Fiercely Beloved
Understanding Chinnamastā’s Textual, Visual, and Experiential Dimensions

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Chapter One: Introduction

Ten years ago in Karnataka, Mysore, while on month-long sojourn to practice yoga, I was serendipitously introduced to the goddess of Śākta Tantra. At one of the many merceries in Mysore’s Devaraja Market, a small group of friends and I shopped for Punjabis to wear, and cashmere scarves and silks to ship home. Several of the cotton blankets hanging in the shop were painted with images of the deities. Some were familiar, like Kṛṣṇa, and others challenged my conventional notions of divinity. Hanging innocuously amidst various blankets was one such challenging goddess, named Chinnamastā, “The Beheaded One” (figure 1.1).

“She is a goddess for yoga,” the shopkeeper told me as I stared at the vibrant red and yellow naked goddess carrying her own severed head in her left hand and a sword in her right hand, while feeding herself and her two attendants with the three streams of blood that spewed from her neck. The image compelled me and repulsed my comrades. She was simultaneously
perplexing, evocative, appalling and beguiling. In that first moment of introduction, Chinnamastā demanded that I reorient myself to the divine feminine in order to comprehend how she could be associated with yoga. In the years that followed, many of my ideas regarding the divine feminine, Indian spirituality, and contemplative practices like yoga would undergo constant revision as I examined each of these things reflexively as both an academic and as a yoga practitioner.

I had always considered myself comfortable with the gruesome image of Indian goddesses, such as Kālī with her lolling tongue and wild eyes, but Chinnamastā presented me with something altogether foreign and confusing. Her image is a bizarre gestalt of conflicting symbols that the mind alone cannot make easy sense of. Her self-decapitation took center stage on the brightly colored fabric I saw that day in Devaraja Market. Severed heads are not uncommon in Indian iconography—Kālī is known for her affinity for blood and freshly severed heads, and both she and Tārā wear garlands of skulls. Yet many consider Chinnamastā to be the most enigmatic of the ten Mahāvidyās—wisdom goddesses of Śākta Tantra—due to her self-decapitation and consumption of her own blood, which she shares with her two attendants, Dākinī and Varnīṇī. Her dynamism is intensified by the unabashed stance or dance that all three devīs engage in unabashedly, naked and smiling, with their arms akimbo and their legs in the dynamic pratyālīḍha and alīḍha (respectively, standing with either the right or left leg forward) stances taken during the lasya dance performed by the goddess at the end of an eon.

Chinnamastā’s bewildering composition affected me on many different levels. She struck me intellectually as an object of analysis, physically due to her provocative stance and presentation, and emotionally due to the curious mixture of conflicting elements. These

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2 Śāktism is a sect of Hinduism that is centered around veneration of the devī in any of her many forms.
impressions indicated that this fearless deity was meant to deeply impact the viewer on a level and scope that mundane images could not. Experiences such as this have impressed upon me the necessity of inquiring into the nature of devotion to models of the divine that do not easily adhere to convention as well as into their often accompanying transgressive and antinomian rites and rituals.

My early experiences at Devaraja Market were a snapshot into the vibrant and expressive religious life of India. After only a few minutes between my time at the shop where I saw Chinnamastā and the crowded street corner where we hailed the nearest auto-rickshaw, I witnessed the divine almost everywhere I looked. It was present in the miniature Śiva statues glued to the dashboards in auto-rickshaws, it was manifest in the little boys, painted blue and dressed like Kṛṣṇa, who occupied sidewalk shrines, and it was in extant as the great goddess in her many forms—from benevolent to fierce—in the marketplace, on magazine covers, and in the inner sanctum of the temple. The goddess is so pervasive that the notion of appropriations and misappropriations of religious imagery are almost absurd while looking at Mahālakṣmī gracing the cover of Forbes India next to kitsch ornamental goddess heads for sale at temple kiosks (figures 1.2 & 1.3).
She is praised in her myriad forms that range from wrathful to benevolent and beautiful to grotesque. The angelic image of the devī coexists alongside the misshapen and surreal. Dichotomies between Uma, the daughter of the Himalayas, and Chinnamastā are woven into the fabric of goddess narratives in a way that supports a polyvalent understanding of śakti that is intended to communicate a unified worldview that actively and consciously combines conflicting characteristics in order to convey the kind of divine power that cannot be contained by categorical conventions.

Her complexity makes her the perfect object of artistic emulation and adoration, and she has accordingly been celebrated in literature, music, art, and film since time immemorial. It is also through these creative conduits that she is constantly reinterpreted and renewed for different people within a variety of social, economic, and cultural contexts. For instance, the devotional poetry to Kālī by Ramprasad Sen delights in her benevolence while bemoaning her cruelty in a form of bhakti known as ninda (criticism). He says, “What’s a mother anyway, the son’s worst enemy? I keep wondering what’s worse you can do/Than make me live over and over/The pain, life after life.”

She is also exalted as all-powerful and all victorious. The saying “Victory to the Mother”—Jaya Mātā Jī—is often used across all of India to express devotion to the divine

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3 Rita Sherma, personal correspondence, May 6, 2016.
4 McDaniel, Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls, 165.
mother in her many forms. The whole of India is so strongly identified with the goddess that it is called Bhārat-Mātā, or Mother India. As would be expected in a culture that values the seen manifestations of divinity, Bhārat-Mātā is depicted as a goddess-like landmass, which appears to represent Durgā, who is sometimes shown riding a lion (figure 1.4). And in other rare cases, reminiscent of Kālī, she is shown wearing a garland of the heads of her faithful sons, as she is shown in this 19th century postcard showing the heads of Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

In contemporary times, the goddess has been used to reflect the evolving roles of women in Bollywood. The recent Bollywood film, Angry Indian Goddesses, makes a tongue in cheek reference to Kālī in what has been called India’s first real “chick flick” (figure 1.5). Filmmaker Pan Nalin says that his “attempt [was] to make a film that shows a reflection of the state of affairs that Indian women are experiencing: career, society, love, family, sex, independence, etc. It’s…about Indian women finding their hearts and losing their heads!” One film critic says that such a movie has potential as a feminist critique of India, or as a plea for equality in the film industry, but somehow falls flat. She notes that, “The opening credits are a brilliant start for a film celebrating womanhood and friendship. It is a montage of sequences from the lives of these

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5 Erndl, Victory to the Mother, loc. 55.
6 The Goddess Wears a Necklace Containing the Heads of Some of Her Devoted Sons, 2013. ebay.
7 Vijayakar, “Angry Indian Goddesses.”
eight women fighting against misogyny in their different worlds…There is a fleeting reference to Kali…But except for validating the title, the reference has little to do with the narrative."

Mapping the erratic movement of the goddess throughout Indian history illustrates the complexity of her emergence and reemergence. Early prototypes of the pan-Indian goddess were found at the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro sites of the Indus Valley. Clay female figurines with waist, head, and neck ornamentation indicate the prominence of women, particularly when compared with an absence of similar male figurines. It is understood that these figurines are evidence of early pre-Aryan goddess-fertility cults. More recent iconographies of Indian and Nepalese goddesses, not the least of which is Chinnamastā (known as Vajrayoginī in the Vajrayāna schools of Tantric Buddhism that are prevalent in Nepal), show striking similarities to these early Matyōkas (mothers). Like the standing figure of the Mother Goddess found in

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8 Kaushal, “Angry Indian Goddesses Review: Nothing Angry about This Film.”
Mohenjo-Daro, dated c. 2700-2100 B.C.E., several Indian goddesses are depicted with jewelry, marking them as goddesses (figures 1.6 & 1.7).  

What brings such an assortment of goddesses together so as to be considered ek hi hai, “all one?” And why, with such rich and copious representations of the goddess in myth, icon, and statue, has she been so hard to trace? My own experience in researching the goddess has shown that mapping the gods, though challenging, can be accomplished through hermeneutics of the vast corpus of texts that cite Agni, Rudra, Śiva, and Brahma. The goddess, conversely, lacks such a cohesive trail of textual breadcrumbs of which to follow. Rather the goddess’s path can be tracked through her image, ritual texts, and mythologies. Despite the fact that the goddess does not have a sectarian following (sampradāya), or authoritative theologians such as Śaṅkarācārya or Ramanuja to develop her theology, texts such as the Devī Māhātmya and the Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa as well as the many other Śākta-tantric texts expound upon her nuanced theology, which gathers a wide variety of pan-Indian goddesses into her fold.

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11 Osella, “Review: All the Mothers Are One: Hindu India and the Cultural Reshaping of Psychoanalysis by Stanley N. Kurtz.”
My initial experiences with Chinnamastā at the fabric shop affirmed two significant religious concepts that this paper addresses: the ubiquity of the devī, and the profound power of the visual in Śāktism. The many forms of the goddess that proliferate in India, though off-putting to some, are meant to be seen and relished—and their image remains the primary way in which they communicate important theological, devotional, and philosophical ideas to their devotees. Seeing is one of the primary means by which religious life is experienced in India, emphasized by the concept and practice of darśan (seeing), whereby the devotee visits a shrine, temple, or holy person in order to see and be seen by the divine.

In her book, Darśan, Diana Eck calls for a “hermeneutic of the visible”, which addresses the methods we use to interpret religious art in a variety of religious and secular contexts.¹² This kind of approach is not only important for understanding Indian religious iconography, but for any scholar who engages culture and its people. Rudolf Arnheim, in Visual Thinking, calls for academia to acknowledge the powerful impact the visual has upon cognition. He notes the importance of cultivating and strengthening the ability to perceive and to interpret what is seen. He says that, “The arts are the most powerful means of strengthening the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in any field or endeavor.”¹³ I contend that the advancement of semiotic and visual analysis within any academic disciple is important, if not essential, in today’s climate of increasing visual learning and image assimilation via the world wide web. Without proper training in the visual realm, how does the student of religion, culture and the arts understand and make sense of the wild array of words and images that flash before them at ever-increasing velocities?

¹² Eck, Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India, 14.
¹³ Arnheim, Visual Thinking, 3.
As a very preliminary attempt to address these questions, this study takes a multidisciplinary and intersubjective approach to the critical analysis of the fierce divine feminine in Śākta-Tantric iconography, of which Chinnamastā is an ideal exemplar. Looking at seemingly anomalous images such as hers helps to reframe how the “divine feminine” is understood by calling into question the often unconscious assumptions that drive the process of categorical construction. Secondly, this study seeks to uncover how these categorizations guide and shape perceptions of women, femininity, and the sacred. Thirdly, this study investigates how a certain images are of incredible importance and value for the aims of certain religious practices, like Śāktism, and how these images inform and give meaning to the religious lives of women.

This first, introductory chapter commences with basic contextual considerations and definitions of Tantra, śakti, and Śākta, and how the goddess is conceived of and understood in her original Śākta context and within contemporary India and beyond. The second chapter focuses on Śakti within the textual and visual tradition of Śāktism, beginning with the Devī-Māhātmya, where goddess theology is first compiled in the myth of Durgā. Then the textual and visual history of Daśa-Mahāvidyās (the ten great wisdom goddesses of Śāktism) is explored, as is Kāli, who serves as visual and conceptual template for Chinnamastā.

Chapter three introduces the semiotic theories and methodologies used to critically analyze the vibrant expressions of Chinnamastā in myth, image, and praxis within Śākta-Tantra. This chapter defines and distinguishes hermeneutics from semiotics, and provides a basic method by which Tantric semiotics can be applied. Chapter four applies these methods to the texts, images, and rituals of Chinnamastā, beginning with her written origins in the Śākta and Tantric mythology in the Śākta-Upapurāṇas and the Tantras before looking at her image as it is
described in her meditation mantras (dhyāna). These two categories of text provide a basic framework upon which the paradigmatic form of the goddess is structured. This exemplary model of the goddess gives a point of departure from which an intersubjective semiotic analysis can take place, which takes into account the diversity of her forms across different religious, cultural, and historical milieus.

Finally, chapter five attempts to bridge the gap between text and image and their relationship to praxis and the experiential dimensions of sādhana and bhakti to the headless goddess. Three contemporary people with a relationship to the goddess have been interviewed—Kulavadhuta Satpurananda—a Śākta-Tantric sādu in Gangtok, Sikkim, near the Himalayas, Neela—a Bengali Śākta practitioner and scholar who lives in New York, and Jessica—an American Tantric and Kālī devotee living in Helsinki, Finland. In addition to these examples, chapter five includes a brief critique of post-modern contemporary artistic presentations of the goddess by Rajni Perera and Anish Kapoor.

**Contextual Considerations: Śākta, Śakti, and Tantra**

Śivah Śaktya yukto yadi bhavati Śaktah prabhavitum
Na ced-evam devo na khalu kuśalaḥ spanditumapi |

If Śiva is united with his Śakti, then he is able to create.
If not, then the God is not even able to stir.

—Saundaryalaharī, verse 1

It is easy to understand why one might be devoted to or love the beautiful or ethereal, but it is much more difficult to comprehend how devotion to the fearsome devī is experienced and understood. The Śākta tradition venerates šakti, feminine power, in the myriad forms of the

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14Saundaryalaharī 1, my translation.
Mahādevī, or Great Goddess. It is one of the three primary sectarian denominations of Hinduism, along with Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism. Śaktism has ancient roots that date back to the Indus Valley Civilizations (c. 3300-1600 BCE), where the cult of the goddess might have been the basis of Harappan religion. It is impossible to know what, if any, religious belief system prevailed in the Indus Valley civilization, but archeological excavations show a reverence for the feminine which may have been the precursor to goddess worship in India.

Within the Tantric milieu of Śaktism the goddess is primarily worshipped in her terrible forms, such as Kāli, Tārā, and Chinnamastā. Chinnamastā, one of the Daśa-Mahāvidyās, Ten Great Wisdom Goddesses of Śaktism, illustrates how veneration within Śaktism is not limited to a singular conventional idea of the divine. Additionally, these fierce looking deities also indicate that there is no one unitary manner in which one should relate to the divine. From the perspective of Tantra, Bhakti, and Śākta—all of which incorporate the divine image into their worship and sādhana (ritual)—the feeling of love and devotion is a complex one, which can and does allow for a variety of co-occurring emotional sentiments, such as disgust, humor, and impetuousness. The primacy of the fierce devī within the Śākta-Tantra milieu indicates that both form and function are of critical importance. Using Chinnamastā as an exemplary Tantric devī, I contend that—in most cases—the fearsome image of the divine functions in ways that benign images cannot, and that her appearance plays a critical role in how she is understood in a devotional context so as to meet the needs and expectations of the devotee.

I intend to draw from existing research on Chinnamastā in order to shed new light on how she has been and is understood within the Tantric milieu and how and why such particular representations of the divine are important, meaningful and necessary for the devotee. To explore her meaning and significance, I will examine how she has been rendered and interpreted through

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her various texts, images, and rituals. The images of Chinnamastā play an important part in her veneration since they bridge the gap between the philosophical themes in the text and ritual experience. Often these images function independent from the narratives of the goddess as objects of veneration within the context of bhakti devotionalism.

Indian religion and philosophy exists in contrast with those traditions in which man has been rendered in the image and likeness of god. Much to the contrary, most of India consciously and purposefully renders divinity according to the likeness of men, women, animals, and the inanimate with the intention of relating to that deity in very specific ways and in order to meet specific needs. In this way, their mythologies and images are open to constant reinterpretation and re-representation. This approach therefore must ask the very important question of “why”? Why and how is a goddess, a female, more important for meeting certain soteriological and theological needs than a god, or a bull, or something non-conceptual?

To answer this question is it essential to understand gender from within the contextual framework of Śākta-Tantra, which consciously employs gender categories for certain purposes that reach far beyond the defining of one’s personal identity. The concept of ūkta is understood as the feminine principle that occupies one half of a dynamic partnership with Śiva, the masculine principle. Their dynamic relationship is responsible for cosmogenesis of the universe, and it is their collective function that is of primary importance. This general principle is understood across all sectarian denominations of both traditional “Hinduism”, Bhakti, and Śāktism. Yet, how ūkta is translated within the social, cultural, and religious systems of each tradition varies.

The meaning of the goddess within the orthodox schools of Hinduism often regard her as the_upholder_of the dharma. In most cases, the goddess is always connected to one of the gods as
his consort and is often a model of the śtrīdharma, the ideal duty of a woman and a wife. The Rāmāyaṇa illustrated the dharma of social class, filial piety, and gender in the epic tale of Rāma and Sitā. Within the bhakti traditions, the temperament of goddess is used to illustrate the ideal emotional sentiment (bhava) that should be cultivated in relationship to the divine. The love relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Radhā is used in many devotional schools as the perfect model of bhakti. Without going into too much detail about the particularities of each traditions usage of gender within their myths and iconographies, suffice it to say that the role of the goddess within normative Hindu religion and bhakti perspectives understand śakti as inherently connected to fertility, motherhood, and proper role of women as defined by śtrīdharma. We will see throughout the many stories and images of the Śākta-Tantra goddess that neither of these general categories are an exact fit for how she is perceived, which leaves one wondering how exactly the goddess of Śākta functions for her many, many devotees across India and beyond.

Śakti

Śakti and Her Western Appropriation

Śakti serves as the perfect entrée into the larger discussion of interpretations and reinterpretations of the Hindu devī in wide variety of cultural, historical, and religious milieus. As such, the very word śakti introduces the theme of contextual transformation to which the goddess is constant subject. The term “śakti” references the Indian philosophical concept of “power” or “energy.” It has been popularly used in the non-Indian West for a variety of marketing purposes: as a clothing name-brand—Shakti Activewear (figure 1.8); a trendy yoga festival dedicated to the divine feminine—Shakti Fest (figure 1.9); and as the moniker for various groups, such as Yoni Shakti, a pole dancing troupe; and the new-age rock band, Shakti

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Yet, despite the rather dramatic innovations and re-imaginations of the relatively abstract notion of śakti, all of these contemporary permutations share a somewhat distant relationship with power or energy as it manifests as the Mahādevī, the Great Goddess, who stands at the gateway of mukti or liberation for her millions of devotees in India.

Fig. 1.8: An advertisement for Shakti Activewear

When coupled with the idea of liberation, śakti assumes specific forms in different places. In North America, it is interpreted as a liberating force and is interpreted according to America’s long history of women’s liberation and feminist movements since the early twentieth century. This emancipation, in the midst of feminism’s third wave, is translated as the freedom to express sexuality and spirituality publicly within the free market. In this context, śakti portrayed as the power and freedom to act and express oneself, rather than the power and freedom from oppression.

Halfway around the globe in contemporary India, a different conception of śakti emerges in the Bollywood film *Queen* (figure 1.10). It opens with a typical scene in contemporary India—the opulence of the Indian marriage. Ranī, the young bride-to-be, is in the midst of preparations when her fiancé calls the wedding off. Both she and her family are devastated and ashamed of the disgrace, so Ranī decides to go on her honeymoon to Paris alone to grieve. She is shown uncomfortably walking Parisian alleys alone, going to after-hours nightclubs, getting drunk for the first time, eating meat, and having rendezvous with foreign men—albeit rather tame ones. *Queen* unfolds as a story about a contemporary Indian woman's reclamation of her agency and independence as she emerges from a culture that continues to adhere to the notion of the "kept" woman through the *śtrādharma*, or proper roles for
women—daughter, wife, or mother. At the end of the film trailer, Ranī is shown dancing on table tops, while a woman's voice whispers *Jaya Mātā Jī*, "Victory to the Mother". It is here we see the reemergence of *śakti* in 21st century India as a soft but powerful reminder that the Mother Goddess of India remains alive and well.

The phrase, *Jaya Mātā Jī*, uttered at the end of the film trailer and proclaimed at most every *śakti-pītha* (goddess temple) in India conveys the long standing cultural importance of *śakti*. This power is considered to be the primary and fundamental quality of the Goddess. In its most general sense, *śakti* as a feminine principle is understood within Śākta-Tantra as the active force. Śak as a verbal root in Sanskrit (*saknoti*) means simply “to do” or “to make able.” The embodied vehicle of that power is most often the Great Goddess who enlivens all of creation. Śiva as the masculine principle, on the other hand, is understood as inert and lifeless without the power of *śakti*. The first verse of the famous Śākta hymn to the goddess, the *Saundaryalaharī* states that, “If Śiva is united with his Śakti, then he is able to create. If not, then the God is not even able to stir.”

Śakti as the active force stands in contrast against other masculine and feminine dichotomies that undergird Greco-Roman/Judeo-Christian and Daoist/Chinese philosophies, evident in Jung’s *anima-animus* theories of contrasexuality where the feminine anima is thought to be passive and the masculine animus is thought to be active and dominant. Within Hindu Tantra, the goddess is understood as Śakti, “she who is active,” which colors her every incarnation throughout the stories and images of the Tantric goddess. Depictions of the Śākta-Tantra goddess, then, must convey the essential power of provocation. With this in mind, as a

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20 *Saundaryalaharī*, 1.
vehicle for śakti and as Śakti, each goddess must necessarily provoke some kind of response, whether through the stories of her exploits, or her graphic imagery. As the generative force, she is shown fecund and fertile—adhering to Indian conventions of beauty, and as destroyer she is shown wielding weapons, riding lions, either beautiful or frightful, festooned with skulls, and dripping with blood. In many cases, these two roles are conflated and the beautiful and the destructive are manifest in a single goddess, as is the case with Durgā.

