

Chapter 1

Kula Tantrism and Śrīvidyā Tradition

ORAL AND WRITTEN TANTRIC TRADITION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TANTRIC CANONS

Tantric textual history is rooted in a diffusion of ideas that occurs in two distinct but interdependent modes of transmission: oral and written. Even texts that are internally coherent assume knowledge that has descended “from mouth to ear.”¹ The task here is to identify the principles that have governed the process of textual composition in Śrīvidyā Tantrism and to consider the implications these principles have for the tradition’s historical transmission. As we shall see, nowhere is case for a centuries-long oral tradition of ideas and practices preceding written traditions made more clear than in the earliest Śrīvidyā texts.

Śrīvidyā practitioners go to great lengths to locate their traditions in the hoary past or to make an important historical (or quasi-historical) associations. For example, proponents universally will claim Śrīvidyā to be the “original secret” (*ādirahasya*) teaching of the Vedas. Some will make even more contentious claims in order to establish a particular historical or ideological identity. For example, certain south Indian branches of Śrīvidyā claim to descend through the lineage of the non-dualist theologian Śaṅkara. In this respect, Śrīvidyā is exemplary of one of Tantrism’s most persistent features: the process of assuming, synthesizing, and interpreting ideas, customs, and practices in order to claim suzerainty over them. The governing principle is that “older is better,” so that the more “ancient” a text can be shown to be—in sense of being in proximity to Vedic texts, which are always considered ancient—the more valuable and reliable it becomes. From a critical perspective it is nearly impossible to assess the antiquity or origin of many Tantric ideas and practices—a subject to which we shall return. The Tantrics’ interest in the antiquity of texts or ideas is usually to classify them “authentic” or obsolete. Śrīvidyā practitioners will acknowledge, and often commend, different types of experience by admitting that different interpretations have derived from regional traditions (*deśācāra*), schools of thought (*sampradāya*), or lineages (*paramparā*).

By the eighth or ninth-century writing had gained acceptance as a viable, if not inherently limited, mode of expression for Tantric ideas.

The creative tension between oral and written modes of transmission fostered the growth of exegetical writing based on oral explanations. While almost all written Tantric texts presume further oral exegesis, we can be less certain about the original mode of a text's presentation.

The uncertain development of particular Tantric ideologies, however, does not arise from modes of original presentation. Whether a text was first oral and then written is tangential to an ideology of doctrinal authority. The guru of a given lineage can sublimate, edit, or interpret a given text as he sees fit. A text's authenticity in the eyes of the guru is ultimately more important than its mode of presentation; texts are always secondary authorities to gurus.

Further, the emergence of written texts does not necessarily clarify the origin or chronology of Tantric ideas and practices. Tantrics are not often interested in defending or defining strict denominational or sectarian lines, especially between Śaiva and Śākta identities. In Śrīvidyā, for example, commentators draw no hard and fast boundaries around the textual canon; there is no single list of texts that has reached closure despite some who claim otherwise. But aversion to accepting only textually generated lists of texts as canonical should not be confused with the absence of a canon. For example, the *Mālinīvijaya Tantra* takes no fixed sectarian positions and has been variously interpreted as an authoritative source of ideology and doctrine by both Śaivas and Śāktas. While the *Mālinīvijaya* is a mainstay of Kashmiri Śaivism, it also displays a clear tendency towards the importance of Śakti(s); it is quoted selectively by later Śākta writers, including those within Śrīvidyā. Thus, a notion of canon that proves useful for distinguishing the Tantric from the non-Tantric must consider not only texts but also persons and groups who appropriate words, signs, and icons as part of a body of oral and written instruction. How then might one differentiate between that which is within a given Tantric tradition's canon and that which is not?

Tantrics exhibit what Jonathan Z. Smith calls "sacred persistence," defined as the rethinking of each little detail in a text and the obsession with the significance and perfection of each little action.² In the sundry ways in which Śrīvidyā authors use texts we see a radical, almost arbitrary selection made from an incredible number of potential sources. But, as Smith notes, once a selection is made the most extraordinary attention is given to its refinement and interpretation. Scholars of Hindu Tantrism have tended to emphasize the "givenness" of the textual horizon and have prescinded from commenting further on the principles of reduction at work within specific traditions. While it remains difficult to determine why a given source is chosen by a given author, it would be a mistake to assume that all

texts that apparently conform to ideological or prescriptive standards will be included in a given lineage's canon.³ Written canons appear to be formed in terms of their relation to oral instructions from gurus.

The significance of the oral tradition in the development of Śrīvidyā canons is twofold. First, the content of a historical writer's instruction remains private and forever obscure: one does not know precisely what a Tantric has learned. Second, the oral tradition determines the selections included in a written canon. The written canon of a given lineage obtains final closure only when one can enumerate a complete list of sources rather than a mere catalog organized around a subject or principle. The canon presupposes the necessary presence of an interpreter "whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists *without* altering the canon in the process."⁴

Śrīvidyā Tantrics, like other intellectual elites, assume a familiarity with traditions and ideas that they do not feel the need to introduce. Śrīvidyā creates a totalistic and complete system of signs and icons which, in the absence of an explicit articulation of a written canon's closure, serves as a functional equivalent.⁵ Rather than center on textual exegesis *per se*, Śrīvidyā gurus focus on sets of signs and icons which not only remain constant but are perceived to be unalterable.

