Routledge Studies in Tantric Traditions

TANTRA, MAGIC, AND VERNACULAR RELIGIONS IN MONSOON ASIA

TEXTS, PRACTICES, AND PRACTITIONERS FROM THE MARGINS

Edited by
Andrea Acri and Paolo E. Rosati

ROUTLEDGE

Tantra, Magic, and Vernacular Religions in Monsoon Asia

This book explores the cross- and trans-cultural dialectic between Tantra and intersecting 'magical' and 'shamanic' practices associated with vernacular religions across Monsoon Asia. With a chronological frame going from the mediaeval Indic period up to the present, a wide geographical framework, and through the dialogue between various disciplines, it presents a coherent enquiry shedding light on practices and practitioners that have been frequently alienated in the elitist discourse of mainstream Indic religions and equally overlooked by modern scholarship.

The book addresses three desiderata in the field of Tantric Studies: it fills a gap in the historical modelling of Tantra; it extends the geographical parameters of Tantra to the vast, yet culturally interlinked, socio-geographical construct of Monsoon Asia; it explores Tantra as an interface between the Sanskritic elite and the folk, the vernacular, the magical, and the shamanic, thereby revisiting the intellectual and historically fallacious divide between cosmopolitan Sanskritic and vernacular local.

The book offers a highly innovative contribution to the field of Tantric Studies and, more generally, South and Southeast Asian religions, by breaking traditional disciplinary boundaries. Its variety of disciplinary approaches makes it attractive to both the textual/diachronic and ethnographic/synchronic dimensions. It will be of interest to specialist and non-specialist academic readers, including scholars and students of South Asian religions, mainly Hinduism and Buddhism, Tantric traditions, and Southeast Asian religions, as well as Asian and global folk religion, shamanism, and magic.

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Texts, Practices, and Practitioners from the Margins

Edited by Andrea Acri and Paolo E. Rosati

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Acri, Andrea, 1981- editor. | Rosati, Paolo E., editor.
Title: Tantra, magic, and vernacular religions in monsoon Asia : texts, practices, and practitioners from the margins / edited by Andrea Acri, Paolo E. Rosati.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022015546 (print) | LCCN 2022015547 (ebook) | ISBN 9781032251288 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032251370 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003281740 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Tantrism--Asia. | Tantrism--Asia--Customs and practices.
Classification: LCC BL1283.84 .T365 2022 (print) | LCC BL1283.84 (ebook) | DDC 294.5/514--dc23/eng20220820
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022015546
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022015547

ISBN: 978-1-032-25128-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-25137-0 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-28174-0 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003281740

Typeset in IndUni-T
by SPi Technologies India Pvt Ltd (Straive)

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Acknowledgement

This volume is the fruit of a collaboration between the editors, which was kick-started by discussions and exchanges that took place during a series of forums FIND 'Transcultural Encounters' held at the Labyrinth in Zagarolo between 2017 and 2021. This collaboration culminated in a panel at the conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) held in Pisa in 2021, in which several of the contributors to this volume participated. We are grateful to all the people involved in those events who contributed to creating an intellectual and human atmosphere that was most conducive to fruitful scholarly exchanges. We thank in particular Adrián Navigante, director of Research and Intellectual Dialogue at FIND, for his support and for providing the intellectual stimuli that contributed to the breeding of the intellectual agenda shaping this volume.

Andrea Acri would like to thank the Section des Sciences Religieuses of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE, PSL University, Paris) and the Groupe de Recherches en Études Indiennes (GREI, EA2120, Paris) for providing funding to cover the publication costs.

Paolo E. Rosati would like to thank the Società Italiana di Storia delle Religioni and the EASR, both of which supported the organization of thematic panels on Tantra during the EASR annual conferences in Bern (2018) and Tartu (2019), which helped him to refine his research focus on the intersection between Tantra and magic.

Finally, we would like to thank Prof. Gavin Flood, editor of the Routledge Studies in Tantric Traditions Series, for strongly and effectively supporting this project, and Dorothea Schaefter, senior editor at Routledge, for making the publication of this volume possible despite the economic downturn and the many other challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.


