



**Nina Mirnig, Marion Rastelli & Vincent Eltschinger
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Nina MIRNIG, Marion RASTELLI & Vincent ELTSCHINGER (éd.), *Tantric Communities in Context*, Vienne, Austrian Academy of Sciences Press (Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Sitzungsberichte, 899 Band; Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens, 99), 2019, xviii + 602 pages – ISBN 978-3-7001-8378-5

The massive edited volume under review is the outcome of a conference held in Vienna in 2015, in the framework of a wider collaborative research project involving the comparative investigation of region, ethnicity, and empire throughout medieval Eurasia. It aims to address one of the major unresolved questions with respect to the tantric movement, namely “the social reality of how these initiatory groups were organised on the ground and concretely interfaced with the wider community of non-initiates or with competing traditions” (p. ix). While noting that our knowledge of tantric communities in the premodern period is in large part based on prescriptive textual sources promoting idealistic visions, the editors rightly acknowledge the methodological challenges of interrogating these sources for reconstructing underlying social realities that are lost to us. They explain that, for lack of alternative sources of information, contributors were “invited to investigate these largely normative texts for elements that inadvertently reveal aspects of the underlying social reality or larger political agendas at play” (p. ix). The result is a coherent and useful collection of fine essays engaging with Sanskrit texts that illuminate various aspects of the socio-religious history of Tantrism against the theoretical background of such key questions as institutionalisation of tantric communities, their representation in non-tantric genres, and their relationship with the political power as well as with laity, among others.

The volume contains 18 contributions, subdivided into four parts spearheaded by a study of Alexis Sanderson. Part I, “Tantric Identities”, contains five chapters (Hatley, Kiss, Leach, Dieter-Mathes, Ferstl) investigating how different genres of textual sources conceptualise tantric communities. Part II, “Tantric Ritual Communities”, gathers four chapters (Törzsök, Gough, Szántó, Tanemura) examining the boundaries existing (at least ideally/prescriptively) between initiates and non-initiates in ritual context. Part III, “Tantric Communities in the Public Sphere”, contains four chapters (Rastelli, Bianchini, Goodall, Bühnemann) focusing on the construction of public identity by tantric communities from the prism of royal empowering rituals and public festivals. Part IV, “Beyond Tantric Communities: The Interface with Lay Communities”, presents four chapters (Mirnig, Bisschop, Sarma, Hidas) examining how lay communities relate to the emergence of tantric traditions. The lucid Introduction succinctly outlines in roughly one and a half pages the main themes and theoretical trajectories of the book and devotes the remaining eight pages to describing the individual chapters. Although the volume seems to have been conceived for a specialised readership, a lengthier Introduction, including a survey of previous research, might have done better justice to the complexity of the issues at stake.

Given that it is impossible here to summarise, let alone discuss in detail, every contribution in a volume of this magnitude and thematic variety, below

I will only focus on seven chapters, whose topics align with my own research foci and competence (thus, without implying that the remaining chapters are any less interesting and significant). I will then conclude with some general considerations on the volume as a whole.

The keynote article by Alexis Sanderson addresses the question of “how public was Śaivism?” Recognising the benefits of applying a sociological perspective to the study of Śaiva texts, the chapter discusses some key examples of boundaries between the public and the private in Śaivism drawn from some of its constituent traditions, namely lay Śaivism, Atimārga, Mantramārga, and Kulamārga, and their engagement with Brahmanism and political power. It opens with some enlightening methodological reflections about how to read prescriptive texts in Sanskrit — for instance, the questions one should ask in order to understand their meaning and social context, and the need not to focus on single traditions or regions in order to achieve a more accurate picture of the texts’ lived contexts. Particularly significant is the section devoted to lay Śaivism in the light of the *Śivadharmā* corpus, where Sanderson, in contrast to his previous view that it “emanated from within the community of the initiated as a means of securing lay support” (pp. 9–10), now sees it as largely independent from the initiatory traditions and specialised textual corpora “on which the much smaller communities of initiates were parasitic”. He argues that these specialised initiates “latched on to these traditions and imposed their authority on them, usually with royal patronage, becoming in this way the officiants of various Śaiva institutions which had their own independent histories” (p. 10).