Like the written canon, the canon of signs and icons suggests a set of implicit rules that govern interpretation.⁶ To locate a Śrīvidyā practitioner in the context of the larger tradition requires both a circumscription of cited texts and attention to the specific signs and icons over which he or she persists. Śrīvidyā makes human experience intelligible within structures of fixed signs and icons, and oral and written words. The signs and icons, like the written words and oral interpretations, become canonical when they mediate the relationship between the perceived larger tradition and the individual perceptions of gurus and disciples.

Śrīvidyā's literary birth, like much of the Tantras, is without infancy and its earliest texts assume an intellectual history of immense complexity and variety. One should not assume a "missing" canon of early sources. In India the technology of writing is not essential for the creation of a textual canon or for an external, collective memory. The traditions of Vedic recitation and ritual provide ample evidence of a sophisticated tradition that is purely oral in origin. In the case of Śrīvidyā, we know precious little about the historical circumstances under which texts were written or why writing was adopted.⁷ If the contemporary situation resembles the past, then we can be reasonably certain that fixed texts or portions of texts contin-

ued to be transmitted in oral form even after their composition, whether they were either originally oral or written.

Sometime after the ninth century there was an explosion of written Tantric texts. With the text came commentators who became autonomous authorities in the transmission of tradition. Written exegesis demanded certain literary skills in decoding and interpreting texts, signs, or icons whether or not there was an earlier oral text. Such skills required highly technical knowledge. Tradition dictated both limited access to manuscripts and the living guru to interpret signs and the interpretations.

The "fixed" elements in Śrīvidyā preceding written texts are its sacred signs and icons: the image Lalitā Tripurasundarī, the *śrīvidyā* mantra, and the *śrīcakra*. Thus, the oral canon does not require fixed oral texts or interpretations rendered in complex sentences transmitted orally. Rather, oral tradition is established by a stable of fixed signs and icons over which interpretations are laid in a particular linguistic idiom. Tantrics could stanch outsiders from their texts either by encoding their signs or disclaiming their efficacy if rent from the context of a guru's oral interpretations. The power of a given sign is therefore partly determined by its relationship with the living guru, rather than by the text or the sign per se. In practical terms, one could be left outside the idiom and therefore without access to the interpretive matrix necessary to control the canon.

The uneasiness expressed about the revelation of secrets in written form seems, from the perspective of historical hindsight, to have been well-founded. Esoteric knowledge has certainly fallen into the hands of the uninitiated; written texts gained autonomy once outside their author's hands. Yet the written word also revolutionized the pace of interpretive developments. While a guru could disavow the veracity or efficacy of written words as inappropriate to his lineage, the technology of writing made the transmission of teachings far more sophisticated. The perceived negative consequences of writing secret interpretations or powerful mantras has hardly prevented Śrīvidyā gurus from using writing as a method for advancing their ideas or practices.

Jack Goody has pointed out, "Writing creates the possibility of the autodidact and makes the acquisition of information potentially less personal, less 'intensive.'"⁸ Surely, Tantrics wished to prevent both autodidacts and the depersonalization of their traditions since either situation would undermine the central authority of the guru and diminish the importance of having to be personally empowered to use texts or powerful signs. Critical to Śrīvidyā's esotericism then is the underlying tension between the preservation and smooth transmission of copious technical information, and the perceived necessity

of an oral culture through which the canon is interpreted. With the potential for the oral interpreter to comment on written words came new questions about the guru's role and authority.

Writing fostered conversation between texts and within the tradition and further advanced the importance of the oral traditions, which came to include written texts memorized and then subjected to oral exegesis. This situation is not unique to Śrīvidyā or to Tantrism; as Goody has shown in his studies of the interface between written and oral cultures in Islamic traditions and elsewhere the situation is not even unique to India.⁹

Though Śrīvidyā texts and commentaries are interpreted exclusively within lineages, gurus and writers remain concerned about the putative continuity of the larger tradition (*sampradāya*). Written texts thus become markers by which Śrīvidyā gurus can acknowledge and codify differences within the larger tradition.¹⁰ However, it is not always possible to determine from written texts alone if theories or rituals have historical instantiations.¹¹ Some liturgical texts, for example, appear to be written for reasons other than the performance of the liturgy.¹² Thus, ritual literature was sometimes written to advance either theoretical concerns about practice and the interpretation of doctrine, or to distinguish one specialized formulation from another. The dependence of ritual liturgies on theoretical works seems more difficult to establish, though theology is also clearly a means by which differentiation within the tradition is established.

At stake for Śrīvidyā gurus and practitioners who identify themselves with particular texts or writers are not only matters of abstract ideology, but larger political interests. Identifying with particular views, practices, or interpretations could shift allegiances, split lineages, and have consequences on one's community life as a caste Hindu. Thus, privacy and esotericism were used not only to maintain traditional secrets but also to insulate those whose views or practices might create controversy within their larger social community. Certain conservative brahmins, for example, would not wish to be associated with texts, traditions, or practices that violate normative social codes.

Interestingly, the effort to distinguish lineages, theologies, and practice was sometimes accompanied by a tendency for inclusion. An affirmation of one's own position did not necessarily mean a rejection of others. Once included into the idiom, the connection between the original source of a given concept, person, or text is made entirely secondary to its use within the exegetical system. Contemporary Śrīvidyā Śāktas exhibit the inclusive tendency by frequently referring to themselves also as Śaivas and *smārtas*. At the same time, they maintain distinctive doctrines (or sometimes interpretations of shared doc-

trines) and offer distinctive interpretations of signs and icons that might find their way into others' systems.