Yet, as Śakti, the goddess exists halfway between an object and its implied action in that her energy is understood as latent potentiality until she is manifested as one of the many emanations of the Great Goddess. Śakti malleable and prone to endless reimagining, which is evident in how she has been conceived of throughout Indian religious history. Tracy Pinchtman identifies three ideas central to the development of the concept of śakti: (1) feminine, generative power, which is often portrayed as the consort of a male deity; (2) cosmogonic power of a single divine entity that is not necessarily female; and (3) the fundamental divine power inherent in all of creation. Pinchtman’s categories are not discrete, but particular notions of śakti are more prominent in specific religious and cultural milieus, apparent in the term’s usage across various texts.

Śakti as a concept is found in Vedic literature, but does not emerge as an independent feminine cosmological principle until much later, on the periphery of orthodox Hinduism. A diachronic analysis of textual references to the goddess explicate the transformation of śakti as an amorphous power in Vedic literature to an independent agent of feminine power by the sixth century with the Devī-Māhātmya (Glory to the Goddess), of the Mārkaṇḍeya Upaniṣad. The developmental streams outlined by Pinchtman are unified in the Devī-Māhātmya and become anthropomorphized as the goddess Durgā, who is a manifestation of the Mahādevī. Śākta

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scholar, Rita Sherma notes that the “various conceptions of the feminine principle combine with the notion of ultimate reality to create a Great Goddess who is the power inherent in creation and dissolution, the primordial material substance… as well as the creative impulse, formless yet the matrix of all forms, transcendent as well as immanent.”\textsuperscript{22} The definition and conception of Śakti outlined in the Devī-ṃhātmya in no small way influences and shapes further evolution of the goddess, which reaches its pinnacle with the development of the Daśa-Mahāvidyās in the Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa and the Brhaddharma-Purāṇa in the late 14th century CE, where Chinnamastā makes an appearance as one of the ten wisdom goddesses.

\textbf{Śākta & Tantra}

Tantric historian N.N. Bhattacharyya says that present day Śākta religion has its origins the goddess narratives of the Upapurāṇas and that it likely comes about as a reaction to the religious, social and economic developments of the Gupta Age (240-550 CE), in which the iconic veneration of deities such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Buddha became central to religious life. It is here where the divine feminine becomes consorted to each of the gods of the trimūrti (triad)—Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. However, for the large population of people who venerated the goddess in her many other forms, this somewhat narrow vision of the Mahādevī was not sufficient.\textsuperscript{23} Thus Śāktism is born out of a need for, what Neela Bhattacharyya Saxena terms, a “gynocentric thealogy”—a religion wherein the divine feminine plays the primary role.\textsuperscript{24} It is in the Devī-Māhātmya where previous iterations of šakti and the devī emerge in such a way as to embody Śākta theology, which positions the Goddess as the dominant divinity, to whom even Viṣṇu and Śiva submit.

\textsuperscript{22} Sherma, “SA-HAM—I Am She: Woman as Goddess,” 31.
\textsuperscript{23} Bhattacharyya, History of the Śākta Religion, 201.
\textsuperscript{24} Saxena, “Gynocentric Thealogy of Tantric Hinduism,” 130-33.
The Śākta-devī develops in such a way as to absorb and integrate the three streams of the devī cited by Pinchtman within a unified system. These principles are articulated in the Devī-Māhātmya’s invocation of the Great Goddess:

*Thou are the cause of all worlds. Though characterized by three qualities, even by Hari, Hara and other gods though art incomprehensible.
Thou art the resort of all; thou are this entire world which is composed of parts... Oh Goddess; thou hast comprehended the essence of all scriptures.
Thou art Durgā... Thou art Śrī... Thou art indeed art Gaurī who has fixed in her dwelling in that of the moon-crested god.*

The Śākta apogee of the goddess takes place within the heterodoxy of Hindu Tantra. Śāktism and Tantra have a close relationship with each other even though they are distinct streams of South Indian religion. Rita Sridhar says that, “Due to the unorthodox worship of tribal goddesses by a sect which was alienated from the Vedic traditions, Śākta was misunderstood as Tantra.” Śākta maintains a worldview that is oriented toward śakti, while Tantra employs yogic sadhana (practices) in an effort to harness and utilize that power. Yet, the two streams are often considered commensurate with each other due to Śākta’s orientation and attitudes concerning the feminine principle and Tanta’s controversial ideas and practices toward women, sexuality, the body, and ritual purity.

Madhu Khanna understands Śākta-Tantra as a specific body of Śāktism that is characterized by both Śākta theologies and Tantric ideologies. This body, she notes, possesses its own unique corpus of texts that exclusively addresses matters concerning the Tantric devī. These textual sources are explicit about her cosmic functions, which place her in a position of superiority over the gods of the Vedic pantheon. These innovations and adaptations can be seen

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25 *Devī-Māhātmya, 4.7.*
in the imagery and icons of goddesses like Kālī and Chinnamastā, who are typically shown as
dominant over Śiva.

Yet to comprehend the meaning of the Śākta Tantra devī, it is important to establish a
familiarity with the ideological structure of Tantra. There is no simple way to define Tantra. Just
like the devī herself, Tantra means vastly different things to different people. The word tantra
has etymological roots in the verb root tan, meaning, “to expand.” Over time, the sense of
expansion refers to the powers inherent in the cosmos by which the tantrika (Tantric adept) can
control and interact with the microcosmic and macrocosmic forces of the universe. Andre
Padoux defines tantra as an ideological vision that sees “the cosmos as permeated by power (or
powers), a vision wherein energy (śakti) is both cosmic and human and where the microcosm
and macrocosm correspond and interact.”

The broad lexical range of the word tantra can be seen in its many usages over time. In
the Vedas it appears as a non-esoteric verb root, meaning simply “to loom.” Later texts use the
word to refer to the kind of work in which the process involves many integrated parts.
Bhattacharyya notes that according to the Mīmaṃśa tradition Tantra is “an act-process—a
method of doing or making something.”

This notion of Tantra can especially be seen in its
strong use and application of rituals, which focus both on the body of the tantrika and the form
of the deity. Likewise, the “Tantras” are also collections of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures that
are functional descriptions and instructions for rituals, which most often employed the use of
mantra, yantra, and dhyāna (visualization meditations on the form of the deity). His definition of
Tantra states that:

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28 Padoux, André, “What Do We Mean by Tantrism?” 19.
29 Bhattacharyya, N.N., History of the Tantric Religion.
Tantra was primarily the way or means to understand the mysteries of life and universe, somewhat akin to the old Pythagorean concept of ‘philosophy’ which was ‘contemplation, study, and knowledge of nature.’ At the earlier stages of history, Tantra arose as the sum total of man’s knowledge of the objective world around him. It was a way of life that sought the significance of knowledge, not in the realization of an illusory absolute, but in the day-to-day activities of men, in the simple facts of life like agriculture, cattle breeding, distillation, iron-smelting, etc., and in experimental sciences like alchemy, medicine, embryology, physiology, and so forth, with a deliberate theoretical orientation that the structures of the microcosm and the macrocosm are identical and that the key to knowledge of nature is to be found in the body.\textsuperscript{30}

According to this definition, the idea of reciprocity between the macrocosm and the microcosm gives importance not only the human body but also the form of the deity, which can be fashioned as \textit{mūrtī} (statue), \textit{yantra} (diagrammatically), or as an icon. The ideological underpinnings of Tantra not only place primacy on the form of the deity, but actively employ the use of material presentations and representations of divinity that facilitate the union of the material and transcendent, symbolized by the masculine and feminine duality of Śiva and Śakti, or \textit{puruṣa} (spirit) and \textit{prakṛtī} (matter).

Since Tantric theories of cosmogenesis are grounded in the unification of masculine and feminine principles, it follows that \textit{śakti} is central to Tantric theology. As the all-pervasive power of the cosmos, she exists in both the microcosm and macrocosm, and she is also the active force that enables movement between these two realms. This renders the \textit{Mahādevī} as the perfect vehicle by which to meet the soteriological and metaphysical aims of Tantra. There are at least three primary ways in which the goddess is focus of Śākta-Tantra veneration: (1) she is \textit{prakṛtī}, and therefore associated with the earth and material reality; (2) \textit{śakti} is active, whereas Śiva is inert; and (3) as \textit{śakti}, she emanates myriad forms throughout the universe, making her simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Much to the third point, she is easily translated and understood across a variety of social, historical, and cultural strata. Her multivalence is espoused

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 23.
in the *Mahābhārata*, which says, “What is here, is elsewhere. What is not here, is nowhere.”

According to this viewpoint, śakti is indeed everywhere. Yet our question is to understand how and why Śakti has manifested in her ferocious form in the guise of the Śākta Tantra goddess, Chinnamastā.

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31 *Mahābhārata*, 1.56.33.
Chapter Two
Evolution of the Goddess in the Tradition of the Mahāvidyās

As an outsider, looking at images of the Indian devī can be a bewildering and thought provoking experience. For me, there has been little comparison between my childhood conceptions of the divine feminine, such as the Virgin Mary, and with Chinnamastā, the “Beheaded One.” That day in Devaraja Market, Chinnamastā challenged my preconceptions about the divine feminine. Yet, it was precisely her untamed appearance that beckoned to be looked at—even venerated. Unlike the Virgin Mary (figure 2.1)—often depicted peacefully gazing eternally downward or toward baby Jesus—Chinnamastā and other Mahāvidyās are in part defined by their agency.

Several of the Mahāvidyās, like Chinnamastā, Kālī, and Tārā, starkly contrast more benign goddesses like Saraswati (figure 2.3)—the beautiful consort of Brahma who holds in her hands a book instead of a scimitar, a crystal mala instead of a garland of skulls, and a water pot instead of a skull cup and severed head. When goddesses like Saraswati are juxtaposed against Chinnamastā, it is not difficult to understand why Tantric goddesses have been associated with black magic and impurity.
Chinnamastā forces the viewer to come to grips with any preconceptions that they may hold regarding race/ethnic religion, polytheism, divinity, femininity, and (of course), the divine feminine. Take, for instance, this photograph of Chinnamastā’s mūrti (figure 2.2), used without attribution or explanation on a blog titled, “Hinduism: Satanic, Demonic Religion Cult of Devil Satan.” The opening statements use images of Chinnamastā’s mūrti, Kālī, and various Aghori sadhus as evidence that veneration of these goddesses is connected with black magic, cannibalism, and human sacrifice. The blog author(s) state that:

Evil Spirits are the main ingredient in Black Magic who work for and alongside the Tantriks and Aghoris (Black Magicians) after they have received the “Blessings (and Recompense)” for their worship from the Devil, Kaali Maa. She is the ‘most favorite’ choice of most Tantriks who practice witchcraft and sorcery (whether openly in public/streets or secretly in cremation grounds or caves & forests) so they may obtain ferocious demonic supernatural powers of vicious “mantras/spells” so they can ruin the lives of those they hate or destroy the lives of those whom their clients/customers hate.

The site author(s) then goes on to quote multiple verses from the Quran that oppose the worshipping of "idols." In this context, polytheism and Tantrism are considered evil religions. The way in which the site has been designed illustrates this point quite clearly (figure 2.4).

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32 The Aghoris are ascetic Šaiva sadhus, known to reside near charnel grounds and engage in antinomian rituals, such as śavasādhana (meditation on the dead).

Yet, such statements drastically oversimplify the myriad functions of the Tantric goddess and the numerous kinds of relationships that devotees cultivate with her. Such statements may also commit violence to the mind of Tantric practitioner who has no interest in “black magic.” Dark goddesses are not always destructive, like Mātangī—the beautiful, dark-skinned Mahāvidyā who is also an incarnation of Sarasvatī. Likewise, beautiful, virtuous goddesses are not always peaceful, such as Durgā—the lion-riding warrioress of the Devī-Māhātmya. In contemporary worship, Kālī, though frightful, often functions as the giver of mukti, or liberation.

Furthermore, concepts of “evil” or the “devil” are difficult to superimpose upon most all Indian religions, wherein each divinity is thought to represent only an aspect of Brahman, who is beyond all conception. The gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are not flat, shallow entities; they are comprised of several traits, many of which are contradictory. In this way, they reflect the very real multi-dimensional emotional and psychological states that are familiar to the human experience. In order to convey the
labyrinthine nature of reality, the stories and images of the divine are necessarily rendered in ways that encompass contradictory characteristics.

With this in mind, exactly how are we to understand the significance of the fierce devī? What meaning can be made from the stories and icons of the Mahāvidyās? A brief look into both the stories and icons of the Mahāvidyās reveal that they function in many ways—most of which have little to do with spell-casting and evil-doing. In this chapter, I attempt to look at these goddesses from the perspective of Śākta-Tantra in order to illustrate the variety of ways their fierceness, sexuality, and power are interpreted and reinterpreted to meet the aims of ritual practice.

Mapping the Mahāvidyās in Changing South Asian Contexts

The question I have continued to ask myself is why, how, and in which contexts do Śākta goddesses function as presentations and representations of power. The answer to this question lies in how power is defined within Śākta narratives and how that power is visually represented so as to communicate important cosmological and ritual ideas that effect and influence the feelings and experiences of the viewer. In both stories and pictures, the goddess is not only the embodiment of śakti, but the embodiment of supreme śakti. The notion of the all-powerful goddess is something that emerges over time as a result of the coalescence of various and seemingly conflicting ideas regarding the Mahādevī.

In order to understand Chinnamastā as an emanation of Śakti requires a general reconsideration of the notions “light” and “dark.” Within Śāktism, these words, though opposites are not assumed to have meanings synonymous with other dichotomous word pairs, such as “good and evil.” Rather, the relationship between light and dark in Tantra is not an oppositional one, but one of reciprocity. Śākta sādhana absorbs and integrates Tantric ideologies—something that is reflected by the Mahāvidyās’ iconographies’
The concept of light within the Indian tradition is better understood as tejas, or radiance, which specifically refers to the kind of light that is given as a result of burning. Monier-Williams notes amongst its lengthy translation for tejas, the words, “fire, heating, and flame” as well as “sharp and fierceness.” There is no indication that tejas is either good or virtuous, but simply that which burns or emits light. It is used often to describe the gods as it is in Chinnamastā stotram. The second verse says

Tanmadye viparita maithunarata pradyumnasat kāminī  
Prṣṭhastham taruṇāh kakaṭivilasān [tejāḥ] svarūpām bhaje

In the middle of [the yoni] Kāminī and Pradyumna [Kama and Rati] are in a reversed sexual position,  
and the Goddess [Chinnamastā] stands on them, brilliant as two million rising suns.34

Likewise, the goddess Durgā of the Devī-Māhātmya is said to have “Atulām tatra tattejasah”—unparalleled brilliance.35 Several of the hymns to the Mahāvidyās note them as possessing tejas, therefore it can be inferred that within the Śākta milieu tejas and śakti are relative terms. Much like a light shining

34 Khanna, Śāktapramodah, Chinnamastā Stotram, verse 2, 230, my translation.
35 Devī-Māhātmya, 2.13, my translation.
through a prism to refract the colors of the rainbow, it is this tendency that renders the Mahādevī prone to endless transformation and reinterpretation.

**Kālī: The First Mahāvidyā**

Popular conceptions of Kālī have undergone incredible changes throughout textual and iconographic history, and it is her ultimate shift from the *Mahābhārata* as Sauptika Pavan, to the sanguinary goddess of thieves, to the ādiśakti of the Mahāvidyās, which provides us with a chronology for the shifting framework of the devī of Śākta-Tantra. In the Starting in the 6th century with the *Devi-Māhātmya* up until the 14th century, a new conception of the goddess develops that culminates in the *Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa*, with the origination of the ten wisdom goddess of Śāktism.

This movement from a warlike goddess to one of liberation is illustrated by the very term used to refer to the ten Great Wisdom Goddesses—“Mahāvidyā”—which literally translates to “Great Wisdom.” This implies a profound re-imagining of the dark devī. No longer is Kālī the malefic goddess of destruction. Her identity shifts and changes throughout the textual history of Śākta literature. The *Rg Veda* contains several hymns that implore the goddess of destruction, Nirṛti, a prototype of Kālī, to go away, yet by the late 18th century, we see quite a different image of Kālī in the devotional poems of Rāmprasād Sen and Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭācārya. Many of Sen’s poems to Kālī express his conflicted relationship with her—one of admiration and devotion, but also one of apprehension and childlike indignation. He says in one poem:

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All right, You crazy woman. 
Get down off the Great Lord’s chest!

Shiva’s not dead; He’s simply 
The Master Yogi meditating.

But poison has weakened Him, 
He can’t bear the force of Your feet, Mother.
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36 Sherma, Rita, personal correspondence, May 6, 2016.
37 Flood, 179.
Now get down before His ribs cave in—
O Shiva’s Woman, You’re pitiless, pitiless.

He drank poison and survived,
Why should he die now?

Rāmprasad thinks He’s playing dead
Just to have your feet touching him.

—Rāmprasad Sen

Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭācārya directly speaks to the goddess’s multiplicity. He says:

Mother,
You’re always finding ways to amuse Yourself.

Śyāmā, You stream of nectar,
through Your deluding power
You forge a horrible face
and adorn Yourself with a necklace of skulls.
The earth quakes under Your leaps and bounds.
You are frightful
with that sword in Your hand.

At other times
You take a flirtatious pose,
and then, Mother,
even the God of Love is undone!

Your form is inconceivable and undecaying.
Nārāyaṇī, Tripurā, Tārā—
You are beyond the three qualities
yet composed of them.

You are terrifying,
You are black,
You are beautiful.

Thus assuming various forms,
You fulfill the wishes of
Your worshipers.

Sometimes You even dance
Brahman, Eternal One
in the lotus heart of Kamalākānta.

—Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭācārya

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38 Rāmprasad Sen, Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair: Selected Poems to the Mother Goddess, 47.
39 McDermott, Singing to the Goddess, 39.
It is this manifold conception of the goddess that is exemplified by the spectrum of the Mahāvidyās. By the time they emerge, they each come to represent a particular aspect of vidyā. However, what is considered knowledge varies greatly throughout Indian literature. Vidyā stems from the same root as Veda and is commonly understood as “knowledge,” but can also be defined as “magic”—both meanings suggestive of the knowledge of magical spells and incantations in the early Buddhist Tantras and the Atharvaveda. In the Devī-Māhātmya, Durgā is referred to as both Vidyā and Mahāvidyā. They are directly associated with knowledge, and in the latter part of the second millennium CE, “seeing through” their sometimes frightening façade becomes a critical component of understanding and accessing the kind of knowledge they embody.

**Text & Narrative**

**The Devī-Māhātmya**

The Mahāvidyās textual pre-origination can be located at least as far back as the sixth or seventh century in Devī Māhātmya, though their prototypes are much older. The Devī Māhātmya is the central text for the cults of the devī since it is the earliest and most popular story to extoll the glory of the goddess. The Devī Māhātmya is a section (caṇḍī) of the much longer Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, which introduces Durgā as the supreme, un-consorted goddess who saves the world from a number of encounters with āsuras including, most famously, the buffalo demon, Mahiṣa. The āsuras can be understood exoterically as malevolent beings but are esoterically imagined as kleśas (negative attributes) within humans.⁴⁰ According to the myth, Mahiṣa performs austerities for hundreds of years to obtain a boon from Brahma, which ensures that no man or god will be able to conquer him. After destroying the world, Mahiṣa chases the gods from heaven as a precursor to destroying the entire universe. Aware of the loophole in Mahiṣa’s boon, the

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⁴⁰ Sherma, Rita, Personal Correspondence, May 6, 2016.
gods combine their śakti to manifest a female divinity to defeat him. From their collective powers Durgā is born—a ten-armed, beautiful, heroic, lion-riding goddess, who is the sum total of their parts.

Enchanted by Durgā’s beauty and majesty, Mahiṣa repeatedly asks for her hand in marriage, which she refuses. Angered and with his substantial ego bruised, he assumes various forms in an attempt to defeat Durgā in battle. She conquers all of his demonic-animal soldiers and impales him with the trident bestowed upon her by Śiva and decapitates him with Brahma’s discus. The remaining demons flee, and balance to universe is restored. The divine beings, including Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva, praise Durgā extensively, which secures her place amongst them as one of the supreme deities of the Hindu pantheon.41

Distinct from goddesses who are outright calamitous and those who are the benign-half of a mystical partnership with a particular god, Durgā defies categorization. In this milieu, she is understood as parabrahman who possesses ultimate power and who is beyond all distinctions. Her relationship to her devotees and to the gods is not a middling one, a theme that becomes further developed in the origin myth of the Mahāvidyās. Rather, she has power and is power, and within the Śākta tradition goddesses do not play an intermediary role between the gods and humanity. They are the force and the fire behind both creation and destruction.

The very first chapter of the Devī-Māhāmya illustrates a multifaceted view of the devī. She is shown as multivalent and paradoxical in nature—she can be simultaneously beautiful and terrible, sattvas and rajas. And it is precisely because of her self-contradictory nature that she is revered as the ultimate power. Here she is referred to as Mahāmāyā, the Great Illusion. From this viewpoint, it is the goddess who casts the spell of delusion, and it is only she who is capable of breaking it:

You are the great knowledge (Mahāvidyā), the great illusion (Mahāmāyā), the great insight (mahāmedhā), the great memory, and the great delusion, the great goddess (Mahādevī), the great demoness (mahāsuri).