The following chapter by Csaba Kiss investigates the term *bhasmāṅkura* in tantric Śaiva texts as well as non-tantric sources, most notably the ca. 15th-century *Jātiviveka* genre of texts discussing mixed castes. This term refers to a little-known category of agents representing the offspring of a Śaiva (often Pāsupata) ascetic and a (*śūdra*) prostitute or wife, who are prohibited from being consecrated as *ācāryas*. This fact is indicative of how far removed the actual social realities even in strictly regulated ascetic milieus must have been from the realm of prescriptive texts. Kiss attempts to integrate textual analysis with a cursory description of the caste of the modern Central Indian temple priests and musicians called *guravas*, which are mentioned in post-15th-century sources in connection with the Bhasmāṅkuras. This is a promising avenue for further research, for such modern traditions could be relevant to understanding the historical evolution of scantily known groups mentioned in premodern texts. It may also be relevant to take into account Old Javanese sources, which contain several attestations of the term *bhasmāṅkura*: on the basis of passages in the *Sumanasāntaka*, *Śivaśāśana/Śevaśāśana*, and *Pūrvādhigama*,¹ the *Old Javanese–English Dictionary*² glosses *bhasmāṅkura* as “descendant of a *wiku* (who is not a brahman?)”, and *kabhasmāṅkuran* as “the status (rank, rules) of a *bhasmāṅkura*”. In contrast with India, it appears that in premodern Java

1. Critical editions of the last two texts by Marine Schoettel are in progress as part of her doctoral research at the EPHE in Paris.

2. P.J. Zoetmulder, *Old Javanese–English Dictionary*, With the collaboration of S.O. Robson, 2 vols., 's-Gravenhage, Nijhoff, 1982, pp. 222–223.

this group of people was granted a relatively high status; among their duties was that of preparing the ash powder used in rituals or ascetic observances.

The chapter by Christian Ferstl focuses on the satirical episode in Bāṇa's *Kādambarī* describing a South Indian holy man (*dhārmika*) living in a Caṇḍikā temple somewhere in the Vindhya. This is a remarkable passage that, though part of the “imagined world” of the Sanskrit Kāvya universe, reflects the social life of Śaiva agents beyond the boundaries of the strictly normative texts, and is all the more interesting as it revolves around the mockery of a low-status character following a form of Bhairavika/Kāpālīka/Kaula Śaivism (pp. 188–190). Ferstl presents a meticulous analysis of the episode's tropes, yet he does not consider the possible “tribal” pedigree of the main character. While he mentions the tribals' (*śabara*) custom of presenting sanguinary offerings and their proverbial association with Caṇḍikā, he states that, since the Śabarās are described as an extremely violent tribe throughout the *Kādambarī*, “though this is not made explicit, they must cause considerable trouble to the pitiable temple dweller” (p. 181). I am rather inclined to assume that the temple dweller himself represents a person whose status is at the interface between the “tribal” and the “civilised” world, being described as a (non-Brahmanical) uncouth Dravidian (p. 184) interacting on a daily basis with the Śabara community (p. 192). A minor yet interesting point concerns the word *avimuktaśaivābhīmānena*. Ferstl translates it as “unwavering self-identification with Śiva” (p. 190), while pointing out, on the authority of Shaman Hatley, that *śaivābhīmāna* could also be understood in the technical sense of “meditative identification with Śiva”, bearing “clear soteriological connotations”, and that the compound *avimuktaśaivābhīmāna* could also be more generally translated as “pride of being a devotee of Śiva”, thus reflecting a pun. I would suggest another possible translation, namely “the pride of being a non-released (*a-vimukta*) Śiva/Śaiva”, adumbrating the later (mainly Saiddhāntika) Śaiva view of the bound souls that become like Śiva upon liberation (*muktaśiva*) as opposed to Śiva Himself, or Śiva-without-beginning (*anādīśiva*). This interpretation suggests that the poet intended to make a mocking allusion to the boastful attitude of the character, who unduly claims to be Śiva (while actually stating that he is a non-released *śaiva*). Yet another possibility would be to understand the word as “the pride of being a devotee of Śiva Avimukta”, referring to the celebrated form of Śiva known as Avimukteśa or Avimukteśvara, venerated as a *liṅga* associated with the Pāśupatas at Vārāṇasī since at least the 6th/7th century,³ thus roughly contemporary to the *Kādambarī*.