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Introduction

Andrea Acri

Framing the intersection between Tantra, magic, and vernacular religions in Monsoon Asia

Tantra (used here as a synonym of 'Tantrism') is a complex, heterogeneous, and protean socio-religious phenomenon. The very definition of Tantra and its status as a clearly identifiable discourse, in spite of the existence of such emic terms as *tantra* and *tāntrika*, is a matter of controversy. Some scholars would restrict Tantra to texts and artefacts associated with initiation lineages within specific (and as a norm, esoteric) soteriological systems across sectarian domains of Indic religions; others, applying a broader perspective, would understand the phenomenon as transcending the boundaries of the belief systems and rituals produced within textually and historically established initiatory traditions so as to encompass multifarious manifestations of the cultural, artistic, and political lives of many societies of the wider Indic or 'Indianized' World.

While the enigmatic origins of Tantra are still debated, textual and art historical evidence suggests that Tantric traditions identifiable as such arose in the Indian subcontinent from the middle of the 1st millennium CE. From ca. the 7th to the 13th century and beyond, Tantric orientations of major religious traditions of 'Hinduism' (especially Śaivism and Śāktism) and Buddhism (especially the Sanskrit-dominated Mahāyāna current, but also the Pali-dominated tradition that became a major force in mainland Southeast Asia from the 12th century onwards) virtually coincided with mainstream religiosity and ritual practice over much of Asia. Transcending the constructed boundaries of the region we now call 'South Asia', Tantra spread over the large swathe of territory referred to as Monsoon Asia[1] and continues to this very day to play a central role in the religious and ritual life of many 'peripheral' areas of the former Indic World, such as Nepal, Tibet, and Bali. Taking on a local garb according to the socio-cultural and geographical contexts in which it developed, Tantra has played a significant role—albeit often in a subliminal manner—in shaping the shared history and collective identity of a geographically vast and culturally diversified region encompassing the continental and maritime space of the southeastern quadrant of Asia.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003281740-1

Admittedly, it seems reductive to pin down Tantra exclusively to specific and distinct textual corpora, lineages, or schools, for Tantric traditions have left a mark on many cultural phenomena in lay milieus, even in contexts that are far removed from those from which they originated. These Tantric orientations, which were not in each and every instance esoteric, secret, or initiatory, may include, for example, self-divinization, ritual violence, transgressive devotional practices, the use of mantras and magical formulas (for both this-worldly and other-worldly purposes), healing, sorcery, possession and exorcism, and different genres of sacred performance.[2] Thus, by applying a polythetic approach, one may argue that some of the distinctive features of what we may call 'elite Tantra' penetrated—through some sort of trickle-down effect—the extended social fabric; conversely, many popular or vernacular cults and practices may have influenced high-cultural/textual manifestations of Tantra. The word 'vernacular' is used in this volume as an indicator of non-Sanskritic, non-elite, 'local' milieus but also of 'lived' forms of religion, which are in some respects the expression of less institutionalized practices and practitioners. The vernacular problematizes and complicates the divide between 'folk' and 'elite', being the outcome of a dynamic process of interaction between different milieus and practitioners.

Scholarly work carried out in the past three decades or so has rightly emphasized the Sanskritic continuum that contributed to shaping many socio-cultural contexts in the Indic World—for instance, the cultural and geographical formation called 'Sanskrit Cosmopolis' by Pollock (2006). Highlighting the enormous importance of Tantra for the religious and cultural history of the Indian subcontinent and beyond, and its alliance with the political elites of the societies across the geographical area that is largely coextensive to that of the Sanskrit Cosmopolis, Sanderson (2009) has called the crucial period from the 7th to the 12th century the 'Śaiva Age'. Thus, Tantra has been mainly studied as a top-down, elite-driven phenomenon that is very much part of the Sanskritic (and/or Brahmanical) intellectual and textual tradition, and which was shaped by the same dynamics that governed them. And yet, Tantra confronts us with the paradox that, from the moment it burst into the Indic religious cosmos, its ritual system has emerged as a source of incommensurable yet dangerous power, which often was consciously formulated in violation and subversion of mainstream norms, Brahmanical or otherwise. Indeed, Tantra can be associated not only with the religious and political elites that sponsored it, thereby facilitating its spread, but also with marginal ethnic groups and social milieus, as well as with lay communities at large, who resorted to ritual agents (both institutionalized and non-institutionalized) to fulfil their worldly needs. Nowadays emically associated in many South and Southeast Asian contexts with low-caste agents, indigenous communities, and black magic, Tantra highlights a stratification of liminal and transgressive practices within the overarching context of mainstream Hindu or Buddhist religious ideology and praxis, as well as a tension between the 'margins' and the 'centre(s)'. It is clear that Tantra had, throughout much of its history and its wide spectrum of different strands, a complex relationship with Brahmanism, at times 'alternative and incompatible' and at times 'dependent and complementary' (Shin 2018: 33).