While this inclusive tendency may be applied inconsistently, it is not incongruous with historical traditions. Śrīvidyā Tantrics appropriate concepts and values articulated in other systems without concerning themselves with what others may say about the consequences of embracing these views. This disregard for intellectual territorial boundaries is especially evident when Śrīvidyā is brought closer to accepted forms of conventional Vedic/*smārta* ritual practice and the *advaita* Vedānta of Śaṅkarācārya. For example, the influential Bhāskararāya ignores the apparent inconsistency between the adoption of Kashmiri Śaiva non-dualism in Śrīvidyā texts and his interest in Śaṅkara's absolute non-dualism (*kevalādvaita*), despite the lack of common ground between the two systems on important matters of ideology and practice.¹³

An "authentic" interpretation of text or ideology does not depend either on arguments or the claim that the ideas were originally espoused by Śrīvidyā thinkers. Rather, the governing principle is coherent presentation *within the confines of the discourse*.

The mere absence of an early written reference does not necessarily preclude the possibility that a particular concept is not part of an older oral source. This view is commonly made by contemporary practitioners who wish to establish the preeminence of their traditions. For example, it is asserted that Śrīvidyā accepts a common Śākta position on the creation of the universe through sound (*śabdabrahman*). It may also be admitted that this theory was adopted from Kashmiri Śaivites who, in turn, may have systematized much older concepts.¹⁴ And yet by bringing these speculations into a ritual practice surrounding the use of a yantra, the *śrīcakra*, Śrīvidyā's proponents can claim to have the "original" projection of creation. This is because the ideology behind the *śrīcakra* may be of common human origin, but the *cakra* itself is not. Śrīvidyā writers never say the *śrīcakra* is their unique property or a human innovation. Rather, the yantra is a sacred and divine artifact that reflects the process of creation and the universe's transcendent, self-created form (*svarūpa*). Human beings can disagree about the *śrīcakra*'s significance and, to some extent, the details of its appearance but they cannot trespass the theological boundary that affirms its divine origin.¹⁵

ŚRĪVIDYĀ: GODDESS WORSHIP IN THE ŚRĪKULA TANTRAS

Śrīvidyā's influence beyond the confines of Tantric Śāktism is evident from as early as the fourth or fifth centuries and predates its first systematic literary presentations in the eleventh or twelfth centuries.¹⁶

The characteristic feature of Śrīvidyā's so-called Śrīkula canon of Tantras is the focus on the goddess in her beneficent (*saumya* or *aghora*), benign and motherly form. The supreme Devī, called principally by the names Lalitā, Śrī, or Tripurasundarī contrasts sharply with the terrifying forms (*ghora*) of Kālī, Durgā, or Caṇḍī who provide the focus of the Kālikula Tantras.¹⁷ Holding the preeminent theological position within the system as the supreme principle in its dynamic and creative aspect, Lalitā, the supreme Śakti is always closely connected to her consort Śiva, her necessary complement, who represents the sentient and eternal reality. Though not the center of theological speculation, Śiva retains his indispensable role as the one who explains the secrets of the Tantra to Śakti.

The Śrīkula Tantras also include other genres of literature not formally under the rubric of Tantra. Such texts gain their authority by making claims for divine origins. These include sectarian Śakta Upaniṣads, various hymns (*stotras*), praises (*stavas*), and protective charms (*kavacas*), which are distinct from most ritual and exegetical materials considered to be strictly human in origin. These sources are "Tantric" inasmuch as they reflect Tantric concepts and values and discuss subjects of similar concern.

Śrīkula literature includes much that is tangential or irrelevant to Śrīvidyā practice. While some Śrīkula works focus on Śrīvidyā's distinctive triadic theology and the rituals associated with it, others have little or nothing to do with these concepts and focus instead on other deities, rites, or theological concepts.¹⁸ The Śrīkula is not identical to Śrīvidyā.

Śrīvidyā is also mentioned in Tantric sources outside Śrīkula literature. In mantra treatises, such as the *Mantramahodadhi*, the *śrīvidyā* mantra is included as part of the broader discussion of mantras and ritual performance.¹⁹ Portions of these sources are also part of Śrīvidyā's textual canon.²⁰ Some non-Śrīkula texts, or portions of text, are authoritative because of their regional impact. Thus, a text, or portions of a text, may gain entrance into a lineage's canon by virtue of local popularity, by the practice locally of its teaching, or by local regard for an author or subject.²¹

Śrīvidyā's votaries have been, and continue to be, involved with gods and rites other than Lalitā, the *śrīvidyā*, and *śrīcakra*. They are especially renowned for their expertise in astrology and in Vedic sacrifice.²² Such interests are often explained by appealing to the idea that all expressions of knowledge and power derive from Śrīvidyā practices. This criterion of reduction can thus be used to distinguish those within Śrīvidyā from those who may appropriate some aspect of its ideology or ritual.

