

Csaba Kiss

The Brahmayāmalatantra or Picumata. Volume 11. The Religious Observances and Sexual Rituals of the Tantric Practitioner: Chapters 3, 21, and 45. Institut Français de Pondichéry / École française d'Extrême-Orient / Asien-Afrika Institut, Universität Hamburg, 2015. 373 p. Collection Indologie n° 130; Early Tantra Series n° 3. ISBN 978-81-8470-207-1 (IFP) / 978-2-85539-153-3 (EFEO) 750 Rs (32 €)

The Franco-German Early Tantra Project officially ended more than half a decade ago, and its results are being published with some slight delay. Notwithstanding, the reader's patience is amply rewarded. Having appeared almost simultaneously with the publication of the *Nīśvāsattavasamhitā*, the earliest surviving Śaiva tantra, and three early works of the Pañcarātra (Early Tantra Series 1 and 2 respectively), the present volume is the second part of a tandem sub-project, the first part of which is still under preparation by Shaman Hatley.

The first word that comes to mind when thinking about the *Brahmayāmalatantra* (henceforth *BYT*) is “daunting”. And by that I mean the complete semantic range of the word: it is formidable, awesome, and challenging, but also at times taxing, discouraging, and unsettling. To begin with, it is a massive piece of work, weighing in at about 12,000 verses arranged in ca. 102 chapters. Although attested by several witnesses, including an early palm-leaf manuscript, the text is not very well transmitted. Moreover, technical terminology aside, it is couched in a peculiar register of Sanskrit called *Aiśa*, which, in spite of the heroic achievements of recent scholarship, is still something we have not come to terms with fully. The world of the *BYT* is equally difficult to reckon with: this is the universe of the cremation ground, inhabited actually or symbolically by initiates seeking magical powers and liberation undertaking outrageous rituals to propitiate ferocious deities. But the appeal and importance of the transgressive kind of tantric traditions is exactly this: what other antinomian religious movements in the history of humanity are attested in such rich detail by their very practitioners, as opposed to through the damning verdicts of antagonists and persecutors?

In order to engage seriously with this world and reconstruct the mediaeval religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent, we need ventures like the aforementioned Early Tantra Project and volumes such as this one. The trailblazer in the study of the *BYT* was Alexis Sanderson, who first realised its fundamental importance, and whose essential studies¹ contextualised the work, lifting it

1 “Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions” in: *The World's Religions / Religions of Asia*. Ed. Friedhelm Hardy. London: Routledge, 1988; “History through Textual Criticism in the Study of Śaivism,

into scholarly discourse from undeserved obscurity. Shaman Hatley's thesis,² a reworked and expanded version of which will be the much-awaited first volume of the present sub-project, engaged with the *BYT* in greater detail and was for almost a decade a trustworthy guide for anyone wishing to tackle the text. However—and I am sure all in tantric studies will agree—there are no dead dragons here to flog.

The *BYT* stands at the very heart of the transgressive trend. Most probably a product of the seventh century and the earliest of the so-called Bhairava tantras, it was influential for centuries to come, most notably for the kindred Vajrayāna tradition of the deity Saṃvara/Śaṃvara, as already shown by Sander-son and, subsequently, Hatley. The geographical provenance is a thorny question, but as Kiss proposes (p. 16), the region centred on Prayāga (modern Allah-abad) is a likely contender.

At the centre of attention in this volume is the practitioner (*sādhaka*). From the very outset, Kiss points out that the taxonomy of this seminal figure—one might say the hero of the tantric saga—is different from the one we know from the later tradition and which became the standard (*tālaka/śuddha*, *miśraka/śuddhāśuddha*, and *carubhojin/aśuddha* vs. *samayin*, *sādhaka*, *putraka*, and *ācārya*). The focus explains the choice of chapters: while chapter 45 expounds on the *sādhaka*, the other two, chapters 3 and 21, teach the pantheon worshipped and the observances undertaken. The three chapters thus form a conceptual unit. Kiss shows that the text's triadic model is hierarchical and that much depends on the *sādhaka*'s spiritual activity in past lives. He also points out that although the *BYT* is on the whole transgressive, many of the activities, even those considered of a higher kind, are within the realm of purity (celibacy, vegetarianism). It should be mentioned in passing that, although unvoiced, the author seeks to engage with the text on its own terms throughout, steering clear of extrapolations from other conceptual frameworks, an otherwise unavoidable trap for the less critically inclined. For example, see his elucidation of the technical term *devāgāra* on pp. 27–30 (not a temple or sanctuary, but the three-dimensional *maṇḍala* of the cult) or (*a/*)*śuddha* on pp. 35–36 (not ritually pure, but cleansed of past *karman*). Moreover, new technical terms are discerned, e.g. *avagraha* meaning 'seminal retention' on p. 49, or the semantic range of already known terms is extended, e.g. *yantra* on pp. 49–50 (not magical diagram, but any prop for magic or magic itself).

the Pañcarātra and the Buddhist Yoginītantras" in: *Les Sources et le Temps / Sources and Time*. Ed. François Grimal. Pondicherry: IFP/EFEO, 2002.