A controversial aspect of Tantra is that many of its streams are characterized by ideas and practices that are either not found in Vedic religiosity or that overlap with non-Vedic, 'shamanic', 'folk', 'indigenous', or 'vernacular' traditions of healing and communion with spirits, including ritual trance and possession, exorcism, theriocephalic (as well as wrathful and bloodthirsty) deities and spirits, as well as the concept of iron as a spirit-repelling magical substance (Slouber, Chapter 3 of this volume). While these elements are especially evident in what Slouber calls the little-studied, yet prolific, 'underbelly of the Tantras'—namely, 'texts on magic, exorcism, snakebite, and a fascinating array of deities orthodox Brahmanical Hinduism would have considered beyond the pale' (*ibid.*), they are also attested in other genres of Tantric scriptures, as well as many textual and non-textual manifestations of Brahmanical culture. This fact does not necessarily demonstrate that they are Brahmanical, for their prevalence does not tell us much about their origin; rather, they may very well have been appropriated by Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism from different streams over a relatively long period. Although it is often difficult to establish the direction of influences and borrowings, there is evidence of appropriation, repackaging, and codification of elements of vernacular practices by Tantric traditions rather than uniquely the other way around.[3]

Furthermore, on the basis of textual evidence, one could hypothesize that the spirit-cults referred to by scholars as (early) Indian 'popular religion(s)', which predate our earliest available evidence of Tantric traditions and indigenous religions, are to be located in a shared background or matrix.[4] Many of such ideas and practices show tantalizing similarities with those that have been—generally, and vaguely—labelled as 'shamanic', 'tribal', or 'indigenous' religions of non-Indo-Aryan language speaking ethnic groups of the Indian subcontinent and beyond, thus suggesting multiple levels of entanglement through processes of negotiation, assimilation, and mutual transformation between institutionalized religions and less institutionalized vernacular or 'indigenous' traditions. Quotation marks are in order when mentioning the 'indigenous' since this category has too often been uncritically invoked to represent a counterpart of (inherently cosmopolitan) high cultures, such as Sanskritic, Sinitic, or Islamicate. Just like 'folk' religion, the expression carries negative overtones, having been often attributed to the religiosity of isolated groups untouched by 'civilization' (Mullen 2000: 127). However, many (relatively isolated) small-scale societies in Monsoon Asia, just like their cosmopolitan counterparts, were already the outcome of circulatory dynamics, whereby local developments took place against the background of translocal exchanges. In other words, 'the "local" was already, at least in part, "cosmopolitan"' (Acri 2017: 18).

This problem begs for the no less controversial question of the origins, i.e. the possibly pre-Tantric genealogy of such elements, in particular imitative behaviours associated with wild animals, spirit possession, the use of bones and skulls, etc. A debate has been, somewhat slowly, unfolding as to whether Tantra owes to non-Sanskritic, non-Brahmanical, and non-Indo-Aryan cultural influxes that occurred following the gradual adoption by Indo-Aryan migrants of cultural and religious elements of the pre-existing inhabitants of

the Indian subcontinent (the heterogenetic paradigm) or is rather to be regarded as a more or less linear historical development of Vedic and post-Vedic religiosity and Indo-Aryan magico-ritual praxis that stems from within the Brahmanical fold (the orthogenetic paradigm).[5] A squarely orthogenetic definition of Tantra has been espoused by Gavin Flood (2006: 14), among others, who states that 'there is no evidence for a non-Aryan substratum for Tantrism, which must be understood as a predominantly Brahmanical, Sanskritic tradition with its roots in the Veda'. On the other hand, Urban (1999: 126) asserts that the history of Tantrism is impossible to write because of poverty of data at present and that 'the most we can say is that, although Dravidian or pre-Aryan origins may be possible, tantric traditions have clear relations to the Vedic tradition as well'. Along similar lines, White (2000a: 18) elaborates a synthesis between an orthogenetic and heterogenetic approach, contextualizing the historical origin of Tantra as 'an orthogenic development out of prior mainstream (but not necessarily elite) traditions, that nonetheless also drew on both foreign (adstratal) and popular (substratal) sources'. In his recent comparative discussion of sorcery across Eurasia, White (2021: 83) argues that to investigate the demonology that forms the 'foundation upon which all of the magnificent tantric systems and pantheons that Hindu Tantra specialists study are grounded', substratal (e.g. Vedic and Āyurvedic, as well as 'popular' *yakṣa* and *nāga* cults), adstratal (e.g. Iranian, Chinese, European), and even superstratal (e.g. Indo-European) traditions have to be taken into account, especially when dealing with the issue of origins and influences.