Historically renowned writers, who are only marginally involved with Śrīvidyā are sometimes invoked to lend importance or bolster arguments. For example, the great Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta (c. 1000 *c.e.*), who was likely unaware of Śrīvidyā's theoretical and practical elements, is invoked by later Śrīvidyā writers as an authority.²³ While historical and contemporary Śrīvidyā writers may express deference to the views of such tangential authorities, they do not necessarily consider such authorities to be initiates. In other words, the tradition acknowledges a difference between "insiders" and "outsiders" but treats each source and figure individually regarding its potential value and degree of authority.

The earliest written texts of the Śrīkula treat Śrīvidyā votaries as a spiritual elite in a rather unstructured hierarchy of religious possibilities. Other theological positions are often accepted as provisionally valid and only occasionally rejected outright. Further, there is remarkably little dialogical exchange or confrontation in these texts. The usual pattern of position and counterposition common to Indian philosophical discourse is rare.

Exchanges between Śrīvidyā writers are marked by varying degrees of tolerance, especially regarding highly charged theological, practical, and social issues such as the inclusion of the five prohibited substances (*pañcamakāra*) in ritual or the practice of sexually explicit "meditation on the aspect of desire" (*kāmakalādhyāna*).²⁴ In one noteworthy case the dispute centers on the interpretation of a guru's works by disciples within separate lineages.²⁵ But little mention is made of anyone other than those who can bolster one's own position. Śrīvidyā texts present yet another instance in Indian history of a specialized group arguing and discussing matters without regard for anyone outside its limited sphere of interests. What is most significant, however, is the extent to which the influence of Śrīvidyā traditionalists is felt outside these limited circles.

ŚRĪVIDYĀ WITHIN AND BEYOND KULA TANTRISM

The identification of Śrīvidyā with the so-called *kula* Tantric tradition and the propensity of some writers to call themselves "Kaula Tantrics," requires investigation. The meaning of "*kula*," and derivative terms, both differs within Śrīvidyā's sectarian sources and in other traditions. In the most general sense, *kula* means a "family" or, as Agheananda Bharati has suggested, a "clan."²⁶ This translation, however, only begins to suggest the term's wide variety of meanings and applications.²⁷

Abhinavagupta offers a variety of historical and theological explanations of *kula* and Kaulism. He attributes its founding with the legendary Macchanda, usually dated no later than the fifth century.²⁸

As a marker for ideological or sectarian distinctions, the term “*kula*” is not particularly useful. Nearly all Śākta Tantric texts refer to themselves as “*kula*” until the sixteenth century. With the introduction of the so-called Samaya Śrīvidyā tradition by Lakṣmīdhara, “*kula*” takes on new and distinctive meanings. Even before Lakṣmīdhara, however, any technical meanings the term “*kula*” might have had for Kashmiri Śaivites are insignificant to Śrīvidyā traditionalists.

In contemporary south India the term “*kaula*” is associated with the ritual use of the *pañcamakāras* and other elements of anti-brāhmanical Tantrism. However, even as late as the early nineteenth-century Śākta/Śaiva texts use “*Kaula*” without negative evaluation—with the exception of Lakṣmīdhara who maintains the inferiority of Kaula views in contrast to his Samaya interpretations and the inappropriateness of Kaula rituals for twice-born Śrīvidyā adepts. The refinements in the meaning of the term “*kula*” and its derivatives—especially *kaula* and *kaulika*—made for the purposes of juxtaposing the Kaula position with that of Pratyabhijñā and Krama in Kashmiri traditions are not discussed in Śrīvidyā texts.

In contrast, the term “*kula*” has caused most Śrīvidyā writers little difficulty. All Śrīvidyā writers before Lakṣmīdhara, and the majority after him, refer to themselves as *kulācārins*, those who “practice according to the *kula*.” Thus, as far as Śrīvidyā is concerned we should, as Harvey Alper has put it, treat Kaula lineages not as schools but rather “preceptorial lines.”²⁹

In *Tantrāloka*, chapter 28, Abhinavagupta mentions ten early teachers of the *kula* system; it is evident that Kaula, even from the earliest times, meant both Śiva- and Śakti-centered worshippers.³⁰ Śrīvidyā’s earliest historical commentators who identify themselves as Kaulas do not use the term “*krama*,” which, as N. Rastogi has noted, refers to a distinct Kashmiri Śākta tradition. The position of the Kashmiri *krama* system familiar to Abhinavagupta and viewed in opposition to Kaulism by Jayaratha does little to sort out the relationship of Śrīvidyā to the *kula*.³¹ The *krama*, despite being Śākta-oriented, receives no separate mention in the works of Śrīvidyā commentators. To its earliest historical commentators, Śrīvidyā is a *kula* tradition and the *kula*/Śaiva and *krama*/Śākta distinction obviously did not pose any significant interpretive problem. *Kula* did not mean strictly Śaiva anymore than *krama* meant to include all Śāktas. What then does it mean to call oneself a “*Kaula*” when both Abhinavagupta the Śaivite philosopher and Bhāskararāya the Śākta Śrīvidyā follower use the term to refer to themselves? A satisfactory answer depends on an appreciation of the term’s multivalent meanings and its historical contexts.

