant for, aspects of medieval Indian religiosity, feel less “out of place” than the third. That contribution, even if anchored in a linguistic analysis of a set of Sanskrit terms and their modern reception, is of an eminently theoretical nature, and occasionally leans towards the purposefully vague jargon that is in vogue in postmodern intellectual circles. It delivers what it promises, namely an attempt to “complicate the search for alternative frameworks by underlining gaps and slippages that surround the meaning of terms in a given text and their modern appropriations” (p. 570).

It is now my duty as reviewer to point at some editorial inconsistencies and glitches, which are admittedly virtually impossible to avoid in a volume of this size and complexity and can be therefore easily forgiven. See, for example, the anachronistic mention of the doctoral dissertation on the *Niśvāsamukha* by Nirajan Kafle, referred to as Kafle 2015*,⁵ as having been “defended this year” (p. 48), whereas the present volume carries

4. K. Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Purāṇas and the Making of a Regional Tradition*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 338.

5. This dissertation has recently been published: N. Kafle, *Niśvāsamukhatattvasaṃhitā, A Preface to the Earliest Surviving Śaiva Tantra*, Pondicherry, Institut français de Pondichéry/École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2020.

a 2020 publication date; an elliptic reference to the only published edition of the *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṅgraha* without providing bibliographic details (p. 72);⁶ the quotation of a passage in Sanderson 2006 without page number (p. 75); the inconsistent spelling of Sap Bāk (p. 170) vs. Sab Bāk (p. 184); the references to Prapanvidya instead of Prapandvidya (pp. 184, 185, 192); the printing of ÉFEO instead of EFEO (p. 184), and of École (pp. xxviii, 247, 281) vs. Ecole (pp. xxxi, 363); the consistent misspelling of *Cilapattikāram* instead of *Cilappatikāram* (p. 324 and *passim*); and such typos as *bhūtiproyojanam* instead of *bhūtiprayojanam* (p. 255, fn. 15), Fabrizzia [Baldissera] instead of Fabrizia (p. 343), Musuem instead of Museum (366, fn. 7), etc.

While many contributors present valuable analyses of textual data, they seem rather reluctant to advance conclusions of a higher order, or socio-historical contextualisations of the textual material they so masterfully engage with. At the same time, they make too parsimonious use of relevant secondary literature. Finally, material from the wider “Indic world” is insufficiently represented: only one contribution (i.e., Szántó’s) discusses data from (mainland) Southeast Asia. This is all the more surprising in a volume in honour of Alexis Sanderson, who has set an example in this regard, having produced a significant and highly impactful body of work on Śaiva and Buddhist Tantric traditions in Southeast Asia.⁷

Despite these quibbles, the volume successfully showcases a rigorous and cutting-edge kind of textual scholarship. As such, it embodies the text-historical approach applied by Professor Sanderson to the study of Tantric traditions, to which scholars across the globe are hugely indebted. Several chapters make available unedited and untranslated textual sources for the first time, thereby expanding the repertoire on which further study of Tantra can be based. In short, the volume makes a valuable contribution to advancing our knowledge of Tantric traditions in medieval India and constitutes a most appropriate homage and corollary to the work and career of Professor Sanderson.

Andrea ACRI (EPHE)

6. P.S. Filliozat, *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṅgraha: The Tantra of Svayambhū, Vidyāpāda, with the Commentary of Sadyojyoti*, Delhi, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts/Motilal Banarsidass, 1994.

7. Among other studies, see in particular A. Sanderson, “The Śaiva Religion Among the Khmers, Part I”, *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 90–91 (2003–2004), pp. 349–463; “The Śaiva Age—The Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period”, in Shingo Einoo (ed.), *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, Tokyo, Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, 2009, pp. 41–350.