Besides acknowledging the intellectual parameters of this problem, many leading scholars of Tantra—with some notable exceptions—have tended to steer clear of undertaking a systematic investigation of the issue of origins.[6] This is understandable, given the perceived lack of evidence going back to the period before the earliest extant written sources. Yet, to write histories of Tantric traditions on the basis of textual sources alone does not eliminate the problem that these sources arguably reflected the views of a small (literate) fraction of the total population of their time, which is thus reduced to a passive recipient of ideas elaborated by the Brahmanical minority, and is *de facto* denied agency by assuming that their arguably distinct religious culture had no influence on the elite stream (Davidson 2017; Slouber, Chapter 3 in this volume). Furthermore, one has to acknowledge the difficulty of bridging the divide between eminently prescriptive texts and underlying social realities, even when trying to reconstruct the latter in the light of the former or, more dangerously, vice versa (for example, when trying to understand ancient sources in the light of modern practices).

Against the background of these (perhaps unsurmountable) theoretical and disciplinary challenges, this volume reflects a preliminary attempt to fulfil urgent desiderata in the field of Tantric studies. The first desideratum is the gap in the historical modelling of Tantra—namely, an absence of a sophisticated treatment of prior behaviours, practices, and attitudes that contributed to its historical formation but were not part of Tantric lineages and did not engage many of the signature elements of mature Tantra (on which see Davidson 2017 and Chapters 1 and 2 of this volume).

The second desideratum is the interface between the Sanskritic elite and the 'folk', the 'magical', the 'shamanic'—all contested terms and concepts,[7] which cannot nonetheless be either ignored, dismissed as non-existent figments of the distorting lenses of modern scholarship, or replaced by the broad category of 'vernacular'. Since traces of these phenomena can be found, often intertwined with Tantric elements, in ritual practices, myths, folk and oral traditions, festivals, as well as visual and performative ritual arts across Monsoon Asia,[8] there is a need to revisit the intellectual and historically fallacious divide between 'cosmopolitan Sanskritic' and 'vernacular local'. This divide has not only contributed to generating and immortalizing such constructed notions of aboriginality as the *ādivāsi*s in India and the *pribumi*s in Malaysia (both of which, perhaps not coincidentally, are modern Sanskritic neologisms), but has also obscured the continuities and shared historical genealogies of the various strands of what Urban (2003: 275) calls a powerful and widespread 'non-Sanskritic, lower-class, and nonintellectual […] current of nonelite Tantric practice—what we may call low-brow, folk, or vernacular Tantra—that has probably always proliferated on the dangerous margins of mainstream Hindu and Buddhist traditions'. Attempting to link together seemingly disconnected actors, geographies, and discourses, one could comparatively study such disparate instantiations of living Tantric (or Tantra-influenced) vernacular traditions as the Bauls and Sahajiyās of Bengal, the Tantric-shamanic healers of Nepal and the Western Himalayas and their possession cults, the South Asian Aghorīs, the Balian sorcerers of Bali, and the Weikjās of Myanmar, as being historically related to, or influenced by, translocal Tantric discourses and bodies of textual as well as non-textual knowledge and practices. This comparative investigation of categories that have too often been perceived as distinct—namely, Tantra (conceived of as inherently high-cultural, Sanskritic, and cosmopolitan) and vernacular religions (conceived of as inherently low-cultural, local, and embedded)—recognizes that, as noted by Shin (2018: 30), Tantric traditions 'have never been a singular or static … but multiple, diachronic and dynamic processes which have proceeded in many different directions according to sects, localities and periods', and were characterized by a typically 'creole' element. This approach may allow us to precisely describe local trajectories and specificities and, at the same time, transcend the uniquely localist approach from which these agents have often been studied. In so doing, it will lay the foundations for future studies elaborating a common framework of understanding for phenomena that have overlapping traits, shared social milieus, and perhaps even common historical roots, and thereby achieve a truly global appreciation of Tantra.