41 Flood, 176
You are the primordial material (prakṛti) of everything, manifesting the triad of constituent strands, the night of destruction, the great night, and the terrible night of delusion.

You are śrī, you are queen, you modesty, you intelligence, characterized by knowing; Modesty well being, contentment, too, tranquility and forbearance are you.

Terrible with your sword and spear, likewise with cudgel and discus, with conch and bow, having arrows, sling, and iron mace as your weapons,

Gentle more gentle than other gentle ones, exceedingly beautiful, You are superior to the high and low, the supreme queen...

Of all that, you are the power (śakti); how then can you be adequately praised?42

In this verse, Mahāmāyā’s dichotomous characteristics intentionally alternate from verse to verse in order to illustrate the great range of forms and meanings she can possess.

Kālī shows up twice in the Devī-Māhātmya, and in both cases she appears as the manifestation and embodiment of Durgā’s fury—a fury that is harnessed and directed toward the demons Caṇḍa, Muṇḍa, and Raktabija. In these battles, she is described as being black, gaunt with sunken eyes, a gaping mouth and lolling tongue. In the first battle against Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, she decapitates them, and in the second battle against Raktabija she sucks the blood from his body, absorbing his power only to use it against him. Kālī’s terrible, blood thirsty form in these tales remains consistent with how she is portrayed in the Agni and Garuda Purāṇas, where she is invoked to defeat enemies in battle. Her blood lust is also referenced in the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, where she is the iṣṭa-devī for a band of thieves who give her head offerings and blood sacrifices in exchange for boons.43

The Devī-Māhātmya places Kālī in a new context as the progeny of Durgā. She still functions as a wrathful deity, but she is no longer associated with criminals and low castes on the periphery of mainstream society; she is now affiliated not only with Durgā, but with the Brahminical gods who brought Durgā into being. This important development in the Devī-Māhātmya heralds a new vision of the ferocious divine feminine in Indian mythology. Kālī is then primed as the ādi of the Mahāvidyās, and she rises to the apex of

43 Kinsley, Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine, 70.
their genealogical taxonomy, and the preeminence of the Śākta devī begins to take shape according to her template.

The development of Durgā and Kālī within Devī-Māhāmya indicate a turning point in popular conceptions of female divinity in India, which prepare the ground for Kālī’s reimagining in the Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa. Though the Devī-Māhāmya predates the emergence of the Mahāvidyās by several hundred years, it is here that the notion of the Mahādevī as a multivalent entity capable of endless adaptation becomes known and revered as a power independent from the Vedic and Purānic gods to whom she was previously consorted. It is also evident through the progression of myths and stories that ferocious tribal goddesses, ancient fertility goddesses, and benign Brahmanical goddesses combine under the awning of Mahāmāyā as a unified entity. It is this unified yet diverse concept of the goddess that later becomes conceived of and portrayed as the ten Mahāvidyās in subsequent Śākta literature and iconography.

These various narratives serve to tell stories but are also ways in which theological rhetoric and discourses are engaged between divergent Hindu views of the divine feminine. In the narrative history of the goddess, she is presented in many ways that often contradict one another—as the subservient consort of one of the male deities; as supreme Śakti, to whom the gods submit; as destroyer, and as creator. Proponents of each of these views vied with the other through the veil of mythic narrative.44

The Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa

The ten Mahāvidyās first emerge as a group in the Śākta Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa between the 10th century and the early 14th century.45 The Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa is an early Śākta-Upapurāṇa, not to be confused with the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa, the Vaiṣṇava text with a similar name. The Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa

44 Rita Sherma, personal correspondence, May 6, 2016
45 Bernard and Kinsley cite two different dates. It is likely that the text was developed over a period of time, so I’ve used both dates as a range.
asserts certain theological and ideological viewpoints that locate Śākta within specific realms of Tantra and bhakti simultaneously. It does so by endorsing Śaiva theological viewpoints and by presenting Kālī as the ādiśakti of the Mahāvidyās, who are emanations of Śiva’s beloved wife, Satī. Despite its classification as a Śākta-Tantra narrative, it is not a “Tantra” in the sense that it is not a practical, ritual manual. It is rather an Upapurāṇa, or “old story” of the Mahādevī’s exploits, which categories it as a bhakti text that functions to elicit a devotional response by moving the devotee on an emotional level. Just like the multifaceted conceptions of the Mahādevī, the Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa fuses together seemingly disparate entities of Tantra and Bhakti together into a cohesive system within the framework of Śākta-Tantra.

The perception of Śakti as the Mahādevī presented in the Devī-Māhātmya is continued and elaborated upon in the Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa. These notions are that Śakti is: the cause of all causes; unified multiplicity; immanent and transcendent; the power of the gods and possesses the power of the gods; and subject to constant change. These characteristics define her as the power that fuels the ongoing cycle of life, death and rebirth—the cycle that the Mahāvidyās symbolize as a group. They are born from Satī’s śakti during an argument with Śiva over attending her father’s sacrifice, to which they have not been invited.

Satī asserts her will, saying that even without a formal invitation she should have the right to attend since she is his daughter. Śiva argues the point, and, enraged, Satī transforms—she turns dark in color, her hair becomes wild, she grows four arms, her white teeth sharpen to constrain a lolling red tongue. Śiva, frightened of what he sees, averts his eyes. He tries to run, so Satī projects herself in ten directions to restrict his movement. Each way Śiva runs, his path is obstructed by one of the ten goddesses. Standing in front of Kālī, he asks “Who are you, O Dark One? Where is my beloved Satī?”

She replies:

Śiva, do you not see that I am Satī who is before you? Kālī, Tārā, Lokeśikamalā, Bhuneśvarī, Chinnamastā, Śodāśi, Tripurasundarī, Bagalāmukhī, Dhūmavati, and Mātāngī are my forms... to your right the very frightening goddess with the severed head is Chinnamastā, O

46 Bernard, 2, from the Śākta Mahābhāgavata Upapurāṇa, 320-49.
Magnanimous One... O Śiva, do not be afraid; these are my supreme forms that pervade within all my other forms.  

This story conveys the collective power that the Mahāvidyās wield. It follows, then, that the ten Mahāvidyās are typically worshipped collectively, and for the Śākta, the individual significance of each goddess is best understood within the context of the group.

Though they share many common attributes, they each possess unique qualities which designate their specific positions and roles they play within the cosmological structure of Śāktism. Śāktas affirm that they are "the one Truth [that] is sensed in ten different facets; the Divine Mother is adored and approached as ten cosmic personalities."  

**Thematic Elements**

This story implies several things about śakti and about the supremacy of the Mahādevī. First, it places Satī as dominant to both Śiva and her father, Dakśa. Satī shows dominance over Śiva by frightening him and over Dakśa by disobeying him. When confronted with Kālī, Śiva, the otherwise fearless lord, tries to run, but Satī’s śakti is so overpowering that from it emerges the other nine goddesses, who bar him from nine cardinal directions. Second, they are understood as “terrible” and fearsome goddesses. Their power is so great that even if they are beautiful, like Tripura Sundarī, they are terrible to behold. Third, their paradigmatic icons juxtapose themes of sexuality, death, and regeneration. When viewed in the context of the ten goddesses—starting with Satī, to Kālī—the progenitor—to the other nine goddesses who occupy specific locations in relationship to Śiva, what emerges is a mythic and iconographic representation of cyclic time, over which the devī presides.

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47 Ibid.
49 Chinnamastā stands to the West, in the location of the setting-sun. This is thought to symbolize the time that exists between not only day and night, but also between life and death.
It is here that we see the formation of the Mahāvidyās as a reflection of the Mahādevī, and it is this text that sets the tenor for the goddess’s subsequent interpretation and understanding within the Śākta milieu. Notably, all of Chinnamastā’s myths and narratives, even her thousand named hymn, regard her as both terrible and brilliant, which follows the general picture of the goddess that is painted in the Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa. Yet, the Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa, like all Sanskrit texts, has a very limited audience. These tales are most often transmitted through oral tradition, and their retellings are frequently imbued with personal and cultural adaptations. The images of the goddess serve to support these stories by illustrating her role and by integrating her many symbols. Mostly, visual images of the goddess provide the bridge between the theological tenets of Śāktism and the individual’s emotional and devotional experiences.

**Images of The Mahāvidyās**

Śakti’s multivalence has allowed for vast reinterpretation of the goddess, which can be seen through her iconographic and literary evolution. Here she is shown as a fierce and emaciated, blood thirsty goddess on the Śiva Mandir in Mumbai (*Figure 2.6*), dated at approximately 1060 CE.
This vision of Kālī changes over time, and contemporary iterations depict her as possessing the qualities of both beneficent deities and fierce ones. In later representations, she usually retains the paradigmatic elements of her icon, such as the lolling tongue, skull mālā, three eyes, and sharp teeth, but overtly violent aspects of images are replaced or their intensity is muted. In some cases, her lustful nature is emphasized, as it is in this graphic painting of Kālī striding Śiva found on the internet (figure 2.7). More contemporary images of Kālī have completely muted her fearsome aspects. Take, for example, the contemporary rendering of Mā Kālī holding baby Śiva who feeds at her breast (figure 2.8). This image
directly aligns Kālī with the Mother while also asserting her dominance over Śiva as mother.

The Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa has several stories where the goddess assumes decrepit, heinous forms in order to test the gods; only Śiva passes. The popular interpretation for such macabre imagery stems from the ascetic, Tantric notion that “to the pure, all things are pure” referencing the subversion of Brahmanical purity rituals that imply that the gruesome is less sacred than the beautiful. The Tantric view asserts that all of creation falls under the umbrella of the sacred and it is up to the tāntrika to see beyond appearances, which explains and gives credence to antinomian rituals, like maithuna (copulation) or śava sādhana (meditation on corpses).

However, in popular Śākta practice people often venerate Tantric goddesses for a wide variety of reasons. Tantric ritual is said to be of three primary varieties—white, red, and black—that are correlated...
with the guṇas. White Tantric sādhanā is utilized for liberation of self and for the benefit of others, red Tantra is self-serving though non-injurious, and aims at the procurement of wealth, love, and health. Black Tantra is both self-serving and harmful, and aims at defeating one’s enemies or incites mārana, the death of another.\textsuperscript{50} Thus death imagery is interpreted in vastly different ways depending on the intent of the tāntrika.

Yet, regardless of intent, it is clear that these images are meant to convey the overwhelming power of the goddess. As stated previously in chapter one, śakti is manifested in three primary ways according to Śākta-Tantra theories of cosmogenesis: icchā śakti; jñāṇa śakti; and kriyā śakti—the power of desire, the power of knowledge, and the power to act. Using death as model, śakti as a verb is modified by the accompanying prepositions, which direct her overall course of action. She has the “power of” consciousness, maintains the “power to” create, and wields “power over” life and death.

It is apparent that their meaning has not been garnered not from a single origin. Rather their function, meaning and significance to their devotees has been constructed from a variety of sources, not the least of which is their powerful and compelling visual rendering. This 1895 lithograph from Calcutta (figure 2.9) shows the Mahāvidyās side-by-side, depicted in such a way as to emphasize their common traits.

Overlooking the unified color scheme that the artist has chosen, certain key elements are prominent: power;

\textsuperscript{50} Ramdas Lamb. Lecture notes, for Religion 662, “Seminar on Indian Religions” (University of Hawaii), October 2014.
dominance over the gods and the āsuras; and their role as subjects of veneration. What undergirds all of these iconographic themes is the goddesses’ status as divine mother of the world (jagat), who must assume a fierce form in order to defend her children from harm, which is the theodicy of the Devī Māhātmya that establishes the framework for the future emergence of the Mahāvidyās. These iconographic and textual changes are in no small way a reflection of changes in how the devī is perceived. Tantric folk goddesses of disease and maelstrom, formerly beseeched to keep their distance, transform in the eyes of the Śākta into divine subjects and objects of religious devotion, and the normally divergent streams of Śākta and bhakti come to a confluence in the fusion of Śākta-Tantra.

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51 Rita Sherma. Email correspondence, 6 May 2016.
Chapter 3: 
Tantric Semiology & Categorical Considerations

Tantric Semiology

The idea of looking at and beholding the fierce divine feminine in a devotional context raises the very important question of how images are interpreted and understood by the viewer and the equally significant question about what specific knowledge and expertise the viewer is expected to bring to bear when viewing and interpreting esoteric sacred imagery. Because religion is such a powerful transmitter of ideas, and since those ideas are widely and readily available through media and technology, it is essential to inquire into not just what images mean, but how they mean, when they mean, where they mean, and to whom they mean. Seeing is an inherently subjective act in that the viewer interprets what is seen according to his or her own experiential, cultural, and religious framework. In addition, the image or concept being interpreted is influenced by its own backdrop, whether the temple, museum, or mass media platform. How does the image of Kālī say one thing to a Hindu, and something completely different to a Christian? Why is it that Chinnamastā communicates strength and power to some, and jīvanmukti (liberated consciousness) to others? And what meaning do such images have in contemporary secular society, which has appropriated the goddess as a symbol of female liberation and non-conformity?

A “hermeneutic of the visible”, as proposed by Eck, involves attempting to interpret and understand visual culture in much the same manner he or she attempts to interpret the ideas embedded in scriptures and narratives.\(^\text{52}\) This visual hermeneutic, however, is complex since pictures show and they tell, making the interpretive process open to anyone and everyone as long

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\(^\text{52}\) Eck, Darśan, 14.
as they are capable of seeing. This visual hermeneutic must incorporate a semiotic theory of
textual and visual analysis. To be clear, hermeneutics is a broad category that involves semiotics,
but focuses on the interpretation of verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. This
interpretation takes into account original context (religious and/or cultural), authorship, and
intent and function. Semiotics, though closely related to hermeneutics, is distinct in that it studies
the process of communication and the processes of interpretation that the viewer engages while
looking at objects, signs and images (the *signifier*) in order to make meaning (what is *signified*).
This takes into account not only the context in which object was conceived, whether verbal (text
or story) or non-verbal (image or concept), but also the context in which the object is being
viewed. Viewer context takes into account myriad factors, such as the viewer’s cultural
background, gender, age, previous exposure to or familiarity with what is being viewed, and so
on and so forth.

Umberto Eco aptly argues that consideration of the viewer process has led to the notion
that “there is no such thing as sign” in that all meaning is context dependent and is therefore
subject to endless interpretations. This, he argues, is not the case, since signs, particularly words
and language, are bound within preexisting limitations that define their overall function. Signs
and images are pre-coded with certain meanings that are embedded/imbued in language or text.

In terms of Śākta-Tantra, and even perhaps in terms of the entire seeing, hearing, and
otherwise cogent human population, certain symbols function in specific ways regardless of how
meaning is made following the recognition of that essential function.\(^{53}\) What this means is that
the interpretation of Chinnamastā assumes certain relationships based on the pre-coded functions

\(^{53}\) Eco uses the examples of “arrow” and “soup” to explain the pre-codification of sign-functions. An arrow
essentially designates movement in a particular direction, though without placement in larger context, the direction
to which it points cannot be ascertained. Soup essentially functions as food, whether used in the terms “soup
kitchen”, “duck soup”, or the sentence “the soup is tasty.” This function is stable and its correct usages are always
bound to this template. For example, it is correct to say, “John eats the soup”, not “The soup eats John” (Eco, *Theory
of Signs*, 37).
of certain signs within her narratives, images, and rituals. These relationships are fueled by how signs act rather than what they are. Without this most basic recognition of sign-functionality, the process of metaphoric deconstruction and interpretation would be impossible.

Chinnamastā’s provocative image poses a problem to the viewer since the basic sign-functions present in her image are occluded by their curious amalgamation. She presents the viewer with various signs or signifiers, such as beheading and heads, blood, women, and sex. Altogether, these signs present an uncharacteristic representation of the divine feminine. Due to the complex relationship between texts, images and rituals in Śākta-Tantric veneration of the Mahāvidyās, it is likely that the combination of unlike forms is intentional and meant to secure the meaning of the deity within a web of coded symbolism that can only be interpreted by certain individuals who have been fully initiated into the system of signs, symbols, and their meanings that characterize the theological and ritual context of the worship of Chinnamastā.

In this chapter, I propose that Chinnamastā’s image can be best explored and understood by taking a multi-faceted and intersubjective approach that includes a hermeneutic of Tantra's visual and textual culture, a semiotic analysis of Tantric symbolism (Arnheim 1969, Coomaraswamy 1971 & 1975, and Timalsina 2015), and a cognitive investigation of the metaphoric and metonymic processes involved in seeing Tantric images. All of these methods are intended to fall within the framework of what Rita Sherma has termed dialexsis—"the intellectual engagement across expressive styles [that takes] into account the factor of diversity."54 This approach seeks to address the different cultural, historical, psychological, and emotional responses one may have to the images and texts of the Tantric devī, Chinnamastā.
Approaching a Hermeneutic of Tantric Visual Culture

Perception is purposive and selective... In looking at an object we reach out for it. With an invisible finger we move through the space around us, go out to the distant places where things are found, touch them, catch them, scan their surfaces, trace their borders, explore their texture. It is an eminently active occupation... Thus a tangible bridge is established between the observer and the observed thing, and over this bridge the impulses of light that emanate from the object travel to the eyes and thereby the soul.  

—Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*

Hermeneutics, originally defined as the study and interpretation of sacred texts, also includes the interpretation of ideas, behaviors, and social structures. Eck proposes that hermeneutics be extended to visual culture in order to comprehend and make meaning out of what we see both in religious and secular contexts. She has also brought attention to the inextricable relationship between that which is seen outside of oneself in the world, and how what is seen is perceived and understood within the viewer's own interpretative framework, which is colored by past experience (both religious and cultural), intellect, and cognition.

When working with images, Tantra takes into account the highly complex process of meaning-making and the connection between the aspirant and the deity within the context of sādhana. Tantric sādhanas are centered on visualization and includes the projection and animation of mental images, which are related to as actual, living entities within the mind of the aspirant. This practice necessarily involves a process of comprehending the symbols and metaphors embedded in the deity's image while interpreting them according to one's own worldview.

57 Eck, *Darśan*, 14.
58 Timalsina, 31.
According to Tantric scholar, Sthaneshwar Timalsina, the interpretation of the tantric image is a process that is both objective and subjective. The aspirant constructs the image of the goddess according to convention, and then correlates what is seen to one’s own worldview. This kind of process is highly personal, and therefore lends itself to the individual nature of tantric sādhanā. With this said, one must acknowledge that the Tantric image does adhere to certain conventions, which serve certain functions or purposes. The symbols, colors, composition, and content of the images is not haphazard or accidental. It can be said that through the construction of the image according to convention the deity reaches out to the viewer or aspirant, and it is through the process of correlating what is seen or imagined that the viewer reaches back to the deity in an attempt to make contact. It is here, within the context of the unique relationship between aspirant and deity, that the personal, individually-oriented characteristic of tantric worship presents itself. What emerges at the point of contact between the conventional construction of Chinnamastā and the worldview of the viewer is a wholly new entity possessing qualities of both the deity and the aspirant. It is possible that this psychological process results in what is understood as the manifestation of the divine within the aspirant.

However, one must first know how to accurately read both the image of the deity and the correlated texts in order to forge contact. Thus the dhyāna, mantra, stotra, and images are used to evoke the goddess. To this end, Arnheim has offered a useful method by which to examine anything that exists in the visual realm—whether purely artistic, religious, or non-religious. He asserts that everything in the seen world is presented in and modulated by a particular context. When changes occur, the viewer must discern whether the image itself has changed, or if it is a result of a shift in context, or if both have changed. If one is unable to make this assessment, it indicates a misunderstanding of the object, its surrounding, or both. Though object and
environment are often enmeshed and difficult to tease apart, viewing the same object in different environments helps to reveal which aspects of the object are more or less conventional, paradigmatic and unchanging, and which alterations are purely contextual.\textsuperscript{59}

Arnheim suggests two ways in which form can be abstracted: (a) isolating the object from its context to observe how the object acts independently; or (b) to observe the changes that object goes through as a result of its place and function in a particular setting. In the case of religious art, prior to applying Arnheim's methods, it is essential to inquire into the function of art within a particular religious and cultural milieu. Thus, in order to abstract the form of Chinnamastā, her visual representations must be understood first within the broader context of Hinduism, and then more specifically within the Śākta-Tantra milieu.

Even so, the notion of a conventional representation of Śakti is problematic when we take into account that śakti in its undifferentiated energetic state is formless and subject to endless permutations. Chinnamastā and the group of wisdom goddesses form what Madhu Khanna refers to as a "luminous sphere" of śakti that emanate from the source like rays of the sun.\textsuperscript{60} Understanding Chinnamastā as an emanation of śakti involves determining what, if any, are the conventions particular to the portrayal of supreme Śakti and which aspects of śakti she represents. The process of deciphering a goddess like Chinnamastā must be as multivalent as the goddess herself.