In general, *kula* and Kaulism refers to the primary streams of Tantrism characterized by certain principles, values, and norms of religious practice.³² They include the elements of ritual most frequently disputed inside and outside Tantric circles: the "five m's" (*pañcama-kāra*), the worship of the female organ in the so-called *kāmakalā* meditation, and the inclusion of persons from all castes and both sexes as active ritual participants.³³

Kaulism remains largely identified with Śrīvidyā even after the emergence of distinctive sub-schools. Bhāskararāya, for example, ignores Lakṣmīdhara when he defines the terms "Kaula" and "Samaya," though it is plainly evident that he is aware of Lakṣmīdhara's distinction. Further, Kaula Śrīvidyā writers deem sources authoritative without invoking the term "Kaula" or the canon proposed by K. C. Pandey so long as the texts support and, to some extent, broaden the scope of Śrīvidyā's ideological or ritual agenda.

To give just one instance of the intellectual distance that separates strands of Kaula Tantric tradition, one need only refer to Abhinavagupta who lists many of the sources of *kula* tradition in the twenty-ninth chapter of the *Tantrāloka*.³⁴ None of these are significant in Śrīvidyā. Conspicuously absent from Abhinavagupta's list is the foremost of Śrīkula Tantras, the *Vāmakeśvara Tantra*, despite its being known in Kashmir from the ninth century and its self designation as a *kula* source.³⁵ Śākta-centered traditions appear only as sub-schools of the Śaiva *kula* where, if Abhinavagupta is any indication, the focus lay primarily on the worship of various aspects of Śiva.

As Paul Müller-Ortega has recently shown, Abhinavagupta relates *kula* to the locus of divinity within the body. Müller-Ortega writes, "It is clear that the Kaula tradition teaches the primary importance of the body as the essential tool of *sādhana*.... The term *kula*, starting from a basic meaning of group, comes to mean the Embodied Cosmos, which encompasses the entire range of the manifest reality."³⁶ He goes on to say, "The Kaula lineage neither reviles nor tortures the body to achieve enlightenment. Rather, the tradition worships the body as a vessel of the Supreme. Indeed, the central tool for enlightenment is the body."³⁷ Given Müller-Ortega's remarks about Abhinavagupta's understanding of *kula*, it is little wonder that Śrīvidyā adepts have, with only a few exceptions, identified themselves as Kaulas.

Pandey's summary of the Kaula canon allows us to consider its relationship to Śrīvidyā. Śrīvidyā authors mention all the Tantras that Pandey lists though only two, the *Nityāśoḍaśikārṇava* and the *Tantrarāja Tantra* are specifically concerned with the particulars of Śrīvidyā.³⁸ The *Kulārṇava Tantra*, one of the earliest Kaula Tantras cited by

Śrīvidyā commentators, treats Kaulism as identical to Tantrism and is far more concerned with extolling the greatness of Kaula principles than with Śrīvidyā per se.³⁹ In this sense, *Kulārṇava Tantra* is indicative of the majority of sources adopted by Śrīvidyā traditionalists but likewise reflects the tendency of all Indian commentators to use texts to advance their own particular agendas.⁴⁰

In the *Tantrāloka* (35.373–374) Abhinavagupta maintains that the Trika, the Śiva-centered tradition he codifies, is the essence of the Kaula as fragrance is to a flower. Jayaratha, however, on *Tantrāloka* 38.51 says that *kula* stands for Śakti which is called “*nityā*” (literally “eternal” but perhaps a reference to the sixteen *nityās* made prominent within Śrīvidyā). This suggests a closer link to Śākta-oriented traditions and would offer a justification for Jayaratha’s choosing to comment on the *Nityāśoḍaśikārṇava* portion of the *Vāmakeśvara Tantra*. Pandey is correct when he asserts that *kula* tradition is not another name for Abhinavagupta’s *pratyabhijñā* system; he, too, subscribes to the opinion that it is a broader term indicating the basic principles set forth in the Tantras and the *Tantrāloka*.⁴¹

According to contemporary south Indian practitioners, the issue of how Śrīvidyā differs from the Śrīkula Tantras should be resolved at the level of specific lineages. At this level, the matter becomes a subject for anthropological study.⁴² Within Śrīvidyā, the heart of the issue involves the rejection of certain Kaula principles, particularly the *pañcamakāras*, by those who harbor caste and religious sentiments that prohibit their inclusion in scripture. Those who reject these perceived “Kaula elements” either edit out controversial points or reject outright any text that includes them. Contemporary adherents of the Samaya sub-school are at the forefront of dissociating such ideas in Śrīkula Tantras with Śrīvidyā. In contemporary Śrīvidyā, and in noteworthy contrast to the position of historical exegetes, the Kaula/Samaya distinction is at the heart of all significant factionalism within Śrīvidyā.

At issue in Śrīvidyā’s Kaula/Samaya split is more than the question of which texts belong in the written canon and which signs and icons should be the subject of interpretation. Rather, the differences center on normative ethical values and ritual conduct. The most generic meaning of the term “*kula*” is one of the first cited by Bhāskararāya in his *Saubhāgyabhāskara* on the *Lalitāsahasranāma*. The path is called “Kaula,” he says, because it is connected with a family (*kula*). It refers to what is obtained in a lineage and through one’s own family.⁴³ Thus, Śrīkula refers to the family of the beneficent goddess.