The third desideratum, which forms a corollary to the previous two, is the extension of the geographical parameters of Tantra, inasmuch as it constitutes an eminently translocal and cross-cultural phenomenon, to outside of the boundaries of the Indian subcontinent. While regions that have been regarded as historically, ethnically, and linguistically 'marginal' with respect to the Sanskritic/Brahmanical world order, such as Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, Assam, Tamil Nadu, and Nepal, have been also perceived as either cradles or strongholds of Tantra, regions like mainland and insular Southeast Asia have

too often been glossed over in wider-ranging studies on Tantra, or regarded as passive peripheries at best.[9] Therefore, attempting to transcend the constructed boundaries of both nation-states and post-World War II area studies paradigm, the volume takes as its geographical theatre the vast yet historically interlinked socio-geographical construct of Monsoon Asia, a large part of which coincides with the transnational, semi-coherent cultural formation referred to as the 'Indic World'.

With a chronological frame going from the mediaeval Indic period up to the present, a wide geographical framework, and through the dialogue between the various disciplines of philology, ethnography, art history, and religious studies, the collective body of work included in the volume intends to make an innovative contribution to the field of Tantric studies by presenting a coherent enquiry on the cross- and trans-cultural dialectic between Tantra and various intersecting phenomena associated with vernacular religions across history and geography. In so doing, it sheds light on practices and practitioners that have been frequently alienated in the 'orthodox' or 'elitist' discourse of mainstream Indic religions and equally overlooked by modern scholarship. (In this sense, the 'margins' invoked in the subtitle of this volume are to be intended in terms of social agents and milieus, geographical regions, and knowledge and practice).

Summaries of the chapters

The first three chapters set the tone for the intellectual agenda of the volume by investigating textual and historical evidence that brings a fresh perspective to our current appreciation of the origin and development of Tantric traditions in the Indian subcontinent, in particular by unpacking the relationship between Tantric texts and social milieus that were illiterate or whose records were not transmitted through the enduring institutions eventually emerging in the early mediaeval period. Chapter 1, 'More Pre-Tantric Sources of Tantrism: Skulls and Skull-Cups', by Ronald M. Davidson continues the author's previous line of exploration (Davidson 2017) investigating the debt Tantric traditions owe to magical groups operating outside of Tantric lineages. For instance, Tantra is often identified with the use or ingestion of polluted materials, whether the employment of bones in various manners, the ingestion of sacraments (*samaya*), or the wearing of distinctive garments. Some scholars have argued that ritualized statements about these materials are specifically posed to contradict the admonitions in the Dharmaśāstras for psychological or spiritual purposes, while others have maintained that they have come from one tradition and were borrowed by the others. However, evidence exists for earlier precedent in the use of polluted or inauspicious materials in North India that has seldom been factored into discussions of sectarian lineage formation in the early mediaeval era. Against this background, the chapter discusses the origins of the employment of a skull (*kapāla*) in Tantric traditions, especially that of the 'skull bearers' or Kāpālikas. It presents the received understanding, examines its complications, and presents evidence not so far considered. The basic argument is that the use of skull-cups and bones for both religious and non-religious

purposes is much more widely spread than appreciated and for some of its early history was intimately connected with the (possibly pre-Tantric) worship of the *piśāca* demons in India, from whom Śaivas and others appear to have appropriated that behaviour.

Chapter 2, 'Charnel Ground Items, *Śmāśānika*s, and the Question of the Magical Substratum of the Early Tantras', by Aleksandra Wenta and Andrea Acri builds on, and complements, the analysis outlined in the previous chapter by exploring further attestations of 'skull-magic' in the early Tantras. Scholars have usually traced these elements back to the marginal milieus of Śaiva Kāpālika ascetics, who were known for their antinomian rituals that heavily relied upon objects procured from the cremation ground, and who were stereotypically portrayed through their five-insignia attire (*pañcamudrā*); however, the chapter argues that in the description of the 'wrathful magic rituals' (*abhicāra*) attested in the early Śaiva and Buddhist Tantras, we find depictions of a different type of 'wild' practitioner that does not entirely conform to the type of Kāpālika ascetic but rather points to a more archaic, pre-Tantric magical substratum dealing with exorcism of demons and skull-magic that could have been subsequently integrated into the textual corpora of Tantric traditions. The authors' underlying hypothesis is that the manipulation of skulls, corpses, and animal parts for magical purposes, known in non-Tantric texts as *śmāśānikakarma*s, may point to a group of cremation ground specialists already in existence prior to the historical emergence and textual codification of Tantric traditions.