2 *The Brahmayāmalatantra and Early Śaiva Cult of Yoginīs*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2007.

The book is clearly structured in two parts. Part One, prefaced by the Acknowledgements, begins with an Introduction (pp. 13–55) consisting of a pithy General Introduction (pp. 13–15), and a sub-chapter on the *maṇḍala* of the cult (pp. 16–31), its observances (pp. 31–34), and its practitioners (pp. 35–55) each. The second chapter is a presentation of the sources (pp. 57–72) with particular emphasis on the palaeographical features of the oldest manuscript (dated 1052 CE) such as letters and numerals. This is a very useful contribution towards a comprehensive overview of mediaeval Nepalese palaeography, a sorely needed study. There do not seem to be any great surprises here, save perhaps the rare use of the *upadhmanīya*. The third chapter is modestly called Editorial Policies: Language and Conventions (pp. 73–90). Herein is one of the most useful contributions of the study: a detailed, carefully planned list of Aīśa phenomena under numbered headings (pp. 77–86). This section is particularly recommended for study, as it will in all likelihood prove an essential reference tool for years to come. The list is constantly referred to in the footnotes to the translations; this practice is very much recommended for future studies of similar texts. One of the rather frustrating features of the *BYT*, that is to say its extreme use of Aīśa, here turns into an advantage: because the text displays so many ‘irregularities’, it offers the possibility of a comprehensive list of Aīśa phenomena. Indeed, very few tantric texts outdo the *BYT* in this respect, the Buddhist *Catuṣpīṭhatantra* being the only case I can immediately think of. Part One closes with a lucid account of editorial policies (pp. 86–90).

Part Two (pp. 91–313), the bulkier part of the study, contains a critical edition of the chapters already mentioned in the title (pp. 93–174) and copiously annotated translations thereof (pp. 175–313). A pervading feature here as in the introductory sections is the author’s critical acumen and intellectual honesty. Where an interpretation is dubious, there is no cocksure certainty parading as knowledge (alas, a number of counterexamples in other studies come to mind). Even the slightest doubt is scrupulously pointed out and alternative solutions are carefully weighed. I will attempt to offer tentative suggestions for the following cruces: 1) padmānāṃ †hiṣaṃ† in 45.238, read padmānāṃ bisāṃ, “lotus stalks”; 2) dattvā †tvam† in 45.321, read dattvārghaṃ, “after having offered *argha*”; 3) †sinthakāraka† in 45.568, read sikthakāraka or any variant spelling, “beeswax producer / apiarist”; 4) †^obukasānāṃ† in 45.570, read ^opukkasānāṃ or any variant spelling, “Pukkasa[tribal]s”.

Two appendices follow. The first is a synopsis of the first twenty-five chapters of the *BYT* (pp. 315–336), the second a chart of measurements (p. 337). The study ends with a list of Abbreviations and Symbols (pp. 339–341), a bibliography (pp. 343–351), and an Index of mostly proper names and technical terms (pp. 353–373). Breaking with the custom of IFP/EFEO editions, there is no *pāda*-

index; surely, in this age of easily searchable e-texts it can be argued that this is no longer an indispensable tool.

The volume was typeset by the author himself, using the LaTeX engine and a thoughtfully customised version of the ledmac package. As a result, the complex editorial process is not only transparent and easily navigable but also aesthetically appealing. One of the very few shortcomings of this method is due to the lack of a proper hyphenation macro for transcribed Sanskrit, which, unless one intervenes manually, produces occasional blemishes such as *Ab-hinavagupta* (p. 13), *av-agrahe* (p. 49), *sid-hyeta* (p. 52), or *lubd-haka*^o (p. 167). Another annoying feature is the spellchecker's insistence to underline almost every transcribed Sanskrit word. Inevitably, therefore, one switches it off, and this allows some typographical errors to slip through the net, e.g. *comparision* (p. 15). Perhaps caused by a bug resulting from customisation, *pādas* are sometimes inaccurately reported in the apparatus (e.g. 45.321). However, these most minute of errors do not subtract anything from the pleasure of reading this learned study.

Finally, there is one sentence I completely disagree with. In his introduction, Kiss writes (p. 15): "My present contribution is a very modest one." Nothing could be further from the truth.

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