What may seem confusing or imprecise in Bhāskararāya is more likely a reflection of Śrīvidyā’s penchant for layers of meanings woven into complex, interrelated patterns. On *Lalitāsahasranāma*

(LSN) n. 91, Bhāskaraṛāya gives a simple Tantric sense to *kula*, he says that the *kula* means the succession from the supreme Śiva to one's own guru and that it refers to a way of life (*ācāra*) rather than the position in society in which one is born.⁴⁴ In contrast, in the *Setubandha* he remarks that *kula* means whomever belongs to one's own caste (*jāti*) but that if one follows a certain shared Dharma, he or she becomes the same caste, presumably brahman.⁴⁵ The shift here is subtle but of critical importance for understanding Bhāskaraṛāya's attitudes about caste. He has not dismissed the importance of caste. Rather, he has shifted the meaning of caste from birth to a shared set of principles and behavioral patterns that create an alternative clan.

Amṛtānanda, in his *Yoginīhrdayadīpikā*, gives "kaula" a meaning that equates it with Śrīvidyā. He says that Kaulas are those who identify five elements in their spiritual lives, the so-called *śrīpañcakam* frequently referred to by contemporary practitioners: (1) the Self (*ātman*) identified with the universal Brahman; (2) the guru; (3) the *śrīvidyā*, that is, the fifteen or sixteen syllable mantra; (4) Śrīmata or the Auspicious Mother, that is, Devī in her beneficent aspects; and (5) the *śrīcakra*.⁴⁶ Amṛtānanda's identification of the Kaula path (*mārga*) with the *śrīpañcakam* is the first historical definition of Śrīvidyā in sectarian terms. Bhāskaraṛāya repeats Amṛtānanda's interpretation at least twice in his commentaries on *Lalitāsahasranāma* and *Vāmakeśvara Tantra*.⁴⁷

Bhāskaraṛāya also says that *kula* means scripture (*āgama*) because it explains and is identical to the thought of the worshiper and the object of worship. This also appears to be a definition of scripture. The goddess, he goes on to say, is the center of scripture because she is the object of *kula* knowledge.⁴⁸ But Bhāskaraṛāya continues to distinguish meanings of *kula* since these, he observes, are preserved in a specific set of scriptures; he quotes the *Paraśurāmakalpasūtra* (6.39) to the effect that *kula* sources should be kept secret.⁴⁹

The more esoteric meanings of *kula* occur beside those already mentioned in the commentaries on *Yoginīhrdaya*. These begin to draw sectarian lines within Śrīvidyā. Amṛtānanda says that *kula* means the body, a view repeated by Bhāskaraṛāya and reminiscent of Abhinavagupta. Kaulas, he goes on to say, are those who remain connected with the outer world.⁵⁰ In the *Setubandha* Bhāskaraṛāya continues this line of thought when he says that a Kaula is one who has made the identification of knower, knowing, and object of knowledge with the conscious self, the same definition he gives for a Śrīvidyā adept.⁵¹ He repeats this idea in the *Saubhāgyabhāskara* in slightly different terms quoting the Kashmiri source *Cidgaganacandrikā*, attributed to Kālidāsa. He says *kula* is the measurer (*pramātr*), the thing to be measured (*prameya*), and the measuring (*pramāna*).⁵²

In other passage, Amṛtānanda says that since the body is the *kula*, holding the body to be superior is called the “practice of *kula*” (*kulācāra*) while revering the shoes (*pāduka*) of the teacher, that is, following the disciplines taught by the guru, is principled conduct (*samayācāra*).⁵³ It is not clear from this single reference if Amṛtānanda is distinguishing the Samayācāra branch of Śrīvidyā identified later with Lakṣmīdhara. Amṛtānanda does not seem to be aware of a sectarian distinction that Lakṣmīdhara formalizes, especially considering his Kaula emphasis on external forms of practice and physical disciplines.

Some two hundred years after Amṛtānanda, Lakṣmīdhara makes it clear that Samayins reject the Kaula injunctions for external worship. He instead centers on the Samayin’s claim that the entire spiritual discipline, including all types of ritual, must be done only internally.⁵⁴

Bhāskararāya, a self-proclaimed Kaula, was aware of the internal division within Śrīvidyā but preferred the esoteric, yogic meanings of *kula* and *samaya* to Lakṣmīdhara’s sectarianism. Surely it would not have been in Bhāskararāya’s political interests to take up the controversies of legitimate behavior in his own brahman community since his Kaula beliefs would put him in the center of the dispute over community ethics. But neither would it be incumbent upon him to comment on Lakṣmīdhara’s Samaya interpretation. Though he often cites Lakṣmīdhara favorably, and sometimes uses the nickname “Lalla” to refer to him, Bhāskararāya does not always endorse his views. In his remarks on the seven names of the goddess that mention *kula* (*LSN*, n. 90–96) and the following two that mention *samaya*, Bhāskararāya eschews the opportunity to discuss sectarian divisions and instead concentrates on esoteric meanings.⁵⁵ He gives a typical “sacred etymology” to *kula* based on esoteric associations rather than strict grammatical formulas. He says *ku* means the earth and *la* absorption, that is the *mūlādhara cakra*, the lowest of the six basic yogic centers within the body; the central path paralleling the spine, the *suṣūmnā*, is also called “*kula*” because it is connected with the *mūlādhara* center.⁵⁶ Quoting *Svacchanda Tantra* he says that the goddess resides in the thousand-petal red lotus, which has its pericarp at the vault of the skull and is called “*kula*”; in the petals she is embodied in the *kulaśaktis*.⁵⁷ He then quotes an unnamed Tantra as saying, “‘*Kula* means Śakti, *akula*, Śiva, and union of *Kula* with *Akula* is called ‘*Kaula*. *Kaula* means the essence common to both Śiva and Śakti, hence Devī is called ‘*Kaulinī*.’”⁵⁸ Abhinavagupta repeats the gist of this remark in the *Tantrāloka*, which is quite possibly Bhāskararāya’s source.⁵⁹