Chapter 3, 'Shamans and Bhūta Tāntrikas: A Shared Genealogy?', by Michael Slouber investigates the question as to whether a relationship might exist between the beliefs and practices of the Bhūta Tantra specialist (*bhūtatāntrika*) and the 'shamans' of India's tribal communities who have long specialized in similar ritual practices, such as healing of illnesses perceived to be caused by spirits. Such healing is often accomplished through 'trance work' and possession, in which the trained practitioner enters altered states of consciousness at will and communicates with a spirit being. The chapter first evaluates the major points of debate in the long-contested etymology of the word 'shaman', touches on shamanism in prehistory, and engages with debates in anthropology and religious studies about the appropriateness of applying the term 'shaman' to non-Siberian religious specialists. It then presents present recent scholarship on the origins of Tantric traditions in India that has tended to emphasize the influence of figures from non-elite communities, including numerous tribal groups in the Indian subcontinent and Monsoon Asia more broadly. Finally, it presents initial findings on the probable influence of shamanic traditions of India's tribal peoples on the Bhūta Tantras.

The next three chapters move forward through the chronological span of our scholarly investigation by accompanying us, so to speak, from the premodern to the modern and contemporary periods. In doing so, they focus on regional expressions of Tantric traditions in the Indian subcontinent (Central-Eastern India, Assam, and South India, respectively) to unravel the problem of the interplay between text-based Tantric lore and vernacular cults and practices, as well as the category of 'magic'. Chapter 4, 'Female Gaṇeśa or Independent Deity? Tracing

the Background of the Elephant-Faced Goddess in Mediaeval Śaiva Tantric Traditions', by Chiara Policardi investigates the Indian elephant-faced female deity known as Vināyakī, Gaṇeśvarī, Gajānanā, and numerous other epithets. Although she is usually uncritically identified with Gaṇeśa's female form, this little-studied figure very early on appears as an independent, if minor, divinity in her own right. Particularly significant appear to be the connections with the goddess Jyeṣṭhā or Alakṣmī, who, in some texts, is described as elephant-faced and as riding a donkey, and who traditionally represents misfortune and disease. After the 8th century, the elephant-faced goddess sometimes features as one of the Eight Mothers and is often included in groups of *yoginī*s in both Vidyāpīṭha (7th–8th century) and Kaula (post-10th century) scriptures. The *yoginī*s' pantheons of these textual traditions find correspondence, to some extent, in various extant pre-11th-century *yoginī* temples, such as Hirapur in Odisha and Bheraghat in Madhya Pradesh. Furthermore, various sculptural collections of *yoginī*s also include such a figure. Through an analysis of the relevant textual and iconographic evidence, the author sheds light on the genesis of this elephant-faced female figure and on its role and significance in the thought-world of mediaeval Śaiva Tantric traditions, providing insights into the process that led to the interpretation of the figure as the female form of Gaṇeśa and highlighting dynamics of interrelation between Tantric traditions and marginal, non-Tantric traditions and regional cults.

Chapter 5, 'Crossing the Boundaries of Sex, Blood, and Magic in the Tantric Cult of Kāmākhyā' by Paolo E. Rosati explores the connection between Tantra and the magic tradition of Nīlācala in Assam in order to explain the encounter between Brahmanism and magic. The chapter first discusses the doctrinal, ritual, and mythical background of the cult of the Goddess Kāmākhyā, whose roots go back to the esoteric sexual path of Kaula Tantra praxis. Having traced the history to this path, which around the 10th century switched from blood sacrifice to a mystic-erotic ritual centred on the *yonipūjā* (worship of the vulva), homologizing blood offerings and erotic rituals focusing on the human body as a source of sexual fluids necessary to obtain such supernatural accomplishments (*siddhi*), the chapter then examines the concept of *siddhi* as a 'magical power' that can be acquired only by those belonging to the *kula* (clan), the only ones who know the *yoni*'s secret (the restricted transmission of *siddhi*s over *kula*'s generations being a complement to the ideology of blood sacrifice). Finally, it considers the intersection of indigenous traditions and Brahmanical ritual praxis in Assam as the source of the peculiar cult of the *yoni* of Kāmākhyā. From this discussion, Assamese Tantra emerges as a religious phenomenon that crosses socio-cultural boundaries and encompasses apparently irreconcilable categories.