Judit Törzsök's fine contribution discusses the prescriptions or community rules (*samaya*) found in Śaiva and Śākta scriptures against the background of Brahmanical Dharmaśāstric rules, showing that Dharmaśāstric principles were either reproduced, inflected, or opposed in *samayas* found in Saiddhāntika as well as Śākta scriptures. The author rightly argues that passages reflecting communities' self-representation found in tantric and Brahmanical prescriptive texts are no less important to understanding their

3. Hans T. Bakker, *The World of the Skandapurāṇa: Northern India in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries*, Leiden, Brill, 2014, p. 12.

underlying historical reality than more “concrete” data drawn from different textual genres or epigraphy. One minor point that could have been explained or developed further is the occurrence in the *Yoginīsaṃcāra/Jayadrathayāmala* and *Devīpañcaśatikā* of the word *lāmā*, which Törzsök defines as “a category of female beings and practitioners” (p. 223). The *Devīpañcaśatikā* declares that autonomous Lāmās should be worshiped, and “those who are clad in black” (*kṛṣṇavāsa*) should not be reviled. The latter probably correspond to the Nīlambaras or Nīlapaṭas, “those of the Black Shawl (cult)”, who practised a strongly antinomian Kaula-like type of cult.⁴ Thus, it is likely that both categories referred to actual social agents.

Péter-Dániel Szántó’s chapter presents an annotated diplomatic edition and translation (the latter tentative, given the many insurmountable philological problems) of the newly discovered *Gaṇacakravidhi*, a short manual spuriously attributed to Ratnākaraśānti on the ritualised tantric communal feast known as *gaṇacakra* in Vajrayāna milieus. In spite of the difficulties posed by the text, its edition and translation are a welcome addition to the limited material on the *gaṇacakra* at our disposal. The author’s general introduction is succinct yet rigorous and informative. Still, it does not deal with issues (and scholarly debates) that are relevant to understanding the social context of such text(s), namely whether these rites were actually performed or were rather the products of prescriptive imagination,⁵ or perhaps both, having been “domesticated” at some point in history by tantric practitioners who sought to internalise and aestheticise their transgressive elements; whether they originated in mainstream Hindu and Buddhist or marginal/“tribal” social circles;⁶ and their possible relationship with analogous Śaiva rituals, namely the *yoginīmelāpa/melakah*.⁷

The chapter by Nina Mirnig, one of the best in the volume, is a wide-ranging and yet detailed analysis of the early Śaiva textual corpora of the Śivadharma, *Niśvāsa*, and earlier Atimārga sources, with a focus on the divinisation of the devotees as Rudra. The socio-religious model she proposes constitutes an important piece of the puzzle that is the formative phase of Śaiva tantric traditions, especially with respect to the figure of the householder-practitioner, and to the participation of antinomian ascetics in public life. Mirnig notes that the imitative behaviours taken up by devotees to “embody” their elected deity derive from Atimārga ideals and practices and, at the same time, resonate with earlier Vedic and Brahmanical ideas of kings and Brahmins as divine embodiments on earth (pp. 485–486), as well as with the Vaiṣṇava devotionism of the

4. Alexis Sanderson, “Tolerance, Exclusivity, Inclusivity, and Persecution in Indian Religion during the Early Mediaeval Period”, in John Makinson (ed.), *Honoris Causa: Essays in Honour of Aweek Sarkar*, London, Allen Lane, 2015 (pp. 155–224), pp. 166–167, fn. 27.

5. Christian K. Wedemeyer, *Making sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 192–194.

6. Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 264–268, 318–322.