In order to do a comprehensive study on Chinnamastā's form it is essential to first have some basic knowledge of Śākta-Tantra's cosmology and ideology, which was briefly discussed in chapter one. Second, these cosmological motifs should be understood in association with the various types of ritual and devotional relationships that are forged with Chinnamastā, after which

\textsuperscript{59} Arnheim, 38.

\textsuperscript{60} Khanna, “The Goddess-Women Equation in Śākta Tantras.”
these ideas must be understood in relationship to the artistic conventions of Hindu art. Only then can Arnheim's visual hermeneutical methods of abstraction and analysis outlined above be applied. These methods, when applied to the goddess images of Śākta-Tantra, however, must incorporate and acknowledge the extensive use and cognitive function of metaphor and metonym, both of which fuel the ritual uses of the divine image.

**Currents of Devotion: Classifying Different Relationships with the Goddess**

Classifying any religious phenomena is an arduous and almost impossible task, particularly in the case of Indian religious traditions that emerge out of different epochs of time, different locations, and the widely varied traditions of South Asia. Goddess theologies are exceedingly difficult to categorize, since the goddess, as śakti, has many manifestations and has diverse functions and appeal. June McDaniel, in her book *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls,* gives a concise and well thought out classification model for Śāktism in Northern India, which is where Chinnamastā is most frequently venerated. McDaniel identifies three primary types of Śāktism: Tribal, Bhakti, and Tantra. These categories are not discrete, and Chinnamastā is an example of how many types of relationships and worship can occur simultaneously.

Folk Śāktism is characterized by propitiations to the goddess for results, boons, or power. This kind of Śāktism is thought to be the oldest and affiliated with the worship of tribal or clan deities. In this strain, the goddess often appears to villagers in the form of natural objects like rocks and trees. The goddess is usually contacted through a shaman, non-Brahmin priests and priestesses, or through spirit possession. The goddess is normally fierce and her propitiation usually functions as a form of appeasement.61 It is primarily within this milieu that goddess

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worship entails and sometimes requires blood sacrifices, usually chickens and goats. Śākta-
Bhakti is by and large the most common form of Śāktism, and devotee accounts show that
Bhakti pervades most other forms of Śāktism. The emphasis is on cultivating an intense loving
relationship with the goddess as the Divine Mother, regardless of her external form.

Her typology assumes that all relationships with the goddess are similar as they are all
forms of give-and-take, where the bhakta offers some kind of sacrifice with the intent of
receiving something in return. Thus the dynamic of economic-exchange is the genotype of
McDaniel’s typology. Yet, within Śākta-Tantra, some kinds of relationships with the goddess do
not assume the same monothetic presupposition as others. Though most kinds of relationships
with the goddess are indeed transactional, there are some interactions that do not function
according to the economics of exchange. The most renowned mystical theologians of Śākta
Bhakti in the modern era, the 18th c. Ramprasad Sen and the 19th c. Ramakrishna, were
emblematic of a non-transactional bhakti. In Śākta-Tantra, the goddess is understood to be
manifesting on both the microcosmic and macrocosmic realms. She is propitiated through
Tantric sādhana that involves visualizations on her form (dhyāna), recitation of her name
(sahasranāma) or her sacred syllables (bija-mantra), and nyasa. These are attempts to both
appeal to the goddess and to merge with her. The tantrika engages these rituals in order to
partake in the śakti of the goddess. Within Śākta-Tantra, McDaniel defines two subtypes: folk or
popular Tantra, which is centered on the ritual attainment of śakti; and classical or scholastic
Tantra where the goddess is viewed as a symbol of liberation, where emphasis is on the
adherent’s familiarity with the goddess’s associated literature.62 It is these two strains of Śākta-
Tantra that this study will address.

Rivers, Channels & Tributaries: Converging Notions of the Mahādevī

Tracing Chinnamastā's development throughout time and space is helpful in understanding her many historical, cultural and religious contexts. She is the misfit of the Mahāvidyās since she has no large cult following like Tripura Sundarī or Kālī, or developed history like Tārā, and any record of her possible origins and prototypes are few and far between. David Kinsley, in his book on the Mahāvidyās, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, suggests that Chinnamastā's lineage can be traced back to early stone figurines of naked, headless fertility goddess (which later emerge as *Lajjā Gaurī*), Koṭavī, a fierce warrior goddess, and Korravai, a South Indian hunting goddess. Additionally, Wendy Doniger and Vasudeva Agrawala have drawn mythological parallels between Chinnamastā and Reṇukā, wife of Jamadagni in the *Mahābhārata*. Sanderson, English, and Bernard have all corroborated the notion that Chinnamastā is an iteration of the blood drinking Vajrayāna Buddhist Vajrayoginī, in the form of Chinnamunḍa. Sanderson has also aptly noted the mention of the Vajrayāna deity, Vairocana in Chinnamastā’s *mantra, śrīṃ hṛīṃ kliṃ aim vajraivairocanīye huṃ huṃ phaṭ svāhā.*

Due to the lack of concrete evidence for any of these probable origins, I propose looking at Chinnamastā as a single river whose primary source—or Mother—is the Mahādevī out of which various river channels emerge, each of which form new variations of the goddess that retain elements of the Mother while assuming their own individual characteristics. Alternately, into the Mother flows various tributaries, which reinforce and reaffirm her identity as Śakti. In this way, the various goddesses related to Chinnamastā can be viewed as channels and tributaries that share the Mahādevī as a common source, but relate to her in different ways. And, as is the case with actual bodies of water, a single "goddess-river," such as Chinnamastā, may meander,

64 Sanderson, “The Śaiva Age,” 240.
dry up, converge with other rivers, or become tainted with runoff “waters” from altogether different cultural and religious environments. Within this framework, both Lajjā-Gaurī and Reṇukā, who each come from different places and uphold completely different, if not conflicting, theological and cosmological worldviews can be channels that emerge out of the Mahādevī and converge at different points into Chinnamastā.

Ultimately, all forms of the Mahādevī are considered “Mother” and are, therefore, benevolent. As such, they are also viewed as aspects of the cosmic Mother creator and are also nurturers—whether fierce or gentle. Chinnamastā’s nurturing role is clear to tāntrikas who are familiar with the nādīs (meridians of energy that underlie much of Hindu esoteric energy physiology). Here, her maternity is depicted through the nurturance of her two attendants with her own bloodstreams, which are three in number. These streams correspond to the three major meridian arteries—ida, pīṅgala, and the central śuṣumnā. The third stream feeds Chinnamastā herself (as the Self), which is what the Mahādevī is understood to be in Šaktism.65

Understanding Chinnamastā to be an emanation of śakti, her prototypes, origins and influences are countless, therefore any critical analysis of Chinnamastā must be constrained so as not to diverge too far from the headless goddess herself. As such, I have limited my survey of her origins and prototypes to those that emerge within Hindu Tantra and Šaktism and have chosen to minimize references to her Vajrayāna Buddhist forms, only referring to them as examples against which to compare corresponding Hindu forms.

**Functions and Conventions of Tantric Imagery**

*That figure is best which by its action best expresses the passion that animates it.*

—*Leonardo Da Vinci*

65 Sherma, personal correspondence, June 29, 2016.
Form follows function within the Śākta-Tantra milieu of artist representation and presentation of the divine. What is considered conventional in terms of Tantric art acts as a sign or a symbol that can refer to a variety of religious dimensions, such as ritual, experience, and text. Apart from possible political and aesthetic intentions behind the portrayal of deities, Ananda Coomaraswamy asserts that Indian art is essentially religious, and that its original aim was to portray the divine. Accuracy in Indian religious art is generally not desirable, since its purpose is not purely aesthetic. He acknowledges that "the infinite and unconditioned cannot be expressed in finite terms," and therefore Indian gods and goddesses must necessarily possess unreal and sometimes ghastly characteristics, such as four heads, ten arms, elephant heads, or blue skin. He cites a verse from Śukrācārya's Śukranītisāra, which states that, "It is always commendable for the artist to draw images of gods. To make human figures is wrong, or even unholy. Even a misshapen image of God is always better than an image of man, however beautiful." This in mind, literalism and realism are less important aims than the representation of religious ideas and the symbols and metaphors which convey these ideas to a viewer who is able to abstract their symbols and meaning apart from the various settings in which they may be viewed.

67 Śukrācārya Śukranītisāra IV.3.77-79, cited by Coomaraswamy in Fundamentals of Indian Art, 8-9.
In this context, Tantric images are used as visual aids for meditation and as ritual expedients by which one is more readily able to identify with the deity. This identification is itself the ultimate aim of Tantric sādhana and is regarded as a return to an undifferentiated state of consciousness wherein macrocosmic reality (Puruṣa) merges with the microcosm (prakṛti), symbolized by the union of Śiva and Śakti. This unification of opposing polarities is best reflected in the Śrī-Yantra (figure 3.1), the geometric representation of integrated masculine and feminine energies and the symbol of Tripura-Sundarī (The Beautiful One of the Three Cities), one of the ādiśaktis (primary goddesses) of the Mahāvidyās. This union is also portrayed metaphorically in the images of the goddesses and in their associated myths. Remembering that Śakti is by her very nature polymorphic, each goddess takes on a unique form that relates to Śiva in ways particular to that form. The adept then must navigate this highly individualized sojourn through rituals that are informed by the sentiment (rasa) of the goddess's stories and images. This journey is also metaphorically understood as the awakening and uncoiling of serpentine energy (kuṇḍalinī) in the body of the aspirant.

Looking at Chinnamastā as an emanation of Śakti or more specifically as a refraction of light through a prism, her form complies with the triadic model of the guṇas. The guṇas are related to śakti since they are considered elemental and ever-present in nature. It is further noted in her dhyāna in the Tantrasāra that the inverted triangle of the yonī, both in her yantra and in her image, serves as a symbol of the guṇas, with each side representing sattvas, rajas, and tamas (See appendix A). Other scholars, such as Bernard and Saxena, have noted the likelihood of she and her two attendants as well as the three streams of blood also being correlated to the guṇas. The relative proportion of each guṇa, however, varies in each of the goddesses. Chinnamastā's
stotra, mantra, myths and images communicate to the viewer which guṇa dominates, and the
dominant guṇa informs her function. The Śukranītisara notes that:

An image of God, seated self contained, in the posture of a yogi, with hands turned as if
granting boon and encouragement to his worshippers, surrounded by praying and
worshipping Indra and other gods, is called a sattvik image.

An image seated on a vāhan, decked with various ornaments, with hands bearing weapons, as
well as granting boon and encouragement, is called a rajasik image.

A tamasik image is a terrible armed figure fighting and destroying the demons.68

Chinnamastā might be easily considered tamasic due to her consumption of blood and the
suggestion of ferocity in the act of her self-beheading. Yet her myths and dhyāna state that
Chinnamastā is located neither in the burial ground, nor in battle; her myths place her at the river
bank and she is seated upon a white lotus in her dhyāna and images. Adhering to the conventions
outlined in all of her dhyāna, she is depicted wielding a kaltar, or sword. This sword is being
used, not in battle, but to fulfill the propitiation of her attendants, to whom she is granting the
boon of her own blood. Strictly iconographically, she is typically shown in the active position of
pratyālīḍha, ornamented, naked, red (the color of rajas-guṇa), and possessing the ideal physical
form of Indian feminine beauty—a narrow waist, wide hips, and full breasts. Thus, according to
convention, Chinnamastā is a markedly rajasic goddess, which locates her in a certain position
within the spectrum of the Mahāvidyās.

Once Chinnamastā has been located within Śākta-Tantra's cosmology her signs, symbols,
and metaphors can then be woven together to create a matrix of meaning for the viewer. This
matrix of meaning is integrated into the interpretative framework of the tantrika, which makes
such a relationship one that is unique to the individual, despite its heavy reliance on conventional
forms and signs.

Metaphor and Metonym

The importance of the visual dimension in Tantra raises the very important question of how such imagery evokes the experience of the transcendent. This opens the discussion to a Tantric semiotic critique of divine imagery within the context of sādhana. Sthaneshwar Timalsina has given an in-depth analysis of the cognitive processes involved in Tantric use of images in his book *Tantric Visual Culture: A cognitive approach*. His research is grounded in the cognitive process of interpreting the metaphoric and metonymic structures of divine images, yantra, maṇḍala, and mantra. He proposes that the "integration of various concepts into one allows us to penetrate beneath the opaque forms and derive some understanding of [Tantric] visual culture."\(^{69}\)

Timalsina's theory that Tantric sādhana is fueled by symbolic language assumes that the texts and images involved should not be understood literally and that their rituals are essentially comprised of techniques to pack and unpack metaphors. Furthermore, each constituent part of Tantric ritual—textual and visual—are (1) metaphors in that they act as symbols for something else and are (2) metonyms in that they act as literary and visual elements that point to or stand for a larger story or picture.\(^{70}\)

Broadly speaking, a metaphor is when one thing is viewed as another, and a metonym is when a part of entity stands for the whole, which is referred to as a "part-whole equation." Metonym and metaphor are both processes whereby we replace either a concept (word) or image for something else. These are both "common tools fundamental to our process of

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\(^{69}\) Timalsina, 32.

\(^{70}\) Ibid, 51.
conceptualization.” These are the cognitive mechanisms by which we categorize and organize things into a structure. As such, the image of Chinnamastā can and should be read with an awareness of the metaphors embedded in the image. What does the head stand for? The severing of the head? What is the symbolism of blood, the sexual intercourse of Rati and Kāma, and what do Ṛkākinī and Varṇīṇī mean as well?

Metaphors are commonly understood forms of visual and literary symbolisms that are based on similarities between the symbol and its referent. A metonym, though a kind of metaphor, is based not only on similarity, but upon contiguity, where a part of the referent is used to stand for the whole. We see this quite clearly in Tantric symbolism of the vulva [Laura: Although the yoni signifies both the vulva and the womb, many gurus and esoteric writings understand the yoni not as “vulva” (which does not create anything) but as “womb” which creates life. Even Western women scholars have often used the term to mean both. For example, the well-known work The Myths and Gods of India: The Classic Work on Hindu Polytheism from the Princeton Bollingen Series, by the renowned scholar Alain Daniélou use the term karma-yonī to mean “womb of action,” although he also uses the term garbhā to signify “womb.” So, it is context-specific. In the case of the Mother of the Cosmos, yonī should be read as “womb,” or at the very least, as vulva/womb because no female reproduction can take place without the entrance to the womb which has its locus in the vulva., which is represented by the rudimentary/aniconic form of the yonī or inverted triangle. In Chinnamastā’s case, for example, her dhyāna in the Tantrasāra by Krṣnānanda Āgamavāgīśa (see Appendix A), states that she stands in the middle of "a half-opened white lotus and in its center is a solar disc red as a

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71 Ibid, 33.
72 Ibid, 34.
73 Daniélou, The Myths and Gods of India, 43.
hibiscus flower and resembling a red bandhūka flower.74 Here, the lotus becomes a symbol for the yonī, which is a metonym of the vulva, which is again a metonym for the goddess. This single sentence is replete with both metonym and metaphor, such as the solar disc, the color red, and the bandhūka flower. The accompanying icon for this dhyāna also includes several other visual metaphors that act as sign-systems for the initiate, which indicate and point to comprehensive ritual processes that involve overlaying and overlapping sign-systems inherent in her mantras, yantras, mudrās and visualizations.

This process is further elaborated within the text through what is known as sandhyla bhāsa, or intentional language, in which a single concept can have three layers of meaning: pāra (supreme); śuṣma (subtle); and sthūla (gross).75 The concept of śakti is itself a form of sandhyla bhāsa in that it is a verb (power over), a noun (power of), and the goddess Śakti herself (power incarnate). In the case of śakti's manifold meanings it is also important to note that even certain actions described or depicted in the text or image can act as metonyms. The incidence of beheading, for example, is not simply an isolated act, but an allusion to many more instances of headlessness and beheading that can be traced within the larger historical, cultural, and religious domain of Śākta-Tantra.

Timalsina begins the process of deconstruction of the image by offering a basic template by which to relate the images in the text, or "signifier," to their possible meaning, or "signified." What is signified may be found in other texts, mantras, images, or sādhana. If we apply his method to a few of the symbols found in Chinnamastā's dhyāna and other associated stories, we come up with many possible references gathered from a variety of sources. In addition to the basic signifier-signified template provided by Timalsina, the addition of a third category—the

74 From the Tantrasāra by Krśnānanda Ágamavāgīśa, cited in Bernard’s Chinnamastā: The Aweful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess, 86-87.
75 Sherma, “SA HAM,” 46.
“sign-function”—helps to clarify how the initial sign operates according to its pre-coded meaning. (*table 3.1*):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Signifier</th>
<th>B. Sign-Function</th>
<th>C. Signified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solar Disc</td>
<td>Assimilation/digestion</td>
<td><em>Manipūra</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Yonī</em></td>
<td>Creation/birthing</td>
<td>Śakti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scimitar</td>
<td>Cutting</td>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongue (lolling)</td>
<td>Drinking/tasting</td>
<td><em>Kālī</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Mind/thought/thinking</td>
<td>Ego/Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>Nourishes/cleanses</td>
<td><em>Soma/life</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neck</td>
<td>Swallowing</td>
<td><em>Viśuddha cakra</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pratyāḷḍha</em></td>
<td>Activity/movement</td>
<td>Rage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snake</td>
<td>Reptiles</td>
<td><em>Śiva/Kuṇḍalinī</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rati and Kāma</td>
<td>Copulation/creation</td>
<td>Creation/Desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dākinī</td>
<td>Ending</td>
<td><em>Piṅgalā</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varnīṇī</td>
<td>Beginning</td>
<td><em>Idā</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of these symbols are deciphered through the metonymic process where a word or a gesture (A) stands for something else (B). This kind of table suggests the Tantric metonymic process is linear, but it is not. Several scholars have spoken at length about Tantra's layered meanings in the mantras, yantras, and icons (Schulman, Timalsina). Timalsina says that this kind of symbolic meaning and interpretation is not a linear one and does not flow in only one direction. There can be multiple meanings for a word or symbol and the signifier and signified often cross-reference one another. For example, the syllable *ha* in a mantra can refer to the sky,
which can be symbolized by a circle or indicated by a lack of color. Vice versa, the sky or a circle in an icon can be a reference to *ha* in the goddess's mantra.\footnote{Timalsina, 40.}

These signs and gestures are largely culture-specific. For instance, some hand gestures or *mudras* are well-known, like *abhaya mudra*—the open palm held by Kālī and some Buddhas, meaning "fear not", while other gestures are more esoteric and difficult to interpret without knowledge of Tantric culture's sign systems. The same image of Kālī shows her adorned with her prototypical garland of skulls, which have been interpreted as the heads of her faithful devotees, or victims in battle. Yet a specifically Tantric reading views the 52 skulls as the *varṇamālā*, or the letters of Sanskrit alphabet, each of which represent an aspect of Śakti—one of the divine *Matṛkās* who are encased in the phonemes of the letters. Thus the garland makes several references to the goddess, her *bijas* (seed sounds), and subsequently to the ritual recitation of mantra. The metonym can be taken even further if we take into account the fact that the sounds correspond to energetic centers (*cakras*) within the human body that must necessarily be activated in order to articulate the mantra. Such an example illustrates that the distance from point "A" (skulls) to point "B" (*cakras*) is not always short or direct.
The same can be said of any of the symbols embedded in the iconography and in the various mantras for Chinnamastā, of which there are many. Each variance of her image, mantra, and ritual should be understood as referring back to a particular cultic milieu within a specific time and place. Adherents from each milieu will understand the image's unique "lexicon." For instance, Chinnamastā is usually shown assuming the pratyālidha, standing with her left foot forward and the right foot back, which indicates rage or pugnacity. In many other renderings, such as this one (image 3.2) from the Vajrayāna tradition, where she is known as Trikāyavajrayoginī, "The Triple-bodied Vajrayoginī," or Chinnamuṇḍā, she assumes the alīḍha, or warrior stance with the right foot forward. Subtle differences such as these give clues to the temperament of the goddess, which can be either fierce or heroic.

These examples convey how the imagistic representations of Chinnamastā generally differ from the conventions outlined in her dhyāna and how the details between images can vary significantly. Though one could argue that a quintessential form of the goddess exists, this form can be interpreted one way by a tribal Śākta, another way by an urban Śākta-Tantric, yet another way by a Śākti-bhakta, and again differently by American Tantric neophyte. It is precisely because of this disparity of translation that a fundamental interpretation will attempt to
incorporate Tantric sādhana, the dhyāna, mantra, maṇḍala, yantra, and mudra, as well as the accounts of those who understand Chinnamastā from a devotional perspective. These elements work collectively to weave together a complex web of meaning for the aspirant. Therefore, rather than attempt to discuss the Chinnamastā's visual and textual themes separately, I alternate between text and image when discussing particular elements in order to convey either a relationship between text and image, or to call attention to disparities between them. These points of departure help the viewer identify possible changes in context and meaning.