Lakṣmīdhara maintains that Samayins differ from the Kaulas by rejecting the use of convention-defying substances or practices in ritual and by the complete internalization of contemplative worship

(*antaryāga*). The rejection of the *pañcamakāras*, for example, and other Kaula practices that deliberately violate conventional brahman ethics is confirmed by contemporary Samayins in Tamilnadu. His claim that the internalization of the ritual is an exclusive Samaya doctrine is debated and rejected by Kaulas. Lakṣmīdhara also splits the Kaula path in two, according to its Earlier (*pūrvakaula*) and Later (*uttara*) forms. The distinction is based on the manner of worship characteristic to them: *Pūrvakaulas* worship the *śrīcakra* inscribed in gold, silk, or some other substance while the *Uttarakaulas* perform worship to the female organ.⁶⁰ *Uttarakaula* practices are considered outside the Vedic fold since they involve left-handed practice (*vāmācāra*), defined as the use of the prohibited substances and unsanctioned behaviors. Samaya worship, in contrast, he says is performed solely within the yogic centers of the body; here the goddess resides in her subtle forms and no longer requires to be worshiped with ritual substances, gestures (*mudrās*), or verbalization including mantras. Lakṣmīdhara leaves no provision for outward expressions of piety, despite the fact that contemporary Samayins continue to perform external rituals (*bahiryāga*).⁶¹

Kaulas who favor external forms of ritual and sanction the use of the convention-defying behaviors also accept the superiority of ritual internalization (*antaryāga*).⁶² Bhāskararāya, for example, in his Upaniṣad commentaries discusses at length the transformative qualities of external worship and the necessity of gradual internalization.⁶³ Contemporary practitioners explain this position by saying that external rites should continue in order to maintain discipline and as an example for those who may never reach the higher stage of internalization. The precedent for such behavior is the exoteric teaching of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavadgītā* in which the yogi is enjoined to act as an example for others and to spare confusion.⁶⁴

Lakṣmīdhara's belief that Samayins worship only internally while Kaulas employ external forms may have been based on regional traditions.⁶⁵ However, his preference for ideas and practices acceptable to high caste Hindus does not exclude non-twice-borns (*atraivarnīkas* or *advija*) from Samaya Śrīvidyā. This point should be emphasized since a misstatement of his views has been supported by a host of reputable scholars.⁶⁶ In his commentary on verse 11 of *Saundaryalaharī*, Lakṣmīdhara states plainly that even outcastes (*śūdras*) can be qualified (*adhikāra*) for contemplative worship (*upāsana*) on the *śrīcakra*. He goes on to say that in Vaidika rituals, *traivarnīka* caste persons are preferred.

Had Lakṣmīdhara restricted Śrīvidyā to only twice-born males (*dvija*) he would have formally distinguished it from all other Tantric traditions since caste is not used to exclude potential initiates. While the content of spiritual discipline (*sādhana*) can be restricted or deter-

mined by caste, access to some form of initiation (*dīkṣā*) cannot. Like all Tantrics, Lakṣmīdhara does not dismiss caste but rather distinguishes Tantric and Vedic qualifications.

Lakṣmīdhara also makes theoretical and practical distinctions between Samayins and Kaulas, some of which are upheld by later Kaula commentators, including Bhāskararāya. In one of their most distinctive interpretive shifts, the Samayins maintain that the *śrīcakra* should be envisioned opposite to that of the Kaulas. The whole configuration is turned upside down, as it were, such that the central *bindu* is no longer in the middle of the central triangle but in the space directly above it.⁶⁷ This repositioning is accompanied by a major theological reinterpretation; the resulting four downward facing major triangles are identified with Śiva while the five upward facing are Śakti. While this Samaya version of the *śrīcakra* still appears in some contemporary traditions it is not the popular figure; neither has Lakṣmīdhara's theological reinterpretation gained a following among contemporary Samayins. (See diagram A1 for the Samaya version of the *śrīcakra*.)

The repositioning of the *śrīcakra*, Lakṣmīdhara contends, parallels yet another Samaya/Kaula difference. The Kaulas, he says, conceive the *śrīcakra* only according to the method of dissolution (*samhāarakrama*) while Samayācārin prefer the creation method (*srṣṭīkrama*). The practical implications of this distinction are straightforward: the dissolution method conceptualizes or "draws" the *śrīcakra* from the outermost lines towards the central triangle while the creation method begins at the central *bindu* and expands outward. This alteration implies a major adjustment in ritual practice (*pūjā*) since the identification of deities with the *cakra* must be radically revised.

Later Śrīvidyā Kaulas do not seem to be aware of Lakṣmīdhara's strict identification of methods by schools or at least evince no interest. Bhāskararāya passes over the issue as a factional dispute and discusses both methods of conceptualizing the *śrīcakra* with equal deference.⁶⁸ Lakṣmīdhara's sectarianism is, once again, unaccounted for in other scriptural sources, suggesting that he describes practices and interpretations familiar to his region, current to his times, or peculiar to his lineage.