7. The author, explaining that he will gloss over this problem in his brief historical overview, does indeed refer to Alexis Sanderson, “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), p. 154.

Bhagavadgītā (p. 476). To her, the link between devotion and the divinisation of the *śivabhakta* found in the *Śivadharmā* would act “as a strategic device to advocate the spiritual superiority of the community of practitioners”, and also facilitate the spread of the Śaiva teachings to new areas (p. 474).

Peter Bisschop’s chapter analyses textual passages from the *Śivadharmāśāstra*, the *Skandapurāṇa*, and the *Niśvāsamukha* attesting to the phenomenon of inclusivism, in order to establish whether it is a property of the Mantramārga or of a broader line of thinking in Śaivism, comprising the lay dimension. Starting from Paul Hacker’s famous definition of inclusivism as “claiming for, and thus including in, one’s own religion what really belongs to an alien sect” (p. 511), Bisschop traces instances that reflect an alternative or more neutral use of the term, for instance the inclusion — with different antagonistic nuances — of different Hindu gods, and the implication that their position and power ultimately derive from Śiva. While remarking that the inclusivistic tendencies of Śaivism have been noted by Sanderson in the context of the Mantramārga, and by Törzsök in early Śaiva Tantras, Bisschop misses my contribution on a passage of the *Niśvāsaguhyā*, which I read as reflecting an inclusivistic attitude.⁸ Verses 1–22 of Chapter 12 describe the various divisions of the Atimārga (i.e. Pāñcārthika, Pramāṇa, Kārūka, and Vaimala) as springing forth from the four faces of Sadāśiva, the paramount deity of the Siddhānta, thereby affirming the superiority of the Mantramārga by tracing its gnostic- and initiation-oriented system to the zenithal face of Īśāna. The passage has some relevance for the author’s presentation of an analogous inclusivistic model in the *Niśvāsamukha*, where the Mantramārga teachings of the same work are portrayed as the revelation of Śiva’s zenithal face as opposed to the Laukika, Vaidika, Ādhyātmika and Atimārga, stemming from the remaining four faces (p. 528).

In general, this body of work may be regarded as a precious addition to the repertoire of contemporary scholarship in the field of Tantric Studies. Besides setting an example of both rigour and depth, it offers valuable textual data along with contextual historical analyses dealing with all major Śaiva tantric and proto-tantric traditions as well as tantric varieties of Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism, Jainism, and their engagement with Brahmanism. Having duly praised its strengths, and without intending in any way to slight its overall value, I shall indicate below three areas to which the volume could have devoted more attention.

First, while the editors have done an excellent job in trying to put together a volume that coherently and meaningfully engages with its overarching theme, several contributors seem unwilling to come out of the scholarly “comfort zone” constituted by manuscripts and text editions to engage with wider-ranging themes pertaining to the socio-historical sphere. Most chapters are squarely situated within the boundaries of texts, while attempts to overcome the methodological problems of studying prescriptive literature to extrapolate social realities through multi-disciplinarity are rare. Only one

8. Andrea Acri, “The Śaiva Atimārga in the Light of *Niśvāsaguhyā* 12.1–22ab”, *Cracow Indological Studies* 16, 2014 (pp. 7–49), esp. p. 29.

chapter, the study by Gudrun Bühnemann on representations of Hanumān in Nepal in the late Malla period, contains art historical data, and itself does not engage with texts beyond a couple of inscribed icons. Equally wanting is a more sustained engagement with ethnographic data pertaining to both colonial and contemporary periods — the only notable exceptions being Ellen Gough's study on the contemporary Digambara Jain "tantric" ritual of mendicant initiation, and S.A.S. Sarma's study on Mātṛtantras and modern Keralan temple priest communities. It seems to me that, despite methodological challenges, the matching of textual and ethnographic data could, especially in the Indian context, help us to reconstruct certain aspects of the past, and cast light on possible socio-historical continuities.