These processes are important and relevant to the understanding and appreciation of Tantric visual culture and the use and significance of the fierce divine feminine largely because these are the processes that facilitate the organization of thought. Therefore ritual use of divine images such as Chinnamastā's indicate an astute understanding of human cognition. What's more is that these processes, which are common between cultures, are essential aspects of the transmission of cultural archetypes and worldviews.77

Chinnamastā's iconic image as it adheres to the conventions outlined in her dhyāna says specific things about Tantric Weltanschauung. Adaptations to that image, which we will examine in the next chapter, reveal appropriations of perceived Tantric cultural archetypes in post and late-modernity (violence; sexuality; transgression). These appropriations reveal the self-reflexive process of meaning making in Tantric semiotics. This also reveals less about Chinnamastā as an archetypal and exemplary model of Tantric divinity and more about the values and worldview of the contemporary secular (non-tantric) viewer. Interestingly enough, awareness of the strict conventions of her image are prerequisites for tantric sādhana. Therefore, it can be inferred that without such knowledge, the uninitiated, though unwittingly engaged in an act of

77 Timalsina, 33.
misappropriation as it were, are incapable of compromising the secrecy surrounding Tantric śādhanā. 
Chapter 4:
Text, Image and Ritual

Mythology & Narrative

_The myth is not my own, I had it from my mother._
—Euripides

Due to the complex manner in which ideas are communicated and interpreted, a visual hermeneutic of Chinnamastā must incorporate both the narrative and ritual dimension. Śākta-Tantra integrates the visual with the mythic, ritual, and psychological aspects of sādhana in order to give rise to an intellectual, physical, and emotional experience of the devī. And even though a devotee of Chinnamastā need not understand or partake in the complex Tantric sādhana outlined in the _Tantras_, their devotion is infused with the emotional sentiments conveyed in her images and stories.

Śākta-Tantra is distinct in the way it consciously integrates these various streams of religious life. Therefore, engaging a hermeneutic of the Śākta-Tantra’s visual culture must also entail the comprehension of its texts and rituals, which should be understood both independently and as a whole. This chapter aims to distill the principal themes of Chinnamastā’s various narratives, as well as comparing those themes to the symbols embedded in her images. By cross-referencing the elements in each of these dimensions, several common themes and ideas emerge that serve to enhance and inform the veneration and propitiation of the devī.

Chinnamastā’s texts can be divided into two primary categories: narratives/mythologies and ritual texts. A very brief look at a chronology of Śakti throughout Indian literature shows the first formal codification of goddess theology in the 6th century _Devī Māhātmya_, followed by a group of Śākta texts, including the 8th century _Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa_ and the 11th century _Devī_.
Gīta. Ritual texts that compile her various stotra, mantra, and other elements of her sādhana do not emerge until much later, such as the 16th century Tantrasāra by Āgmapādra and the 19th century Śāktapramoda. The instruction for the use of these texts can be found in the Mantramahodadhi of Mahidhara (Appendix B).

The name “Chinnamastā” first appears in the Mahābhārata in the story of Reṇukā and Paraśurāma. This tale, although not of Śākta origin, parallels Chinnamastā’s origin stories in the Prāṇatosinī-tantra and the Svatantra-tantra. These stories, when looked at comparatively, communicate specific theological perspectives on dharma, śtṛidharma (the duty of a woman), ritual, and notions of purity. When read in relation to Chinnamastā’s ritual texts and iconography, these stories uphold Śākta views that assert Śakti’s preeminence as the cosmogonic force of the universe.

Chinnamastā’s Origin Stories

There are several common tropes that emerge in all of Chinnamastā’s stories: heads and beheading, sacrifice, and desire. How these tropes are understood depends upon the cultural, religious, and mythological contexts in which they are presented, as well as the individual devotional sentiments of each of her worshippers. The first story discussed in the Mahābhārata’s epic story of Paraśurāma and his mother Reṇukā acts as a literary template for the beheading of the goddess, which is central to all of Chinnamastā’s stories and icons. Here we look at the various reasons for beheading and re-heading, as it were, in Orthodox schools of Hinduism.

Perhaps not coincidentally, subsequent stories in the Śākta-Upapurāṇas weave elements from Reṇukā’s story into Chinnamastā’s origin stories in such a way as to compare and contrast
these two goddess-women against one another. Commonly thought to be heterodox to normative strains of Hinduism, Tantric ideas regarding sexuality, decapitation, and blood sacrifice are conveyed in these Śākta myths to order assert very important theological ideas about Śakti. By comparatively analyzing the themes and tropes in these mythologies of the goddess, it is possible to come to a greater understanding of why and how various conceptions of the goddess are important and essential for Śāktas, Tantrics, and various other devotees of the devī.

Reṇukā and Paraśurāma in the Mahābhārata

Even though Reṇukā’s story in the Mahābhārata does not espouse Śākta religious motifs and themes, her story helps to understand the basic cosmology of Chinnamastā and the Mahāvidyās by means of contrast. The story of Reṇukā and Paraśurāma predates most all stories that proclaim Śakti as the preeminent cause of the universe and illustrates normative views on virtue and propriety, particularly in regard to notions of purity and the role of women. This story also provides a context in which to place the themes of beheading, sacrifice, sexuality, and the control of desire.

Reṇukā is a human princess, whose chastity and devotion gain her the siddhi (power) to control and collect water in sand pots, which she dutifully brings to her husband Jamadagni for the daily pūjā, sacrificial rites. However her power is compromised one day at the river while collecting water:

Reṇukā, the daughter of a king, was the wife of the paradigmatic chaste (and notoriously irascible) sage Jamadagni, and she was renewed for her chastity. One day as she bathed in the river, she caught sight of a king playing the water with his queen, and Reṇukā desired him. As a result of this unchaste thought, she lost her senses and became wet in the water. When she returned home, her husband immediately noticed her excitement, became enraged, and commanded his five sons to kill their mother.
The first four refused, and he cursed them to lose their senses and become like birds and animals, like numb, inanimate creatures. Then the fifth son, Paraśurāma [Rama with an axe], obediently cut off his mother’s head. When Jamadagni offered Paraśurāma a reward for this obedience, Paraśurāma chose that his mother would rise up alive, that one would remember her murder, that no one would be touched but the evil, and that his brothers would return to their normal state. All of this was granted.  

This story introduces themes that reemerge in Chinnamastā’s stories— notions of power, purity, and sacrifice. From this perspective, the root cause of Reṇukā’s offense was that she allowed her sexual desire to consume her to the extent that it compromised her ability to focus on her duty to collect water. Consequently, she loses her power, which indicates to her husband that she has been unchaste. It is this transgression for which Jamadagni seeks retribution. Of their five sons, only Paraśurāma is willing to follow a son’s dharma to obey the will of his father and behead his own mother. Paraśurāma, however, out of love for his mother, implores his father to reinstate her head under the condition that she have no memory of the act. It is this loss of memory that renders her as pure as she had been before the incident at the river. It is in this context that Reṇukā is referred to as Chinnamastā.

Prāṇatoṣīnī-tantra

The Śākta origin myths of Chinnamastā illustrate a very different picture of the aforementioned themes of power, purity, and sacrifice. In these two variations of her origin myth found in the Prāṇatoṣīnī-tantra, power is understood as śakti rather than chastity, and her sacrificial beheading is not an act of reprisal, but one of benediction wherein her own blood is fed to her attendants. The first story is from the Nārada-pāñcarātra and the second is from the Svatantra-tantra. The primary theme in both stories is power, which initially emerges as desire, and the harnessing and transmutation of that power for the ritual aims of Tantra. Further, these

78 Mahābhārata, 3.116, quoted by Wendy Doniger in “Put a Bag Over Her Head,” 16.
Śākta stories connect Chinnamastā with the mythologies of Śiva and Parvatī, which give further insight into Tantric perspectives on ritual, desire, and sacrifice.

**Nārada-pāñcarātra**

One day Parvatī went to bathe in the Mandākinī River... with her attendants, Jayā and Vijayā. After bathing, the great goddesses color became black because she was sexually aroused. After some time, her two attendants asked her, "Give us some food. We are hungry." She replied, "I shall give you food, but please wait." After a while, again they asked her. She replied, "Please wait, I am thinking about some matters." Waiting awhile, they implored her, "You are the mother of the universe. A child asks everything from her mother. The mother gives her children not only food but also coverings for the body. So that is why we are praying to you for food. You are known for your mercy: please give us food." Hearing this the consort of Śiva told them that she would give anything when they reached home. But again Ṛkī and Varṇī negó her, "We are overpowered with hunger, O Mother of the Universe. Give us food so we may be satisfied, O Merciful One, Bestower of Boons and Fülfiller of Desires."

Hearing this true statement, the merciful goddess smiled and severed her head with her fingernails. As soon as she severed her head, her head fell on the palm of her left hand. Three blood streams emerged from her throat: the left and right fell respectively into the mouths of her flanking attendants and the center fell into her mouth. After performing this, all were satisfied and later returned home. (From this act) Parvatī became known as Chinnamastā.

**Svatantra-tantra**

[Śiva narrates] I shall tell you of the emergence of Chinnamastā. In the Kṛta Yuga on Mt. Kailāśa, the best of all mountains, Mahāmāyā was engaged in Mahāvrata with me (sexual intercourse). At the time of my seminal emission she appeared fierce and from her body two Śaktis emerged who became her two attendants known as Ṛkī and Varṇī. One day, Caṇḍanāyikā with her two attendants went to the bank of the Puśpahradrā River. When it was noon, her hungry attendants asked Caṇḍikā, "Please give us food." Hearing this, the smiling and auspicious Caṇḍikā looked in all directions and severed her head. With the left bloodstream, she satisfied Ṛkī, with the right one she satisfied Varṇī and from the center one, she drank her own blood. After playing in this way (litā), she replaced her head on her body assumed her original form. At dusk, they returned home. When I saw her pale appearance, I suspected that she was abused by another. This infuriated me. From this anger a portion of me arose and became known as Krodha Bhaṭrava. This happened on the day of Vīrāṛtri. Thus Chinnamastā was born on Vīrāṛtri.79

**Themes in the Myths**

**Desire & Control**

Reṇukā’s siddhi to control water is indicative of the ability to control desire and sublimate

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79 Bernard, Chinnamastā, 7-8.
it for religious and ritual aims. This theme is consistent between both Chinnamastā and Reṇukā’s mythology. However, the reasons behind the control of desire varies between the goddesses. In the myth of Reṇukā, sexual desire is seen as polluting, and chastity is seen as the ideal constitution of women. Rita Sherma says of the two stories that,

The story of Reṇukā is a riff on the power of śrīdharma and the siddhi that can accrue as a result of śrīdharma perfectly maintained, placing the daily spiritual life of women at par with the ascetic quest. Nevertheless, it is also a morality play on the danger of straying from śrīdharma—a story of harsh retribution that is justified by the impurity arising from the transgression of kama outside the control of dharma. Reṇukā is wrongly conflated with Chinnamastā (one of the ten Mahāvidyā-s), just as the “suttee” who immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre is wrongly conflated with the Mahādevī in Her form as “Sati,” who—in rage, and against the wishes of her husband, father, and every norm of śrīdharma—immolates Herself in the sacrificial fire of Her father’s yajña, thereby destroying his yajña (and him). Chinnamastā has no śrīdharma as She is neither human nor married; rather she is an aspect of the Mahādevī. Ultimately, She transcends purity and impurity, and Her actions are meant to be understood, not morally through the lens of dharma and karma, but metaphysically through the lens of creation, sustenance, and liberation.80

As an aspect of the Mahādevī, Chinnamastā’s myths illustrate different attitudes towards sexuality and the function of desire.

In both of Chinnamastā’s origin stories, sexuality is paramount to the creation of the goddess. In the first story, she becomes dark when she is aroused, and though there is no direct correlation between her arousal and the rest of the story, it can be inferred that such darkness is indicative of tamas-guṇa, base desire. Yet darkness is not a metaphor for impurity as it might be in another context. In this context, tamas represents the coarse matter of the earth from which Chinnamastā is able to nourish her attendants who propitiate her, calling her “O Merciful One, Bestower of Boons, and Fulfiler of desires.” She is preoccupied with her thoughts, but is able to redirect her attention towards the call of her attendants in order to satiate their hunger. Chinnamastā maintains agency and power over herself throughout the story, even in the midst of desire and her self-decapitation. Her self-awareness is constant, and as such she suffers no amnesia following the loss of her head.

The Prāṇatōsinī-tantra begins with the cosmogony of the universe and similarly addresses the themes of desire and control. Chinnamastā, as Mahāmāyā, the “Great Illusion,” is engaged in Mahāvrata, sexual intercourse, with Śiva. By calling Chinnamastā by the name “Mahāmāyā” it is suggested that the story begins prior to the creation of the material world. This would also explain why she became “fierce at the time of [Śiva's] seminal emission” since this heralds the initial schism between Śiva and Śakti that renders their unified state split into two, which then results in the emergence of her two Śaktis, who represent the multiplicity of forms in worldly existence.

In all of the aforementioned myths of Chinnamastā, sexuality and desire are connected to the cultivation and generation of the kind of power that creates, sustains, and ends life. In the tale of Reṇukā, however, it is the transcendent Vedic gods who bestow power and perpetuate life. The Śākta myths, on the other hand, present the power of life and creation as a matter-of-fact, which sees the act of creation as natural and necessary.

Furthermore, in this context the goddess herself is nourished by the act of beheading, suggesting a cyclical relationship between life, death, and regeneration.

The notion of control within these stories is an interesting one, since ‘control’ can be defined in different ways. On one hand, control can imply the suppression of basic urges and desires. This definition is conveyed through representations of Chinnamastā that show her to be seated upon Rati and Kāma (figure 4.1), in which the seated position is thought to convey the
suppression of desire. Alternately, control can mean harnessing or manipulating basic drives and impulses, as in the training of horse or dog. This definition understands that which is being controlled as still active, but not unbridled. Images of Chinnamastā standing or dancing upon Rati and Kāma show her controlling desire, but not in a manner that cuts off its essential activity (image 4.2). Some read the active stance as a sign that she is transcending desire rather than suppressing it.

The concept of control as means of harnessing desire coupled with the idea of mukti or freedom are both illustrated in Chinnamastā’s narratives and images. She controls desire on the bottom of the image as she stands on Rati and Kāma, and at the top she is released from the bounds of finite existence as she severs her head, while remaining vital, alive and aware.
The stories and images may suggest the ritual use of sexual energy in the practice of *maithuna*. They may also communicate the philosophical notion that it is through restraint of mundane desires that one is capable of transcending neurotic psychological and physical attachments so as to experience a relative freedom of awareness/consciousness. From the cosmological viewpoint of Śākta-Tantra, control of desire is a prerequisite for *mokṣa* (emancipation). These ideas are particularly salient for the Tantric devotee who seeks not only to worship the goddess, but also to *merge* with her. This means that she is the model and the ideal with whom the devotee wishes to identify and embody. She leads by example, beckoning the viewer to not only emulate her, but to *become* her.

*Association with Śiva and Parvatī*

Many details in the *Nārada-Pāñcarātra* and the *Svatantra-tantra* connect Chinnamastā with Śiva and Parvatī—the father and mother of the universe. These associations connect Śāktism with both Tantric and Śaiva philosophies. The *Nārada-Pāñcarātra* refers to Chinnamastā as Parvatī, the consort of Śiva, and Śiva narrates the *Svatantra-tantra*, calling
Chinnamastā “Mahāmāyā” prior to her beheading. This reference to Mahāmāyā as the consort of Śiva also shows up in the Śiva-Purāṇa, when Śiva takes Parvatī as his beloved and praises her "as the great power of illusion, the primordial nature."81 This identifies Parvatī as Mahāmāyā, Śakti, and Prakṛti, and this identification further connects her to Chinnamastā and the other Mahāvidyās in subsequent Śākta literature.

The mention of Śiva's seminal emission is significant, since it is an ongoing dilemma in mythology of Śiva and Parvatī. According to several accounts in the Bhāagvata-Purāṇa and the Mahābhārata, Parvatī's greatest sorrow is that Śiva will not consummate their marriage and give her a son.82 However, this does not mean that Śiva does not enjoy a sexual relationship with Parvatī; indeed, he does, but without ejaculating. Rather, Śiva “spills his seed” in a variety of places: upon the earth, out of which emerges his son Kumāra83; and into the sacrificial fire, Agni, from which his son Kāṛtikeya is born.84

Both of these instances point to a larger subject in both Chinnamastā's and Śiva’s stories, which is one of self-sacrifice. Though aroused by Parvatī, Śiva contains his semen until he can offer it to Lord Agni has a sacrifice. This seed is held first by Agni, who pours it into the Gangā, who then puts the embryo on top of the mountain where it gestates to full maturity and is born.85 Implicit in this myth are two things: one is the idea that the progeny of Śiva and Parvatī can be considered not only divine, but the child of the world since it has gestated and been nursed by the earth, fire, and water; second is that what comes of Śiva's self-sacrifice is material life, which is sacred according to Tantra.

81 Śiva Purāṇa, 2.3.29.20, cited in Kramish, The Presence of Śiva, 358.
82 Kramish. 364-68.
83 Bhāagvata-Purāṇa 3.2.23-34, cited by Kramish, 370.
84 Mahābhārata 9.43.6-16; 13.84.8-13, cited by Kramish, 370.
85 Mahābhārata 9.43.6-16, cited by Kramish, 370-71.
Chinnamastā, by contrast, does not sacrifice semen but the life-elixir of her own blood. Similar to Śiva, Chinnamastā herself does not engage in the full act of sexual consummation in her origin stories or in her dhyāna. Additionally, Ďākinī and Varṇī are not born in the conventional manner, but in a way that adheres to the conventions of hagiographic lore—they “emerge from her body” in an ambiguous manner that does not imply labor or vaginal birth. It can be inferred that, since they are emanations of her śakti, they materialize in a manner similar to the Mahāvidyās in the Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa. Perhaps these parallels are an attempt to connect Chinnamastā and the Mahāvidyās with the theologies of Tantra and Śaivism. It is speculative, but Śiva's seminal emission and Mahāmāyā’s anger may be referencing Parvatī and Śiva, who are the embodiment of prakṛti and Puruṣa and the mother and father of the universe.86

Iconography

It is not necessary for all art to be beautiful, certainly not pretty. If art is ultimately to "interpret God to all of you", it must be now beautiful, now terrible, but always with that living quality which transcends the limited conceptions of beauty and ugliness... Nature is sometimes soft and smiling, sometimes also red in tooth and claw; in her, both life and death are found. Creation, preservation, and destruction are equally His work. His images may therefore be beautiful or terrible.

—Ananda Coomaraswamy87

86 Parvatī taunts Śiva during their courting period and says to him "How can the Great Lord of the linga exist without Prakṛti? Everything at all times is held together by Prakṛti. What you hear, what you eat, what you see, and what you are all the activity of Prakṛti...I am Prakṛti and you are Puruṣa," adding that it was only because of prakṛti that Śiva was embodied and animated and that without her he could not engage in action at all. (Kramish, 353, from the Śiva Purāṇa 2.3.13.1-21)
87 Coomaraswamy, "The Aims of Indian Art,” 11.
A general overview of the conventions and aesthetic theories of Tantric art seems relatively straightforward, but it is important to consider that whatever is considered ‘conventional’ has changed throughout the long history of both Tantra and Indian iconographic representations of the divine. As such, determining what is truly conventional requires the ability to abstract conventions apart from their ever-changing historical and cultural frameworks.

For example, the classical form of Chinnamastā is noted as digvastrāṃ or digambarāṃ (naked) in her dhyānas in the Mantramahānarva\textsuperscript{88} and the Tantrasāra\textsuperscript{89} (see appendix A). Yet she is shown in this Rajasthani painting (figure 4.3) from the 18\textsuperscript{th} century wearing a tiger skin loincloth. The covering of her vulva indicates that this image was produced in a milieu that, for whatever reason, felt the need to sanitize the normally nude image of Chinnamastā. Conversely, an image of Chinnamastā from around the same period shows the goddess in all of her naked glory (figure 4.4) assuming the pratyālīḍha stance with the left leg extended, drawing the viewer's attention directly to her yonī. Looking at these two images side by side, the viewer is presented with several incongruities that raise questions about the how these images functioned and what they meant to those who commissioned or made use of them.

\textsuperscript{88} Mantramahānarva, cited in Sridhar, “The Wonder That is Chinnamastā,” 131.
\textsuperscript{89} Tantrasāra, cited in Bernard, 87.
The juxtaposition of these two images illustrates Arnheim and Timalsina's assertions that images should be understood in relationship to their context, and that each rendering possesses indigenous meaning as well as those that are context dependent. This section will attend to several overlapping themes that occur between Chinnamastā's texts and images. In order to maintain a reference to the overarching themes present in her paradigmatic form, I will look at each theme through a variety of lenses: historical, semiotic, ritual, and hermeneutic. It is through this interdisciplinary approach that Arnheim's methods for visual analysis can be adapted to suit Tantric images.