Contemporary Śrīvidyā does follow Lakṣmīdhara on the so-called left-handed (*vāmācāra*) and right-handed (*dakṣiṇācāra*) distinction. The left-handed path, defined by the use of "prohibited" ritual substances including sex outside marriage, is identified with the Kaulas. Right-handed worship rejects these practices and follows the "orthodox" views of *smārta* brahmanism. Only the right-handed path is deemed appropriate to the Samayins. Lakṣmīdhara is not the first to articulate the right/left distinction in these terms. He also seems to reflect the

historical situation even though Kaulas do not always follow left-handed methods or take ritual injunctions literally.⁶⁹

Bhāskararāya rejects the interpretation of left- and right-handed worship in terms of specific "antinomian" practices. Instead he offers an esoteric distinction based on the acceptance of certain gods in worship.⁷⁰ His opinion apparently is intended to counter popular understanding of the left/right distinction. For Bhāskararāya, denying the use of powerful but convention-defying substances would undermine the effectiveness of the Śrīvidyā path.⁷¹ Without naming Lakṣmīdhara, Bhāskararāya rejects his opinions and avoids a potentially controversial subject. Bhāskararāya simply implies that Lakṣmīdhara's Samaya views are a mistaken account of an undivided tradition.

Bhāskararāya also interprets *samaya* to suggest that there have been fewer doctrinal and practical distinctions between the two schools than might be assumed from Lakṣmīdhara. On *Lalitāsahasranāma* n. 97 (*samayāntaḥsthā*) Bhāskararāya assents to the idea that *samaya* worship is internal when he says, "*Samaya* is commonly... explained as offering worship, etc. to a *cakra* in the ether of the heart...."⁷² He then identifies this teaching with the yogic process of uniting spiritually with the eternal Śiva in a ritual called the "*mahāvedha*." While details of the ritual he has in mind are uncertain, his general interpretation is not: "The method of effecting this must be learned from a guru. This is what is meant here by *samayācāra*."⁷³ He later refers to Samaya as a tradition of teachers and scriptures, "*Samaya* also means the five books of Vaśiṣṭha, Śuka, Sanaka, Sanandana, and Sanatkumāra, because they describe this internal worship."⁷⁴ Here he echoes Lakṣmīdhara even though there are no texts bearing these names either in Bhāskararāya's own references or as independent works.⁷⁵

As in the case of the term *kula*, the use of sacred etymology is crucial for determining the esoteric meanings of *samaya*. He says *sama* means "equality" while *ya* is the "one who attains the goal," thus the term refers to "the equality [*sama*] between the goddess and Śiva."⁷⁶ But apart from these references, Bhāskararāya makes no explicit mention of the theoretical or practical divisions in Śrīvidyā noted by Lakṣmīdhara.

The split between Kaula and Samaya is far deeper than a disagreement about terminology or theoretical points of divergence, such as the refashioning of the *śricakra*. The central issue revolves around the acceptance or rejection of practices at the heart of Tantric tradition, namely, the use of powerful substances and behaviors that are ordinarily prohibited or rejected according to high-caste canonical interpretations. For Bhāskararāya and the Kaulas these practices

define Śrīvidyā as Tantric and distinguish it from practices enjoined in the Vedas. Though he does not insist on their literal, external practice, he views their practice as integral to Tantric discipline. Lakṣmīdhara, representing more conservative social and religious forces, is unwilling to compromise on these issues; he is at pains to emphasize that external practice of *any* rite is a “lower” form of discipline (*sādhana*) and that all rites associated with Kaulism should be abandoned by the twice-born. Thus, he makes the exclusion of external rites a significant part of Śrīvidyā’s soteriology and suggests that anyone participating in Kaula rites is unfit for “higher” *sādhana*. Only the Samayins, he maintains, achieve the final state of grace and insight.⁷⁷ That the majority of Tantric sources do not support Lakṣmīdhara’s interpretations cause him no concern. These sources are rejected outright or accepted only as partial truths.

Like other Śrīvidyā writers, Lakṣmīdhara resorts to a hierarchical interpretation that places his own Samayācāra at the apex of theological possibilities. However, he also suggests that the tradition rather than the guru has the ultimate authority to determine which portions of scriptures present the “correct” or “highest” forms of worship. In south Indian traditions, the controversy and confusion concerning Kaula/Samaya terminology continues though the dispute over the central issue dividing the schools, as Lakṣmīdhara posited it, remains one of the clearest and most important divisions within contemporary Śrīvidyā.

The evidence suggests that Śrīvidyā either began among high caste persons, most likely *smārta* brahmans not antagonistic to Kaula values, or that Kaula followers were the first to codify the tradition in written texts. Those who rejected Kaula values and practices may not have been involved in the composition of Tantras since they would be ill-disposed to associate Śrīvidyā with Kaulism. Other texts important in south Indian Śrīvidyā, especially the *Saundaryalaharī* attributed to Śaṅkarācārya, do not appear on the historical scene until well after the emergence of the written Kaula Tantras.⁷⁸ There is no evidence to suggest that Śrīvidyā was exclusively Kaula from its inception or that Kaula values crept into the system only gradually: both opinions held by contemporary adepts holding opposing interpretations.⁷⁹

Before proceeding further into the history of Śrīvidyā’s texts and ideologies, it is appropriate to consider first new evidence about its emergence in south India and to attempt to track Śrīvidyā’s development in the context of other important movements and ideologies.