Second, most contributions take into account non-elite milieus and/or non-Brahmanical agents to a still insufficient extent, and virtually none of them even touch upon such a difficult yet important issue as the emergence of Tantra (that is, beyond the boundaries of texts and their historical layering) before the "formative period" of the 5th–6th century CE. The question of emergence in connection with social, historical, and geographical contexts has been recently discussed by scholars like Ronald Davidson⁹ and Geoffrey Samuel,¹⁰ with whom none of the contributions attempts to engage. Even if these discussions have been deemed controversial in other contexts, they would have deserved at least a mention in a collective volume dealing with the social history of medieval Tantra.

Third, in the Preface the editors declare that the volume is devoted to the "socio-religious history of Tantric communities in the early medieval Indic world" (p. vii). The expression "Indic world" is in itself ambiguous, as it may be regarded as a synonym of "Indian", but could also be taken to denote a much wider geographical area than the one coinciding with the Indian Subcontinent, namely the "Indianised" cultural spheres of Southeast Asia and Central Asia. This extended geographical focus is missing in the volume: although one contribution mentions snips of epigraphic data from Southeast Asia (Mirnig, pp. 500, 504), that region's tantric traditions, documented through a significant corpus of texts, monuments, and living realities, would have deserved a more significant representation, not least because Southeast Asian data are in some cases — as counter-intuitive as it may sound — chronologically earlier and better preserved than their Indian counterparts, or because they contribute in other ways to cast light on aspects of Tantrism in India.

To conclude: the choice of some contributors to take the cautious approach to "gather and display small pieces of data, in the hope that this may be useful for further investigations" (Kiss, p. 84) is understandable given the chronic problems posed by the relationship between prescriptive Sanskrit texts and social realities. While the main strength of this volume lies in its cutting-edge textual scholarship, I also feel it has missed an opportunity to bring these data

9. Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*.

10. Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

into conversation with wider-ranging and multidisciplinary, perhaps bolder, discussions that may be useful not only to advance tentative answers to some lingering crucial problems relating to Tantrism, but also in order to appeal to an audience beyond the narrow circle of specialists. In spite of these limitations, the volume lays the foundations on which any future attempts to achieve a comprehensive social history or “grand narrative” of the tantric movement in the Indic world could be built, and is therefore to be regarded as a most useful scholarly resource.

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Ophira GAMLIEL, *A Linguistic Survey of the Malayalam Language in Its Own Terms*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2020, xvi + 324 pages – ISBN 978-3-447-11267-3

The first version of this book appeared in 2017 (The Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem); it was intended as a tool for Malayalam classes then offered by the author at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The 2020 book is divided into 16 chapters and 10 appendices (paradigms, kinship terms, glossary, further readings, Malayalam sources). Exercises are provided for each chapter (up to the 13th chapter) and Appendix H offers a key for exercises.

Chapter one includes an introduction, a section on script (single letters) and a section on pronunciation. The introduction (5 pages) gives very brief notes about the earliest written documents in Malayalam, the evolution of the writing system as well as some information regarding the various names used to denote the language through the course of history. The topic that receives most attention is standardisation (2 pages). A few lines are devoted to the previous grammatical descriptions of Malayalam. Gamliel mentions the *Līlātilakam* (a poetical treatise of the 14th century, composed in Sanskrit *sūtras*, which describes — among other things — the morphological and phonological characteristics of *Maṇipravāḷam*, the mediaeval literary language of Kerala defined as a mixture of the *Keraḷabhāṣā* and Sanskrit, as well as three more recent works: (1) *malayālmayūṭe vyākaraṇam* (*A Grammar of Malayalam in the Language Itself*, published in 1863), written in Malayalam by George Matthan, an Indian priest of the Anglican church, (2) *malayālabhāṣāvyākaraṇam* (*A Grammar of the Malayalam Language*, published in 1868), written in Malayalam and in English by the German missionary Hermann Gundert and (3) A.R. Rajaraja Varman's *Keraḷapāṇinīyam* (*The Kerala Paniniad* as translated by Andronov,¹

1. Michail S. Andronov, *A Grammar of the Malayalam Language in Historical Treatment*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag (Beiträge zur Kenntnis südasiatischer Sprachen und Literaturen 1), 1996.