In order to begin the task of understanding what is contextual and what is essential, form must be distinguished from its influences. To that end, Chinnamastā’s Indian and Tibetan images are useful resources, as are her mythologies and narratives. The attributes of Chinnamastā that are common between these texts create a paradigmatic form that can be isolated from the large variety of settings in which she has emerged and continues to exist.
**Iconographic Origins**

Many scholars have linked Chinnamastā with ancient headless fertility goddesses from the early part of the Common Era (Bernard 1994 and Kinsley 1997). The prototypical headless, naked goddess has become known by the name *Lajjā Gaurī* from around the 6th century (*figure 4.5*). However, several naked, headless goddess figurines were excavated over a period of time from different sites in the Deccan region and have been dated between the first and eighth centuries. A red sandstone figurine (*figure 4.6*) of a nude, headless goddess, thought to be from the Kushan dynasty, dated at around the second century, is shown adorned with a beaded necklace, a girdle, and anklets. Sir John Marshall found a similar figurine in Northern India in Bhita, Uttar Pradesh (*figure 4.7*), which is also dated at around the same time. The head is missing and in its place is a large lotus flower, with its leaves adorning the neck. In both figures the arms are extended upward, and the legs are spread apart, emphasizing the vulva. This is sometimes referred to as the frog position, which was a typical birthing position of the time. Stella Kramish also notes that the thighs and lower muscles are sculpted as to appear tense, which may be indicative of giving birth. A similar stone sculpture dated at around the same time as the previous two (*figure 4.8*) was found near Satara, from Vadgoan in Maharashtra. The tiny sculpture shows the same nude, headless form seated next to a bull—Nandi—to the right, which indicates an association with Śiva and Parvatī.

These figurines and other mother goddesses with similar features may be conceptual antecedents to Chinnamastā. In the case of *Lajjā Gaurī*, whose head is never shown, the icon and the rituals surrounding Chinnamastā suggests a strong relationship between the two. Today,

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93 Sankalia, “The Nude Goddess or ‘Shameless Woman’ in Western Asia, India, and South-Eastern Asia,”
similar goddesses are commonly propitiated by women who want children, such as this stone effigy, which has been anointed with butter and red lead at the Kamākhyā Temple (figure 4.9).

Clockwise from top right:
Figure 4.5: 6th Century. Lotus-Headed Fertility Goddess Lajjā Gaurī, Madhya Pradesh
Figure 4.6: 2nd century. Goddess, Kushan
Figure 4.7: 2nd century. Goddess, Uttar Pradesh
Figure 4.8: circa 100-300 CE. Parvatī and Nandi, Maharashtra
There has been a good deal of speculation as to why Lajjā Gaurī is depicted without a head. Many scholars believe that the lack of a head is meant to draw attention to her genitalia, which becomes the foci of her image and her identity. From this view, she is the source of all creation, an anthropomorphized symbol of the earth, and the prototypical fertility goddess. There are many other interpretations behind the absence of the head, but it seems that the main purpose in portraying the goddess in this way is to express the quintessential notion of fertility. The significance of the headless figure as a symbol of fertility and of veneration is suggested by the
fact that the pubic area is often worn away, likely due to the touch of devotees over time who sought to make contact with the most important feature of the icon—the yoni.\footnote{Blurton, 164.}

There are many streams to similar goddesses that can be linked to 
Lajjā Gaurī. The \textit{Ṛg Veda} speaks of Aditi, the mother of the gods, in one of its rare mentions of the goddess:

\begin{quote}
\textit{In the first age of the gods,}
\textit{Existence was born from non-existence}
\textit{After this the quarters of the sky were born}
\textit{From her who crouched with legs spread.}
\textit{The earth was born from her}
\textit{Who crouches with legs spread,}
\textit{And from the earth the quarters of the sky were born.}
\textit{From Aditi, Daksha was born,}
\textit{And from Daksha, Aditi was born.}
\end{quote}

\textit{—Ṛg Veda 10.72}\footnote{Doniger, cited in: Ganesh, “Mother Who Is Not a Mother: In Search of the Great Indian Goddess.” WS59}

Śakambharī, another notable headless goddess who was found at the Harappan sites, is rendered upside down with vegetation issuing forth from her womb. The \textit{Devī-Māhāmya} briefly mentions her, reaffirming her ever-present influence in Indian culture:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Next O ye Gods, I shall support the whole world}
\textit{With the life sustaining vegetables}
\textit{Which shall grow out of my own body}
\textit{During a period of heavy rain.}
\textit{I shall gain fame on earth then}
\textit{As śakambharī.}
\end{quote}

\textit{—Mārkandeya Purāṇa, 11.48-9}\footnote{Pargiter cited in: Ganesh, “Mother Who Is Not a Mother: In Search of the Great Indian Goddess.” WS61.}

These are just a few examples of the many possible connections to Chinnamastā. Even so, there is no direct linkage between these goddesses and Chinnamastā since they are separated by a great deal of time and cultural and religious influences. However, abstraction of essential elements is still possible considering that the emphasis on the unusual combination of certain visual elements: headlessness and the exposed vulva. The ambiguous gap between \textit{Lajjā Gaurī}
and Chinnamastā is filled with adaptations that tell a story about the varied religious, psychological, and emotional functions and importance of religious imagery.

Dhyāna, mantra, and myth: The image in textual form

Due to Chinnamastā's violent and sexual content, it is easy for the uninitiated or uninformed viewer to be distracted and even confused by the array of symbols in her iconography. It is because of this panoply that an accurate reading of her image requires considerable pre-existing knowledge of Śākta and Tantra's ideological and cosmological structure, which necessitates literacy in the Tantric metonyms and metaphors in the iconography of the Mahāvidyās. Without at least a rudimentary ability to converse in this particular language, the viewer will not have access to the meanings inscribed in her image.

The relationship between visual symbols and Tantric ideas becomes more apparent when they are viewed in relation to Chinnamastā's mythologies, dhyāna, and mantras. Through cross-referencing her texts and images, it becomes clear that one image can have several meanings, and these varied interpretations are precisely the avenues upon which different people construct their own unique relationship with the goddess. The possibility of variable interpretation is important since the interpretation of these metaphors is often culture specific. For instance, headlessness may be associated with the loss of one's ego or individual identity in one reading of Chinnamastā's image (Doniger and Bernard), or it may indicate that the identity and function of the goddess as being situated in the body, rather than the head or mind (Ganesh 1990).

For brevity and clarity, I have attempted to organize the many symbols in Chinnamastā's texts and images according to her location in both place and time, her physical attributes, and the predominant themes of sexuality and death. These descriptions incorporate an array of possible meanings and their significance to Śākta-Tantra ideology, cosmology, and sādhana. The
exposition below, however, is not exhaustive in that it does not include analyses of non-paradigmatic forms of portrayal, such as the Rajasthani print from the 1880's (figure 4.3). Rather, the metaphors and metonyms described adhere to a paradigmatic form of Chinnamastā that emerges when her many ritual texts, stories, and images are viewed collectively.

**Location: The Function of Place and Time**

Place and time function in many ways in religious myths and images. Primarily, sacred places, whether literal or mythic, serve as metaphors and metonyms that reference specific ontological and cosmological theories. In the case of the stories and images of the goddesses of Śāktism and Tantra, their location both in time and space may indicate particular rituals and events and their ideal locations and recommended times, or they may serve as symbols of events that occurred in the sacred history of Śāktism. For instance, the time of day and the presence of water in either the *dhyāna* or image of the goddess can indicate prescribed times and places for ritual actions.\(^{97}\) Similarly, Chinnamastā's relative nearness to the Gaṅgā in her mythology emphasizes her function as the creative force of the universe since the river Gaṅgā is both the site of cosmogenesis in the *Mahabharata* and a symbol for creation and life itself.

The *dhyāna*, mythologies, and images of Chinnamastā each describe the place and time of Chinnamastā's hierophany. Her *dhyānas* locate her both in literal and mythic place and time (*mAṃipūra cakra*), while her origin stories situate her in mythic time (*Krta Yuga*) and at locations marked as the *axis mundi* for the majority of Indian religions (Mount Kailāsa and the Gaṅgā River). Visual renderings of the images in these stories can vary quite a bit, from those that closely follow the stories in the *Tantras*, to those images that improvise a great deal, such as the

\(^{97}\) Timalsina, 49.
Rajasthani image, which places her in the charnel ground—a location never noted in any of her texts or oral histories.

**Embodied Space**

**Maṇipūra: Solar Center of Creative Dissolution**

Both of her *dhyānas* reference the “Solar Disc”, referring to the navel of the practitioner, or the *manipūra cakra*. It is within this space that the *Tantrasāra* positions the sacred, embodied space of Chinnamastā’s abode, which is in a half-opened white lotus, decorated with the *yonī*—the inverted equilateral triangle. The *yonī* has multiple meanings, simultaneously representing various aspects of Śākta and Śakti: the created world, symbolized by the three *guna*s; and the creative force—symbolized collectively by Śakti, woman, and the womb. *Maṇipūra* is located at the stomach, associating it with consumption, assimilation, and expulsion—a theme aptly conveyed by Chinnamastā and her attendants’ consumption of blood.

Chinnamastā’s location at *manipūra cakra* points to several other important elements of her *sādhana* and to Tantric cosmological principles. This location also notes the cluster of sounds (*mantra*) for use in her *sādhanā*, indicated by both her own *yantra*, and the *manipūra cakra*. Though the beheading is prominent in the image, it has already occurred, and what we are being asked to visualize is the actual drinking of blood. Her *dhyāna* in the *Mantramahodadhi* emphasizes the importance of the act of drinking as the word *pibanti*, or “drinking”, shows up three times in the short meditation.

What is most significant about this location is that it is situated within the body of the aspirant. Because Chinnamastā is Śakti, this renders her abode as sacred, and since her abode exists within the body, the body becomes a sacred space. The location of *manipūra* then serves to reinforce Tantric theory that correlates the microcosm (*prakṛti, śakti*) with the macrocosm
(Puruṣa, Śiva). Heavenly, sacred space does not exist in some transcendent, distant place, but within corporeality. Additionally, the body itself can be seen as yet another metonym pointing to embodied existence in general, which includes sanctity of the earth.

If the aim of Tantric sādhana is to come to an understanding of the goddess/macrocosm and the self/microcosm as unified and undifferentiated, then the work of aspirant is to prepare himself or herself to enter the inner sanctum of the goddess. Just as the bhakta or the Brahmin would undergo purification rituals before entering the temple, so then does the tantrika before attempting to contact the goddess within. This notion broadens the question of how the body, as sacred space, is treated ritually, and how this type of ritual differs from those in which the aspirant’s body merely approaches the temple.

In Serpent Power, Sir John Woodroffe discusses the function of śabda, sound, within the context of the cakras. He notes that sound is conceptualized in Tantra as having several states that range from causal to subtle to gross. Parā sound is that which exists immediately prior to manifestation (or aspiration) and is in its causal state within kuṇḍalinī at the mūlādhāra, root, cakra. This sound-motion becomes active and audible, though abstract, between mūlādhāra and manipūra, where it is in its Paśyantī state, becoming a subtle expression of the mind (manas). It is at the manipūra where śabda transforms and becomes intelligible and known through the intellect (buddhi). This process sees sound as śakti, and like śakti, it is dormant and in a potential state until provoked into a state of vibratory movement called spanda.98 This movement of kuṇḍalinī śakti is stimulated by śabda through the appropriate mantras, so that it can make its ascent through the body.

Since Chinnamastā is located at manipūra, she should be understood as the Iṣṭadevatā, or tutelary deity, for those devotees who seek to move from the pāra to paśyantī state of

98 Woodroffe, Serpent Power, 89-90.
consciousness. And as the Īṣṭadevatā for this particular stage, her image must symbolically convey the movement from causal to subtle sound as well as refer to those rituals, mantras, and visualizations that will facilitate this transformation.

Nāḍī: Rivers of Life and Regeneration

A discussion about Chinnamastā's location within the body at manipūra cakra necessitates an introduction to the nāḍīs, or nervous systems, within the body. The nāḍīs are clusters of sympathetic nerve-like fibers that form subtle canals and are thought to converge around the cakras in varying concentrations. The cakras, understood as seats of the goddess, are penetrated as śakti moves through the nāḍīs.99 Each cakra lies upon one of seven centers along the spinal column and the head, which represented by a yantra and a bija. They are, in ascending order, mūlādharā, svadhīstāna, manipūra, ānahata, viśuddha, ajña, and sahasrāra, the abode of Śiva. Further, each yantra contains not only the bija for the cakra itself, but specific letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, which further correspond to the Mātrikas, or Mothers, which are again represented by the varṇamālā— the garland of skulls worn by both Kāli and Chinnamastā.

The Śāndilya Upaniṣad states that term nāḍī (river) stems from the root nad, which means “to move”, and it is within the nāḍīs of the body that prāṇā, or energy, moves100, and they are thus considered conduits of prāṇā. A large portion of sādhana deals with the purification of the nāḍīs through various means, though mostly through prānāyama, breathing practices. The Tantras speak of anywhere between 72,000 and 350,000 nāḍīs in the human body, but there are only fourteen principle nāḍīs and three chief channels, called Idā, Pingalā, and Śuṣumnā.101 The

100 Woodroffe, Serpent Power, 110.
101 Ibid, 111.
Śuṣumnā is understood to correspond with the spinal cord, with Idā and Pingalā forming the left and right chains of sympathetic ganglia, which converge with the central cord in the region of the solar plexus, near the manipūra cakra.\(^{102}\) In symbolic language, this is where the three rivers meet at a confluence, and it is no coincidence that Chinnamastā’s two origin myths place her at the bank of the Mandakini River and Puṣpabhradrā River, both alternate names for the Gaṅgā River.

Incidentally, Rajrappa Temple of Bihar, one of the main Chinnamastā temples in India and Śakti-Pīṭha (Śakti temple), is also located at the confluence of the Damodar and Bhairavi (Bhera) Rivers. The Damodar River joins with the Bhairavi at the center of Rajrappa, where there is a waterfall at the point of its confluence. Water is a particularly potent symbol and element in the region, and locals claim that the Bhairavi river never dries up or becomes muddy. The water of the hot springs north of the temple is also said to have healing powers.\(^{103}\)

Though no written accounts of the temple have drawn connections between the textual tradition of Chinnamastā and her temple, there are many striking similarities between the myths and dhyāna to the particular geographic features surrounding Rajrappa. The fact that bhairavi means "twelve-year-old girl" is significant, since it likely references Varṇini, who is described in the Tantrasāra as a "perpetual twelve-year-old girl." The waterfall at Rajrappa is noted by locals as a washing the feet of Chinnamastā, though it can also easily be a geographic symbol of śuṣumnā nādi, also symbolized by the three distinct streams of blood that are spurting from Chinnamastā's neck into the mouths of Ďākinī and Varṇini. It can be inferred that the blood streams are symbols of kundalinī sakti as they move through the Idā and Pingalā nādis, and the

\(^{102}\) Ibid, 113.
\(^{103}\) Mahalakshmi, “Tantric Visions, Local Manifestations,” 205-06.
three goddesses themselves can be seen as the three nāḍīs, with Chinnamastā holding court in the śuṣumnā.

The location of these rivers—both actual and mythic—make several metonymic references to each other, and these references elucidate and fortify many themes in Chinnamastā's broader story, which in turn contributes to the Śākta cosmologies found within the literary and ritual tradition of the Mahāvidyās. As actual geographic features of Rajrappa, the rivers indicate the site of Chinnamastā's heirophany, which supports her position as divine Prakṛti and relates her story to the myth of Śāti, whose dismembered body parts were strewn throughout India at the sites of the Śakti-Pīthas. As a place within the body, the nāḍīs mark the body as sacred and cross reference her images and literature, which relate important cosmological themes and ritual practices to the aspirant.

Mythic and Archetypal Place and Time

Most all of the references to place and time in Chinnamastā's dhyāna function as ritual aids for the Tantric aspirant—either as a visual aid, or as pointers to particular mantras. Her mythologies, by contrast, use location and time in a slightly different manner to denote her affiliation with Śākta, Tantra, and perhaps even Śaivism. The mention of specific times and places reference stories and ideas from the larger matrix of Vedic and Purāṇic literature. Mythological references to Chinnamastā locate her within a specific cultural and religious milieu—that of Tantrism, Śāktism, and Śaivism. The mythologies also espouse certain kinds of theological ideas, such as the supremacy of Śakti as the active force in the universe. Through associating her texts with other cognate stories, such as Reṇukā’s story, we see the possible
intend to distinguish the cult of Chinnamastā and Śāktism from the more Orthodox schools of Vaiṣṇavism.

The origin myths, then, function differently from the Tantras and other related ritual texts. If we assume that images are at least partially influenced by the text, it is obvious which images of Chinnamastā were rendered according to her mythologies and which images reflect the conventions in her dhyāna. In several instances, as can be expected, the imagery represented is a conflations of dhyāna, myth, and artistic innovation.

This highly innovative rendering of Chinnamastā (figure 4.10) is a superb example of such amalgamation. This image shows what appears to be a composite of several goddesses, since the four-armed goddess is headless, but wears a sari and rides a lion. The four arms may reference the goddess Lakśmī, or the four aims of life, while the lion indicates a connection to Durgā.104

Such a stylized rendering may reflect the ideologies of cultural Śāktism, while the images that adhere to the paradigmatic conventions of her dhyāna reflect the rituals and philosophies of religious Śākta-Tantra. It is commonly noted that Chinnamastā is not a goddess for householders (Bernard 1994, Kinsley 1997, and Saxena 2011), and as such her typical iconography may not suit the everyday devotional practices of Śākta devotees. This is the likely reason behind why the goddess Chinnamastā at Chintpurni is shielded from view in the inner sanctum of the temple.

Outside, her pindī (stone effigy) is the main site of darśan for the many householder pilgrims and locals who visit the temple daily.

**Yantra: The Goddess of the Rising Sun**

It is common for goddesses to be grouped together in clusters: the saptmātryās (the seven mothers), or Navdurgā, the nine goddesses who are emanations of Durgā, and the sixty-four yoginīs of Śākta-Tantra are just a few examples. These goddess clusters help to frame the visual and mythological symbols of each individual goddess within the group. In this regard, Chinnamastā’s placement or location should be understood in relationship to the other nine Mahāvidyās. To do this it is helpful to revisit the mythic origination of the Mahāvidyās within the Purāṇas.

The Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa makes note of the various cardinal directions where each of Mahāvidyās appear, creating a perimeter around Śiva. These directions are noted as Śiva runs in various directions, only to be faced with each one of the goddesses. The goddesses restrain Śiva's movements, frightening him and preventing him from stopping Saṭī from going to her father's sacrifice. In the Brhadhārma Purāṇa, which tells a similar story, Saṭī leaves the ten as guardians of Śiva in her absence. In each of these stories, the placement of the goddess is important because it may indicate her protective function, which might also be indicated in her yantra, and the physical construction of the temple. The chapter concludes with the proper sādhana for worshipping the Mahāvidyās, which includes mantra and the construction of their yantra.

A complete reading of the text reveals that the location of the goddesses should be understood in relationship to their placement upon the Mahāvidyās' yantra. Upon the yantra,

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105 Śridhar, Chinnamastā, 124.
each deity occupies a specific corner that is denoted by her bīja. The goddesses in this regard are considered lokapālas, or deities of the spheres, which protect the inner sanctum from adverse influences from the outside. It is also plausible that the direction of the goddess within the myth and yantra are metaphoric references to the temple in which the Śiva lingam resides in the center. The metonymic structure of this is complex, since the lingam serves as a part-whole reference to Śiva, around whom the Mahāvidyās arrange themselves in the ten directions—eight compass points, plus the zenith and nadir. The symbolism can go on almost limitlessly from this point since each direction can be correlated to a point on the body, a mantra, a function, a stage of awareness, or a particular kind of knowledge (jñana).

There is a discrepancy regarding Chinnamastā’s location between scholarly translations of the Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa. Kinsley and Sridhar note Chinnamastā as holding the western corner, while Bernard and Khanna cite the east. The literal translation of the text states that, “The very dreadful headless goddess to the right is Chinnamastā, O esteemed one” (Mahābhāgavata-Purāṇa 8.33-34). In order to determine to whose right she is standing—either Satī's (west), or Śiva's (east)—the reader has to understand who is being spoken to and who is doing the speaking. Clearly, it is Śiva who is being addressed, however who is speaking is not as obvious. Bernard notes that it is Satī speaking, yet the texts states that it is simply the “goddess” speaking (devyuvāca), whereas the previous dialogue is prefaced with “Satī says” (satyuvāca). The speaker is not Kālī (who occupies the zenith of the yantra), since she is also referenced in the third-person in the first stanza of the same verse. Therefore, it is likely the Mahādevī speaking, conceivably viewing the scene from a top-down omniscient perspective, which would make Chinnamastā’s location to the east of Śiva as both Bernard and Khanna have affirmed.

106 Khanna, Yantra, 33-34.
The eastern quadrant is noted by Bernard to be auspicious, as it is the direction of the rising sun. This interpretation makes sense since Chinnamastā's dhyāna notes her as being as “effulgent as a million blazing suns”. Although it is likely that, if indeed the Mahāvidyās fall upon the yantra diagram, then their meanings are related to a cosmic process, and each location is a stage of that process. Chinnamastā's iconography, of course, suggests that she is the goddess of dissolution and liberation, and her relationship to the manipūra also indicates that she occupies the realm of assimilation, which entails a breaking down or transmutation of matter into energy.