Chapter 6, '"Let us Now Invoke the Three Celestial Lights of Fire, Sun and Moon into Ourselves": Magic or Everyday Practice? Revising Existentiality for an Emic Understanding of Śrīvidyā', by Monika Hirmer tries to depart from the positivistic existential outlook cast by Western scholarship on the 'magical' rituals carried out by South Indian practitioners of the Goddess Śrīvidyā to cultivate oneness with the goddess Tripurasundarī. Hirmer explores the ontological coordinates that accommodate this oneness cogently and unambiguously, and

proposes a radical re-evaluation of the concept of 'beingness' as conceived by a modern scientific framework, revealing an emic understanding where bodies expanding into subtle realms and actions partaking in cosmic designs respond to ontological coordinates informed by transcendence. The ontological dislocation she advocates, where identities and practices deviating from a positivistic framework need no longer be confined to the domain of 'magic' but can be appreciated in their ontological primacy and epistemic legitimacy, invites novel modes of approaching the Śrīvidyā tradition and Tantric traditions generally.

The last three chapters of the volume continue the enquiry along the lines developed in Chapters 4 to 6 by extending the geographical focus to the outlying regions of the Indian subcontinent, more specifically Nepal and insular and mainland Southeast Asia, and by focusing on the disciplinary perspective of ethnography of contemporary societies. Chapter 7, 'Narrative Folklore of *Khyāḥ* from Tantra to Popular Beliefs: Supernatural Experiences at the Margins among Newar Communities in the Kathmandu Valley' by Fabio Armand reveals the rich narrative folklore of the *Khyāk*, a supernatural being that haunts the imaginaries of the Newars, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group living in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. The author strolls on the trails of this supernatural being in order to access a complex belief system that provides a framework for understanding some Tantric ritual practices pertaining to both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. He presents two different dimensions of Newar culture through which both etic and emic observers can comprehend the nature of *Khyāḥ*s: a Tantric dimension, where these beings are direct emanations of the energy produced by the female goddesses known as *Aṣṭamātṛkā*s and the dimension of popular beliefs, which view these beings as born from the divine union between Nāsaḥdyaḥ, the god of music and dance, and a human girl. Providing a morphology of the *Khyāḥ*s from a taxonomic perspective on the basis of ethnographic work and discussing the divine origins of this being through an analysis of narratives, Armand examines an important pre-pubertal feminine initiation, the *bārhā tayegu* (nep. *gufā basne*), where the *Khyāk* becomes a symbolic deflowering agent. Focusing on the dynamics of the ritual and its possible failures, the discussion highlights a borderline situation: if a girl dies during the ceremony, her *ātman* will turn into one of the forms of *Khyāk* and will continue haunting the house where she passed away. These circumstances introduce a Tantric-shamanic perspective concerning the categorization of the various forms of *Khyāk* and the specific rituals to pacify them.

Chapter 8, 'Magical Tantra in Bengal, Bali, and Java: From *Piśāca Tāntrika*s to *Balian*s and *Dukun*s' by June McDaniel investigates how magical Tantra is understood in three distinct Asian regions, mainly in the light of ethnographic data drawn from interviews with practitioners. Having introduced the term 'magic' and its disputed use in scholarship, McDaniel examines the processes of magical transformation, the emic understanding of the supernatural, and the roles of deity, gender, and ritual empowerment in the traditions forming the subject of the chapter. She shows how magical practices can be incorporated into both 'elite' and 'folk' Tantric systems in both India and Indonesia, and that magical concepts can cross Muslim and Hindu lines more easily than many

other forms of ritual by escaping the critical view of theologians from both traditions. By presenting some Asian models and their understandings of magical practice and ritual, McDaniel's study brings new material to the study of sorcery and magic, which has often focused upon the Western magical tradition, and also highlights the potential of comparative study of the hitherto little-documented traditions of Tantric magic in contemporary South and Southeast Asia.

The final chapter, 'Tantrism and the Weretiger Lore of Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia' by Francesco Brighenti explores traditional beliefs about weretigers as physical shapeshifters found among, on the one hand, Austroasiatic-speaking tribal groups inhabiting the Shan Plateau, the Upper Laotian highlands, and the Annamite Cordillera, as well as Tibeto-Burman-speaking ethnic groups of northern Myanmar, and, on the other, the Theravāda Buddhist societies settled in the river valleys and alluvial plains of Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia, where similar weretiger beliefs form a little-studied aspect of the prevalent magical lore. Noting that oral traditions regarding human-to-tiger transformation in the last three countries have clear links with Tantric black magic, possibly as a result of the early prevalence of Mahāyāna-cum-Tantric Buddhism (and, as far as the Khmer Empire is concerned, of Tantric Śaivism too) in those countries during the mediaeval period, and their later continuation as 'Tantric Theravāda' complexes, Brighenti assesses the interplay of indigenous (Austroasiatic, Tibeto-Burman, Tai) and South Asia-derived (Tantric) cultural traditions that shaped the weretiger lore of lowland mainland Southeast Asian societies.