There is very little information regarding the construction of a Mahāvidyā temple or of a yantra for the group of Mahāvidyās. Even so, looking to Chinnamastā's various forms helps to piece together potential meanings behind her location. As stated earlier, Chinnamastā is most likely a variant of the Vajrayāna Buddhist goddess, Vajrayoginī. This relationship is also indicated in Chinnamastā’s mantra, Śrīṃ Hrīṃ Klim Vajravairocanīye Hūṃ Hūṃ Phat Svāhā”. Here the goddess is called Vajravairocani, or “Thunderbolt Buddha”. Vairocana is one of the Dhyāni Buddhas of Vajrayāna who are connected with the construction and depiction of Buddhist mandalas.

The Dhyāni Buddhas preside over large groups of Buddhas and Śaktis, and their “offspring” are imbued with the characteristics of their creators. Chinnamastā, Vajravairocani, and Vajrayoginī are collected into one of the five Dhyāni Buddha families known as the Vairocana family. Vairocana resides in the center of the mandala, though at times he is given a place in the southeastern corner between Aśokbhya in the east and Ratnasambhava in the south. There are also instances where Vairocana and Aśokbhya change places. Chinnamastā’s alternate names (Vajrayoginī and Vajravairocani), her adornments and implements (skulls, skull

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107 Bhattacharya, B. *Esoteric Buddhism*, 131.
cup, and scimitar), eastern location, and association with Ṛkī (one of the progeny of Vairocana) indicate that she is affiliated with either or both the Aṣokbhya and Vairocana families.

The placement of deities in the maṇḍala is symbolic of their placement within the stupa (shrine), which is also a symbol for the universe. Similar to Indian Tantra, the visualizations begin at the periphery of the maṇḍala and move inward. Each section of the maṇḍala, from the periphery to the center, represents a stage of the evolutionary process. The center of the maṇḍala is the realm of the bīja, which emerges out of śūnyatā, or voidness, and from the bīja comes a general conception of the icon, which is then followed by the external form of the deity.

Chinnamastā in this context is anomalous since she seems to exist between realms due to the ambiguity of her location within the sphere of the maṇḍala. However, Elizabeth English has noted that Chinnamastā, who she refers to as Trikāyavajrayoginī (Three-bodied Vajrayoginī), is characterized by her triple nature—creator, creation, and dissolution. This is quite clearly alluded to through the depiction of the three goddesses of different ages and the three distinct streams of blood. Sherma notes that the number three, in the Tantric system, has a range of meanings.

Trikā is sometimes understood to refer to: (a) Śiva, Śakti, and Nara (man, human person); or (b) Śiva, Śakti, and Ānu (the infinetesimal small spark that makes one a jīva); alternately, (c) as described in the Mālinivijayottata-tantra Parā-śakti (transcendent), Parāpara śakti (both transcendent and immanent), Aparā śakti (immanent); (d) in addition there are triads such as Icchā Śakti (power of volition), Jiñāna Śakti (power of knowledge, omniscience), Kriyā Śakti (power of action), and (e) Prakāśa (Śiva as luminosity); Vimarsa (Śakti as dynamic reflection), and Sāmarasya (the “one taste” of the state of samādhi).

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110. English, 96-97.
111. Sherma, personal correspondence, June 29, 2016.
By framing Chinnamastā’s identity within the context of mythic, literal, and archetypal space, and by interpreting these locations according to the conventions of the *maṇḍalas* of the Dhyāni Buddhas, a more complete picture begins to unfold. In both Indian and Buddhist Tantric images her symbols are relatively consistent—as the governess of *manipūra* and as the Triple-bodied *Yoginī* her image suggests that she is a supremely active form of Śakti that either moves from one state to another, or exists within the liminal realm between causal and subtle realities. As a goddess between dimensions, she is necessarily portrayed within a phantasmagoric collage of elements from this world and the next.

**Śakti-Rūpa: Chinnamastā’s Physical Attributes and Overarching Themes**

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasure which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body, could enjoy...But as pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain; because there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death: nay, what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of this king of terrors. When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience.

—Edmund Burke

**Nudity & Sexuality**

In this section, it is necessary to see sexuality as distinct from that which is erotic. What is erotic is lustful and concupiscent, and though it involves the impulse of the body, it is

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112 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*, 34.
something that is connected to a certain preoccupation of the mind. Sexuality, on the other hand, is a larger category that can be related to that which is erotic, but is also functional and rooted in the body. One could say that while eroticism and lust are mental creations or tendencies, sexuality is embodied reality.

The images of early headless, nude female figurines like Lajjā Gaurī convey a kind of sexuality that is connected to the idea of origin—the origin of life, particularly human life. Our origins are essentially sexual, but they are not necessarily lust-driven. Women coming to worship these stone figurines are likely not coming with erotic sentiments, but with a real wish to procreate and have children. Similarly, devotees of Chinnamastā who have spoken of their relationship with her, do not cite it as being driven by sensual urges. Rather she is seen as a symbol of dynamic and forceful femininity. Likewise the rituals outlined in the Mantramahodadhi promise boons of wealth and poetic talent rather than sexual prowess. Why then does Chinnamastā evocatively display her naked body while standing on top of a copulating Ratī and Kāma? What does her sexually assertive image present to a post-modern viewer as opposed to a Śākta-Tantric? And does her image demand a reorientation to sex and a re-visioning of notions of propriety around female sexuality?

Perhaps part of the problem lies in how sexuality is defined and understood in the West. There are so few synonyms for “sex”, and those terms connote either wantonness or basic biology (coitus), and therefore can almost be construed as conceptual opposites. In Sanskrit, however, there are several terms used to denote sex—maithuna (ritual sex, marriage implied), rati (sexual pleasure), Mahāvrata (the union of Śiva and Śakti, as noted in Chinnamastā’s mythology), and sambhoga (carnal sexual enjoyment) are just a few.
The notion of dialexsis attends to the question of how symbols are interpreted in different ways depending on context (Sherma). Engaging dialexsis reveals how Chinnamastā's sexual imagery can mean different things to different people. Her nudity, exposed genitalia, and the copulation of Rati and Kāma have been explained in many ways by various scholars (Bernard, Kinsley, and Shin). In some cases, scholarly interpretations have used terminology that assumes certain relationships between concepts and form. For instance, Jae Un Shin's study of Chinnamastā is titled "Erotic Nudity, Barren Sexuality, and Ferocious Goddesses." The title alone assumes an analogous relationship between eroticism and nakedness. Yet, such a statement inadvertently supports the early orientalist and puritanical view of Indian art, which superimposed Protestant values onto Indian religious art and iconography.

The process of dialexsis therefore requires a critical and reflexive analysis of sexuality. To this end, several questions will be addressed as they pertain to Chinnamastā iconography: What is the relationship between sexuality and eroticism? What is the relationship between sex and death? There are no easy answers to these questions, but perhaps it is more valuable to think through these questions and acknowledge the wide gaps that exist in our understanding of sexuality and human desire. We can investigate these gaps by attending to specific elements in the literature and icons: maithuna—copulation (as represented by Rati and Kāma), viparita rati—the reverse sexual position with the woman on top, and the yoni, or exposed vulva of Chinnamastā.

A prerequisite for thinking through the relationship between sexuality, nudity, fertility, and eroticism requires, at the very least, the ability to abstract one concept from the other, so as not to string together ideas into false analogies. Surveying Chinnamastā's large corpus of images reveals that sexually charged content can have several metonymic references. How nudity and
sexuality are portrayed are completely context dependent, and many academic views and covert value judgments about, say, exposed female genitalia contributes to the proliferation of specific ideas about the presentation of the female body and sexuality.

Fleshing out disparate views on the religious use and portrayal of the naked female form is possible by engaging a comparative analysis of similar forms of iconography from different historical periods. The first image is a Vajrayāna thangka painting of Chinnamuṇḍā-Vajrayoginī (figure 4.11). Though lacking Rati and Kāma, this image helps to frame images of Chinnamastā, who is understood as an adaptation of Vajrayoginī. The second is a contemporary detail of Rati and Kama, rendered in a similar style to thangka painting of Chinnamuṇḍā (figure 4.12). Next is a 19th century Kangra painting that is only slightly more graphic in its depiction of Rati and Kāma (figure 4.13). The third image is a lithograph from 18th century Bengal (figure 4.14), and though contemporary to

Figure 4.11: Chinnamuṇḍā Vajrayoginī

Figure 4.12: Detail of Rati and Kāma beneath Chinnamastā
the previous two images, represents a contrary cultural and religious ideology. Here, the nudity and copulation have been covered with Rati's skirt, and even Chinnamastā's *yonī* has been hidden behind the long hair that hangs from her decapitated head.

Examining these images side by side reveals several ideas regarding the portrayal of sexuality in Buddhist and Indian religious art. First, is that shifting contexts, including that of British colonization of India, most assuredly result in varied notions of nudity, some more functional, while some see sexuality as a metaphor for desire and lust. This latter view assumes that such images are meant to titillate the viewer. It is this perspective that seeks to clothe and cover the sex act and to shield Chinnamastā's *yonī* from view. Ironically, by removing the sexual content from the image, focus is inadvertently placed on Chinnamastā's decapitation, which turns the icon into something that is less sexual and more violent.
It is agreed upon that Chinnamastā has genealogical ties to Vajrayoginī from the Buddhist pantheon (Bernard 1994, English 2002, and Sanderson 2009). Thus, when we examine these images in relation to Vajrayoginī and Chinnamunḍā, the disparity between perceptions of nudity and sexuality become strikingly obvious. Chinnamunḍā is an emanation of Vajrayoginī, who is not always headless. What is common between them is not headlessness, but their nudity, exposed vulva, and affiliation with yab-yum, or maithuna. In the case of both goddesses, the concept of yab-yum is not shown, but implied since Vajrayoginī is a consort of the Buddhist deity Heruka, with whom she is in an eternal sexual embrace. In this original context, the portrayal of sexuality is linked to the theological and cosmological principles of Buddhist-Tantra, where yab-yum is a symbol for the union between wisdom (female) and compassion (male). Iconographies and statues of yab-yum are not artistic per se, in that they are not primarily valued for their aesthetic qualities and are, therefore, not intended to arouse the viewer in any such way as were certain Kangra court paintings.

These Buddhist images, incidentally, do not put the locus of attention on violence, but on the form and function of masculine and feminine energies as a metaphor for the resolution of duality. Additionally, since the images, while fierce and sexual, are not necessarily violent or erotic; they do not draw the same analogies between fierceness and violence, or sexuality and bawdiness as is the case in other renderings. In the context of Vajrayāna, ferocity can exist as an emotional and embodied state that does instigate or imply violent action, and sexuality can remain as a metaphor for integration without denoting a physical or psychological obsession with the act of copulation.

Sanitizing the depiction of sex in Chinnamastā's icon (an action motivated by preconceptions and moral judgments about sexuality) contributes to the pervasive notion that

113 Bhattacharya, Buddhist Iconography, 247-48.
sexuality, particularly female sexuality, is amoral or lustful and any depictions of it are therefore solicitous and meant to arouse the viewer. This makes such images metaphors—not of sex—but of desire and attachment, which are seen as detriments to the aims of Tantra and Buddhism. This is an example of how metonymy can work to move the image outside the fray of its original intended meaning. Also, by concealing the *yonī* and the sexual union of Rati and Kāma, the image inadvertently becomes more about violence and blood lust than about the themes of *maithuna*. This means that Chinnamastā's stance becomes a ferocious, violent one, rather than a stance that is protective and assertive. She becomes threatening rather than life-preserving and self-sacrificing. She becomes a goddess of maelstrom, rather than a goddess of radical beneficence.

Alternately, both Śākta and Tantra do not enjoin ascetic or puritanical notions of sexuality. Rather, sex is seen as the creative force behind embodied existence, which is the microcosmic reflection of the transcendent. From this perspective the images are suggestive of the power that undergirds reality and act as metonyms for the dynamic interaction of dichotomous pairings of cosmic forces in the universe, represented by *yab-yum*, Śiva-Śakti, and the *lingam* and *yonī*. Since Śāktism understands human sex (both symbolic and literal) as a mirror of the divine impulse of creation, it follows that rituals in both Śākta and Tantra engage sexuality either in a metaphoric sense through the internalized ritual act of *nyasa* (the placement of hand gestures on corresponding parts of the body) or through the exterior ritual of literal *maithuna* (sexual intercourse between a man and woman). This is most clearly represented in Chinnamastā's iconography in the image of Rati and Kāma. There are several subthemes that emerge through the frame of their precarious position beneath Chinnamastā's feet.
The story of Rati and Kāma exists within the larger mythology of Śiva and Parvatī, and the viewer is thus presented with another oblique reference to Śaivism. Rati is the goddess of love, particularly the kind of love and enjoyment that is connected to sex, and her consort is Kāma, the god of desire. The divine couple therefore represents the sex, love and enjoyment that is understood as a natural part of human life. Kāma is also the god of the springtime, responsible for the arousal of the desire to procreate and resuscitate life following the winter.

In Śaiva mythology, Kāma is charged with helping the gods save the world from the demon Taraka. It is prophesied that only Śiva's progeny can defeat Taraka, but being an ascetic, Śiva is unlikely to have children unless provoked on a grand scale. The gods charge Kāma, who is akin to cupid, with the task of inflicting lustful desire upon the heart of Śiva. Kāma attempts to disturb Śiva's meditation by compelling him with all the fecundity of spring. But to no avail, Śiva, in a holy ire, opens his third eye and consumes the body of Kāma with his fiery gaze. It is at this point that Parvatī is sent to seduce Śiva away from his asceticism in order to conceive a son powerful enough to save the universe.

This myth acknowledges the necessity of generative creativity through corporeal and symbolic sexuality. This necessity and fact of life is often glossed in metaphors of the springtime—flowers, fruits, and birds. An uncensored and Śākta-Tantra view of this process, however, also sees the death and disintegration of winter that precedes the spring—the cold, long nights and barren trees that feed the soil with the humus needed for new growth the following season. Reading Chinnamastā's image with this in mind suggests that Rati and Kāma represent the divine interlocutors of sexual renewal and fruitfulness. This takes desire out of the Brahminical milieu that valorizes the denial of sexual impulses and vilifies human sensuality—a view aptly portrayed in the story of Reṇukā and her son, Paraśurāma.
The myth of Reṇukā must also be revisited in relation to the topic of divine representations of sexuality, since her story is the inverse of Chinnamastā's and adds insights to certain parallels between stories. Reṇukā is aroused by watching King Citraratha frolicking with his wife.\(^{114}\) It is significant to note that Citraratha is a *gandharva* (heavenly musician) and his wife is an *apsaras* (celestial dancer). Their play arouses Reṇukā, and it is because of her perceived loss of control that she is deemed unchaste and punished (beheaded). Since chastity is the source of her power, she accordingly loses her ability to harness the water for her husband's *pūjā*, which alerts him of her indiscretion.

Chinnamastā's myth, on the other hand, does not cite presence of a *gandharva* or otherwise, but it does make note of her becoming "wet in the water," much like Reṇukā. Her *dhyāna* incorporates Rati and Kāma in a loving embrace as an indirect reference to Chinnamastā's rousing thoughts. Yet, the Śākta myth sees Chinnamastā's impulse as one that is power-giving, instead of power-depleting. She absorbs the base feeling of sexual desire, harnesses it, rather that letting it harness her, and uses it to feed Dākinī and Varṇīṇī. This process is conveyed by the fact that she turns dark, indicative of *tamas-guṇa*, the power of Kālī, and the darkness of Parvatī. Here the arousal of the woman is expressed in a highly positive light. It can be construed that female arousal is in fact a necessary prerequisite for the nourishment and perpetuation of both physical and spiritual life.

This idea is emphasized by the *viparita-rati* position assumed by the goddess of love and her consort, the god of desire. It is suggested that with the woman on top, sexual custom is overturned, as it were, and the feminine is given prominence as the active cosmological force. This is an idea that is understood within the mythology of Śiva and Parvatī, since it is she who

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must arouse him from his latent state in order to fulfill his destiny as creator of the world. This very same idea initiates the Śākta text, the Saundaryalāhārī, which states:

Śivah Śaktya yukto yadi bhavati Śaktah prabhavitum
Na ced-evam devo na khalu kuśalāḥ spanditumapi |

If Śiva is united with his Śakti, then he is able to create.
If not, then the God is not even able to stir.

—Saundaryalahārī, verse 1

More literally, the images of sexuality in part refer to maithuna, the fifth makāra (Tantric ritual), where Śiva unites with Śakti in sexual union. The Tantrasāra and the Mantramahodadhi mention maithuna. The Tantrasāra makes explicit reference to literal copulation (ejaculation) during Tantric sādhana, while the Mantramahodadhi's explanation of Chinnamastā's sādhana implies that the act might be symbolic. It states that

*He shall fetch a beautiful young woman for being adored as the representative of Chinnamastā. She must be in the prime of her youth and virile enough to satisfy five men. She must be kept in good humor with gifts and ornaments. She must be kept smiling continuously, keeping her hair loose and disheveled. She must be adored in fully naked form...Oblation is offered and at the close of the Night the woman is sent away fully delighted with monetary gifts...He shall observe vows and restraints on that night if he is desirous in attaining learning.*

It is probable that literal ritual sex, however, is not a requirement since several texts, including the Mantramahodadhi, warn that only particularly heroic aspirants should attempt literal maithuna.

Like the images of Chinnamastā, Śākta-Tantra rituals are forms of symbolic discourse that are intended to evoke, through their enactment, the same kinds of sentiments noted in the texts and stories of the goddess. Śākta-Tantra rituals serve a variety of aims, all of which exists

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115 Saundaryalahārī, 1, my translation.
117 Mantramahodadhi, 110-11.
118 Kinsley, "Corpses, Severed Heads, and Sex", 156.
under the awning of sacred embodiment. These aims can then be spiritual and transcendental on one end, or they can be for material prosperity and social influence on the other. Regardless of the individual's goal in performance of the ritual, its efficacy depends on the participant's acknowledgement of and ability to interact with the laws of Tantric power in the universe. This ability is contingent upon the generation of specific emotional sentiments that are noted in the ritual texts.

In this vein, worship of Chinnamastā and the Mahāvidyās appears to exist at the confluence of Tantric and Śākta sādhana. In the former sense, Mahāvidyā rituals intend to bring about pure, unmediated experience, which is one reason for the emphasis upon fearful, sexual imagery. In the latter sense, Śākta veneration of the goddess is akin to bhakti's priority on intensity of feeling and emotion. When Tantra and Śākta converge, the ritual meditations upon goddesses such as Chinnamastā use graphic imagery of sex and death, in part, to bring about an intensely emotional experience for the devotee. These experiences must be so in order to bring about the kind of catharsis that is transformative in nature.

*Heads, Headlessness & Blood*

Dance, when you're broken open.  
Dance, if you've torn the bandage off.  
Dance in the middle of the fighting.  
Dance in your blood.  
Dance when you're perfectly free.  
—Rumi

Calling attention to Chinnamastā's sexual aspects, however, should not detract from the most compelling attribute of her icon—the beheading and her headlessness. Each of her dhyāna whether of Buddhist or Hindu origin stresses the importance of visualizing her severed head.
Several scholars, such as Bernard, Kinsley, and Sridhar have all given exhaustive reasons for its meaning and importance. So as to avoid reiterating their research, my intent is to incorporate their interpretations of headlessness within the visual hermeneutical methods of both Arnheim and Timalsina. This entails briefly looking at Chinnamastā's headlessness singularly before looking at it in relationship to the rest of the iconography in order to come to a comprehensive interpretation of not only headlessness, but headlessness conjoined sexuality within the Mahāvidyā tradition.

Beheading is such a common trope in Indian religious literature and mythologies that it is nearly impossible to summarize literary references to it into a few a short paragraphs. In lieu of giving an exhaustive account of decapitation tales, a few accounts of that are similar to Chinnamastā’s must suffice. Why and how these heads are cut off varies drastically between Chinnamastā’s story and Reṇukā’s, but the meaning of the head must be relatively consistent for the metaphors to retain their meaning throughout the many stories than employ decapitation.

First, as cited earlier, is the story of Reṇukā in the Mahābhārata, second is Somadeva’s account of transposed heads in the Kathā Sarit Sāgara, of which there have been many cultural adaptations. Here is Tawney’s translation of Somadeva in Ocean of Story:

A Brahman’s wife goes to fetch water from the Ganges. There she sees a vision of a beautiful youth who follows her. Nevertheless she tries to fill her pitcher, but is unable to do so as the water continually flows away. Frightened, she returns home with her pitcher still empty. Her husband grows suspicious and, dragging her to the place of public execution, kills her with his sword. The son sees the sword dripping with blood, and on hearing the truth expresses his desire to follow her. The father prevents him, saying that if he puts the body and head together she will return to life. The son hastens to the spot where his mother has been killed and, in his hurry to achieve his object, puts her head by mistake on the trunk of a female criminal, that was lying on the same place. The mother rises to life, but reproaches the son for his hasty action, at the same time pointing out it is by the workings of Brahmā.119

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119 Tawney/Penzer 1926 (6): 276-277
In an alternate South-Indian telling of the story, where Reṇukā is venerated collectively as Mariamma and Yellamma, her head is transposed with a prostitute and their identities are crossed. Arun Jaganatha retells the South Indian tale:

Jamadagni ordered Paraśurāma to take her to the forest and cut her head. On the way Reṇukā saw an outcaste woman passing nearby. She... [in order to protect] Reṇukā, helped her. Paraśurāma tried to separate them but was unable to do so. Paraśurāma gave a severe blow with his axe to cut his mother’s head but due to strength, both of the women’s head got cut. After that he straightly went to Jamadagni and because of gladness he asked Paraśurāma to ask a boon. Paraśurāma asked the renewal of his mother’s life. Jamadagni gave him some water to him and said that when the head was fixed to the body of the dead one, should sprinkle that water to the head and so Reṇukā will rejuvenate. Paraśurāma reached near his mother’s corpse and in hurry he joined the heads wrongly i.e. his mother’s head onto body of that other woman and the other woman’s head onto body of his mother. They both got rejuvenated. When this news reached the people around the area, due to surprise, all of them started worshipping those women as goddesses. The one with the head of Reṇukā was named as Mariamma and other one came to be known as Yellamma.120

When reading these stories and viewing their subsequent imagistic renderings, there are several basic questions that come up, the most basic of which is “What is the meaning or purpose of a head?” The head, severing as a signifier within these tales and their associated images, has a specific sign-function, which gives rise to a meaning, which then validates the purpose of decapitation.