Notes

1 Monsoon Asia encompasses South Asia, Southeast Asia, and much of East Asia as its cores and includes the greater Himalayan region, Central Asia, and Japan as its edges. For a (re)conceptualization of this region, see the introduction in Acri, Blench, and Landmann (2017), and Acri (forthcoming).

2 To give an idea of the cross-cultural potential of the application of a broader definition of 'Tantra' to disparate socio-cultural contexts across place and time, we may cite the list of seven features individuated by Crosby (on the basis of earlier studies by François Bizot) to define the Pali-dominated Buddhist tradition of modern Thailand and Myanmar as 'Tantric Theravāda'—viz., (1) ritual creation of a Buddha within one's own body; (2) the use of sacred language for the identification of microcosm and macrocosm; (3) sacred language as the creative principle (or the arising of the Dhamma from the Pali syllabary); (4) a system of analogic substitution/homologization; (5) '[e] soteric interpretations of words, objects and myths that otherwise have a standard exoteric meaning or purpose in Theravāda Buddhism'; (6) necessity of initiation; and (7) the application of the six previously outlined methods to pursue mundane and supramundane goals (Crosby 2013: 141–142). Cf. also the application by Stephen (2005: 85–93) of 18 distinguishing features of Indian Tantra elaborated by Teun Goudriaan to premodern and modern Balinese religion.

3 See Davidson 2002 and, on the relationship between the deities and ritual syntax of the Bhūta Tantras and Gāruḍa Tantras and shamanic traditions of Austroasiatic communities in the Indian subcontinent, Chapter 3 by Slouber in this volume; on the profound influence exerted by Bhūta Tantras and Gāruḍa Tantras on Āyurvedic medicine, see

Slouber 2016; on the transformation of the Gāruḍatantric goddess Tvaritā into the royal goddess of Nepal, see Slouber 2021. For an argument in favour of the appropriation of autochthonous goddesses by Brahmanism, see Shin 2011. For the appropriation of demonological elements (either substratal or astratal), see White 2021. On the issue of possession and practices broadly referable to a shamanic typology in the Marāṭhī cultural area, see Rigopoulos 1999.

4 For instance, many Buddhist Jātakas mention, often in a negative light, non-Buddhist offerings of meat, fish, blood, and alcohol to tree spirits (*yakkha*s) possessing those who interact with them, which are remindful of the offerings to fierce deities found in later Tantric texts (see Cowell 1896, Jātakas 50, 113, 347; DeCaroli 2004: 24–25). Orthodox Brahmanical sources perceive tree shrines (*caityavṛkṣa*) devoted to the cult of spirit-deities in a similarly negative light, prescribing expiatory atonement for Brahmins who enter in contact with them (along with funeral pyres and a *caṇḍāla*: see *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 1.5.9.5). For a discussion of a 'magical substratum' or matrix shared by Sanskrit texts across genres and time-periods, see Chapter 2 by Wenta and Acri in this volume.

5 For a discussion of the two paradigms, see Acri (2017).

6 The exceptions being Davidson (2002), Samuel (2008, 2011), Parpola (2015), Acri (2017), White (2021) (emphasizing circulatory dynamics but not steering entirely clear of the issue of origin), among others. For a (often cherry-picking and over-simplifying) critique of the 'tribal hypothesis' elaborated by Davidson, and a programmatic dismissal of the very possibility of looking for the origins of Tantra, see Wedemeyer (2013).

7 For recent critiques of the categories of magic and shamanism, respectively, see Otto (2013) and Pharo (2011). More discussions of these terms and their histories and referents may be found in Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 8 of this volume. On shamanism and Tantra in the Himalayas, see Müller-Ebeling, Rätsch, and Shahi (2002).

8 For a survey and discussion (including previous literature) on the overlap between spirit-possession/-mediumship and Tantric traditions in the masked dances of South India, Odisha, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, and Bali, see Samuel (2008: 315–322).

9 For an approach aiming at correcting this imbalance, see Acri (2016) and Acri and Sharrock (2022).