The function of the head is rather clear in these stories. The head, as the vessel of the mind, is the thing that gets the body into all kinds of trouble. From this very general statement, it is clear that it is not the mind itself but the manner in which it functions that is responsible for the perceived offense. Bernard, Doniger and Kinsley maintain that the head itself is often understood as both the literal and symbolic locus of personal identity, which therefore implies that the mind or intellect, rather than the body, is paramount to one's sense of self. This is best conveyed through Descartes’s oft quoted phrase, “I think, therefore I am”. This idea is confirmed in the story of Reṇukā. When Paraśurāma beseeches his father to lessen his mother's punishment by reinstating her head and freeing her from any memory of the actions that had transpired, he is

asking for her for an absolution of her “sins” which were located in her thoughts and not in her body (she did not act upon her impulses). Who Reṇukā is as an individual is redeemed once her memory has been eradicated.

Chinnamastā, however, does not completely adhere to this template. She, unlike Reṇukā, is not being executed. Rather, she takes her own life at the behest of her attendants, who are hungry. Further, she reinstates her own head and suffers no amnesia after the bloody episode. The only notable negative outcome is Chinnamastā's resulting pallor from the blood loss, which angers Šiva. The idea of transformation between the stories is nonetheless consistent, but only insofar as it concerns the names of Parvatī and Šiva, which change to Chinnamastā and Krodha Bhairava (angry Šiva). It is likely that the change in name of the goddess and Šiva are an attempt to absorb Chinnamastā into the overarching theologies of both the Mahāvidyās and Śaivism.

Here the concept of “self” takes a different turn. In the previous stories, the self is constrained and modified by the kinds of thoughts that are produced by the mind. It is the stopping of thoughts (decapitation) that leads to the liberation of self (i.e. the loss of memory). A psychoanalytic reading of these stories supports this interpretation through the notion of the
repressed traumatic memory, in which the repression functions to superficially “free” the victim from re-experiencing the distressing event within their mind, thus dissociating the individual from the traumatized ‘self.’ Chinnamastā, on the contrary, is not plagued by the contents of her mind. Her thoughts merely occupy her, after which she is able to hear the pleas of her attendants. Since, her identity is not located in the mind or intellect, it follows that any act of decapitation would not cause and end to her life or sense of individual self. Knowing this, she willingly and unhesitatingly cuts off her own head to fulfill the purpose of feeding her friends.

A look at Chinnamastā's iconography helps to understand the purpose of heads and beheading with Śāktism, and how this view differs from the one presented by Reṇukā. The heads and their removal are exhibited in the stories and the icons of Chinnamastā as containers and symbols of power. This power can be understood from a metaphoric perspective as varnamālā, strung together as mantra, or as occupying the location between viśuddha and sahasrāra cakras (the latter, being the abode of Śiva, where the divine union between Śiva and Śakti occurs). It can also be understood as the literal blood offerings of goats and chickens made to the goddess as Mahāvidyā Temples like Kamākhya and Rajrappa.

This 19th century woodblock print from Calcutta (figure 4.15) is a typical, though not strictly paradigmatic rendering of Chinnamastā that is replete with severed heads.121 In addition to the basic, essential headless goddess, all three goddesses wear head mālās, and Dākinī and Varnini both hold the cut heads of two unidentified men. In addition, each goddess holds a scimitar, and it appears that Chinnamastā's head is being cradled in a skull cup.

121 Lāl, Representation of: Chinnamastā, Calcutta.
This contemporary rendering of Chinnamastā (figure 4.16) is a more paradigmatically accurate portrayal of her collective texts—from her stance, to the graphic display of the yonī, the maithuna of Rati and Kāma, the solar disc, and the presence of the river. Unlike, the previous image the artist has taken no liberties with the addition of heads, but has clearly included skull cups in each of the goddess’s hands. These symbols are relatively straightforward, yet the beheading is still perplexing as it is juxtaposed against the backdrop of springtime love between Rati and Kāma, flowering lotuses, and the brightness of day. This counters regular associations of decapitation with the graveyard, skeletons, and the darkness of night. Both images, with extra heads or with skull cups, show that beheading in the Mahāvidyā tradition is not punishment, but a form of sacrifice. And, like all sacrifice, what is important in its ritual implementation is not only the offering or the act itself, but the intended outcome.

What is striking about her image, perhaps more so than the proliferation of severed heads, as in the Bengali print, is the distinct streams of blood. The outcome of Chinnamastā’s beheading is the stimulation of blood flow. To this end, the same basic semiotic question posed about heads must be applied to blood: what does blood do? What is its essential function? Blood in a
sacrificial setting obviously serves many purposes, but its most basic essential function is as a carrier of nutrients and hormones, which nourish the body (and therefore life), and carrier of waste, which is filtered through the liver and excreted as bile. Blood’s biological and physiological functions are, not surprisingly, very amenable to the Tantric concept of nāḍī—the “movers” of energy.

Generally speaking, blood is thought of as an impure substance in India. By her association with blood, a menstruating woman is also regarded as impure. The Āṅgirasasmrṭi states that a woman is as impure as a caṇḍāla (outcaste) during the first day of her menses and is only considered clean again once she has bathed on the fourth day. Such strong negative associations with blood should be juxtaposed against the significance and importance of blood in Śākta-Tantra. Blood in this context in understood in relationship to the elements or signs that undergird Śākta cosmology—namely, the goddess, (devī), creativity and creation (śakti), and maternity or motherhood. Menstrual blood is indicative of a woman’s fecundity, and it is this fecundity that renders all women natural containers of Śakti. From this purview, blood is not polluting, but nourishing and life giving, which is why it is the sacrifice par excellence to the goddess.

As a sacrifice, blood signifies more than just corporeal existence. It signifies life (jiva), which is viewed as existing within the body as a gross manifestation (Sthūla sarira), within subtle reincarnated bodies (Śuṣma sarira), and the causal body that gives rise to both the gross and subtle bodies (Karana sarira). Within the stories and images of Chinnamastā, what she offers through her own self-sacrifice is life to her devotees. She acts as the sacrifice, sacrificer,

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and the boon simultaneously and thus presents herself as a complete model of worship for the devotee.

By linking concepts of self and identity as they are signified by the head with notions of life as signified by blood, an altogether different meaning of sacrifice is communicated to the viewer. Since she takes her own head, identity and self are synonymous with the concept of agency. In the previous stories of beheading, the one being decapitated (women, on all accounts) has no sense of personal agency, and her life ends and begins again at the behest of her keepers (men, on all accounts). Gender distinctions aside, in Chinnamastā’s mythology it is clearly the self that is being sacrificed (rather than the other), and it is the self and others that are nourished through the act. This nourishment comes in the form of the perpetuity of life. Further, her sacrifice is not punitive in nature; it is rather an act of ultimate beneficence.

On a much more mundane level these visual and mythic images maintain the Śākta practice of sacrifice to the goddess. Kinsley has cited several myths in which heads are offered to the goddess as expressions of devotional fervor, or as way to acknowledge the goddess's supreme power. These stories, as well as Chinnamastā's reiterate visual and mythological themes of both Kālī and Tārā, who are often shown with skulls and decapitated heads. Chinnamastā as the Mahādevī can be considered a creator deity, and as a creator of life her image must include death and the constraints of time. The dichotomous pairing of life and death is often commemorated in sacrificial rites associated with fertility. Often a blood or fluid sacrifice is offered to the gods in order to preserve the universe. Prajāpati, the creator of universe is noted as fearing death in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa:

> Having created all existing things, he felt like one emptied out, and was afraid of death...Hence the gods built up Prajāpati and gave him the shape of the fire altar.\(^{124}\)

\(^{124}\)Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, cited in Kramish, The Presence of Śiva, 268-69.
Stella Kramish notes in the *Presence of Śiva* that

\[ \text{Prajāpati was afraid of death, which he carried within him and into creation, for without death the year would have no form; not dying, it would have no end, no time to die in. Time pervaded the work of the creator and himself at work. It held sway over him.} \]

This gives credence to sacrifice, especially the fire sacrifice, which must be performed to maintain cosmic order.

Yet, a different relationship with time and death is illustrated in the overarching cosmology of the Mahāvidyās, and Chinnamastā as an icon, perhaps more so than the rest, reigns over the constraints of time and death. This is explicated quite beautifully in the *Prāṇatośinī-tantra*, which refers to the beheading and drinking of blood as *līlā*, or divine play of the goddess. In this context, conception, life, death and regeneration are all the delightful amusements of Mahāmaya, who as Chinnamastā, *smiles* as she hears the cries of her attendants right before she severs her own head.

The myths and meditations also note that her beheading at no time is ensued by her demise. Mahidhara notes Chinnamastā as being very “pleased” while witnessing her attendants partaking in her blood, and the *Śāktapramoda* states three times that the goddess “drinks joyfully” (*pibanti mūdā*). Not only is Chinnamastā cogent and aware of what is happening, she is happy about it. Most all of her icons demonstrate the embodiment of *līlā*, and it is perhaps this very aspect which acts as the abnormality in the image. A spectacle that would otherwise result in death is presented in a manner altogether incongruous to the act itself—she stands—and in some cases, she dances—with eyes open and a smile on her bloody lips. This implies that this is not a religion of somber adherence to *dharma*, nor is it one that prides itself on stoic presentations of ascetic discipline. Rather, the message seems to be that all manner of life and death are sacred in the eyes of the great goddess.

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125 Kramish, 269.
This reading sheds light on the practice of blood sacrifices at both the Rajrappa Temple in West Bengal and the Bhagwati Temple in the Saptari district of Nepal. Rajrappa, a Mahāvidyā temple, serves an adivasi (tribal) population as well as pilgrims, which total over a thousand visitors per day. The temple priests slaughter an approximate 50 to 100 goats per day to the goddess. The Bhagwati Temple has been under scrutiny for its exorbitant execution of well over 1,000 goats, sheep, and buffalo during the Durgā celebration of Dashain. Mahalakshmi says that the locals consider goat flesh to be the mahaprasada, and pay a higher price for such sacrifices. It is likely that animal sacrifice serves an economic purpose since priests are paid more for them, as are those willing to sell goats to visiting pilgrims.

It is unlikely that the adivasi population is familiar with the details of Sanskrit literature concerning the Mahāvidyās, and according to Mahalakshmi's research, they are Śākta, but do not engage a critical Tantric view of Chinnamastā. Thus their worship is one that maintains elements of ritual-based Śāktism, and to a small degree bhakti devotion. Indeed, a direct reading of the icon itself does not suggest the sacrifice of others, animal or human. The theme is one that is markedly self-sacrificial in nature. Being that Chinnamastā drinks her own blood, no doubt to preserve her own life as she nourishes the lives of others, the image connotes that through selfless action, one sustains their own life. By quite literally taking her life into her own hands, Chinnamastā exhibits radical agency over herself and the lives of her attendants.

*The Integration of Sex and Death*

Chinnamastā is not the only deity to juxtapose sexuality and death her image. Kālī displays both, and the Mahāvidyās as a group illustrate both themes interchangeably. The rituals

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126 Haviland, “Revulsion over Nepal Animal Slaughter.”
of Tārā in the *Mantramahodadhi* fuse together these two things to dramatic effect in forms of śavasādhana (corpse ritual). Tārā's *Taranga* states that:

> The sādhaka who seeks lordship should sit naked on the heart of a corpse in a cremation ground and offer the goddess a thousand flowers, each covered with his semen, while reciting her mantra.127

However, even if an aspirant does not engage the literal practice of meditation on corpses and *maithuna*, even a purely internal visualization of sex and death can be both powerful and highly disconcerting. So why then have both these images been fused together in Chinnamastā's images and meditations? Kinsley has aptly stated that such images are meant to provoke the aspirant into the pure and unmediated kind of experience that is paramount in Tantric sādhana. It is the overwhelming quality of these experiences that bring about transformation.

Yet, it may be useful to approach the combination of sex and death from a different perspective, which can be best introduced with the French expression for orgasm, *petite mort*, or “little death”. In the context of the Mahāvidyās, and specifically Chinnamastā, the goddess asks the viewer: What dies, and what lives through the actions portrayed in the image? As discussed earlier, something of the self is being sacrificed in order for something else to flourish. In a purely biological sense, both men and women “lose” something during the act of copulation when they come together to create new life—a man loses his semen, and a woman loses her blood (menstruation) for 9 months during gestation. Metaphorically speaking, the moment of orgasm is commonly experienced as a momentary loss of individual awareness, which supports Kinsley's statements above. Orgasm also requires a letting-go of the mundane thoughts which one is normally preoccupied with—thoughts that generally form conceptions of an individual self.

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Viewing sex and death together as a whole adds an essential layer of interpretation to Chinnamastā's image. What is being somewhat violently sacrificed is informed by the sexually charged content below the scene of decapitation. Sex and death together in the image tells the viewer that individualistic ideas of self to which one is attached can be transmuted and overcome through the skillful engagement of earthly impulses (prakṛti), which are aspects of the Mahādevī. However, the engagement of prakṛti in this sense does not result in a loss of consciousness, since Chinnamastā's story tells of her ability to see and hear her attendants despite her arousal. Unlike most, she is able to exist and function in the midst of the kinds of experiences that typically render one unconscious—either literally, in the case of death, or metaphorically, in the case of sexual arousal. She is able to harness the power of both experiences and is thusly capable of offering her own life blood to nourish others and herself. It is likely that, according to this reading, the life that is being generated and sustained is indicative of the supreme goal of Tantra, which is jīvanmukti—liberated consciousness in the world, rather than apart from it.
Chapter 5: Contemporary Iterations

Śākta-Tantra is first and foremost rooted in praxis; all of the signs, symbols, and metaphors found in the literature and images of the goddess converge within the realm of sādhana—ritual observances that at the very least deal with the recitation of sounds and the visualization and animation of mental images. As such, in order to maintain congruity with the theme of "how images (both literary and visual) mean" in the scope of sādhana and the theology that undergirds Śāktism, it is important to understand how and why these signs and symbols of the fierce goddess incite the contemporary viewer into action.

In this closing chapter, I return to the question I asked at the very beginning of this critical and self-reflexive analysis of the headless goddess, Chinnamastā: how and why particular forms of the divine that inspire fear and awe necessary and important, and how do such forms maintain relevance and meaning in new generational and cultural contexts? In essence, this is a personal quest just as much as it is an academic one. Why have I carried this curiously off-putting goddess in my mind for more than a decade? How does she reach across space and time and communicate to a non-Indian, secular person such as myself? Answering these questions requires the ability and willingness to critically contemplate Chinnamastā long enough and in such as way so as to extract her essential characteristics and view them in both their original contexts and new ones, including secular post-modernity.

By bringing the goddess Chinnamastā into a "secular" milieu, it is necessary to redefine secularism, which is commonly understood as the slow decline of religion since The Enlightenment. Max Weber referred to this as the "disenchantment of the world," which according to semiotician Robert Yelle entails, "the loss of faith in mythological narratives and
the efficacy of ritual practices. However, the prevalence and popularity of the goddess of Tantra in today's world suggests that perhaps secularism should be framed another way. Yelle offers an alternative definition of secularism, which he states can be "more accurately…described as the replacement of one sort of religious cosmology by another." This new cosmology is evident in Neo-Tantric movements, Śākta-Tantra revivalist movements in diaspora, and even in pop-culture films, television shows, and multimedia projects such as Priya's Shakti, which aims to "illuminate attitudes towards gender-based violence" (figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Priya's Shakti

129 Ibid, 93-94.
130 Devineni, “About.”
What, then, is the new cosmology of Śākta-Tantra in "secular" post-modernity? What must be examined in light of Śāktism in post-modernity is that "religion" has primarily been framed according to an exclusivist, monotheistic worldview that does not entertain the notion of diversity. Because Śāktism is fundamentally pluralist in nature, the question of a new postmodern Śākta cosmology is a moot one. If we revisit the general definitions of śakti, Śākta, and Tantra that were given in chapter one, what we will find are theologies that are very amenable to post-modern theories that understand knowledge and truth to be context dependent, and that such contextual knowledge can also be non-rational and self-referential.

This point is evident in the range of relationships and interpretations of the fierce devī within postmodernity, which extend from classical Śākta-Tantric modalities of bhakti worship, to hybrid styles of Śāktism fused with elements of Buddhist and Hindu Tantra, to views of the goddess within the realm of contemporary art. Finding evidence of Chinnamastā in modernity was not difficult, but locating devotees of the goddess willing to discuss their experiences was a challenge.

I was only able to talk with three people regarding Śākta-Tantra worship of the Mahāvidyās—Kulavadhuta Satpurananda, a Tantric guru referred to as Babaji, and Jessica and Neela who are Babaji's students. All three see the goddess as being both real and symbolic. However, the "realness" of the goddess deserves some qualification, since the way in which they relate to the goddess differs from the adivasi relationships with the goddess at Rajrappa Temple. Her 'reality' is verified through the internal, embodied experiences of both Neela and Jessica. The goddess has not shown herself to them (not that I know of, anyway) as an apparition or heirophany, whereas in Rajrappa, goddess-sighting stories abound.
In a non-religious context, the goddess has also become quite popular as the subject of several contemporary artists. As can be expected these "relationships" with the goddess are devoid of any kind of devotional sentiments. The goddess is understood in these circumstances primarily in association with the artist's own inner world of thoughts, emotions, and memories. In all cases, since the artist is South Asian, their preexisting knowledge of the goddess, devotional art, and Śākta themes is evident in the way in which the art is rendered and explained.

I have located two artists who relate to the fierce goddess differently. Rajni Perera, originally from Sri Lanka, is a Canadian conceptual artist who has taken the religious motifs and artistic conventions of Rajput paintings and adapted them in order to critique late-capitalist and post-colonial influences on South Asia. Anish Kapoor, a renowned non-conceptual sculptor, whose work has been installed at Versailles, Chicago's Millennium Park, and The Rockefeller Center, is influenced by the theologies and material culture of Śākta devotionalism, which he uses to convey what he calls a phenomenological relationship to timeless themes [need to check that interview]. Curiously, it is within this contemporary milieu where Chinnamastā returns to the Mother river of the Mahādevī who is tangible, yet formless, and full, yet empty of any single definition, and therefore open into myriad interpretations.
Rage in blood hot fury,
Trampling over the cupid couple
Locked in opposition on the Eros-lotus,
Holding Her self-sacrificed head
High in Her left hand,
The analytical chopper in the right,
The yoga-serpent-beauty-sash
Hanging along her shoulder left,
She stands in opposition,
Drinking in glory Her own blood stream
Sharing with the two damsels left and right,
Chhinnamasta, the Self-suicidal revolution!

—Kulavadhuta Satpurananda

Kulavadhuta Satpurananda is a Northern Indian guru based in Gangtok, Sikkim in Northern India near the Himalayas (figure 5.1). He was born in Calcutta in 1961 and was initiated as an aghori at a very young age and lived in Tarapith, on the grounds of the Tārā temple in West Bengal between the ages of ten and eighteen. At eighteen he was declared a lineage holder by his teacher, Vamakhyapa of Tarapith and received the name Kashyababa, or "mad father." He wandered from place to place for the next decade, studying with various people until he was 28 years old, when he received the title Avadhuta by Baul master Swanubhawadeva. The following year, he received the title of baul cūḍāmaṇi (living jewel of the Bauls) by the same teacher during the Jayadeva Baul mela.

He currently identifies himself as a lineage holder of the Vajracharya school of Tantra, which he says teaches a method called Vajrayāna Sahajayāna. I was not familiar with this particular school, but after some correspondence with Babaji, this method seemed somewhat nonsectarian and a syncretic blend of Indian and Buddhist Tantra. His relationship to "religion" is somewhat difficult to pin down and rather amorphous. Despite his many teachers over the
years, he is still a devotee of Tārā and teaches students to work with the symbols and images of the Śākta-Tantra goddesses—the Mahāvidyās.

Babaji occupies the gap between traditional Tantric modes of teaching and tutelage, and exposure to the broader world via the Internet and global travel. He has both Western and Indian devotees and offers his teachings free of charge to anyone who visits him. He speaks English, and on occasion his students invite him to teach abroad in Europe, Australia, Asia, and North America. Babaji also speaks at conferences on Indic religions as a representative of Tantric religion.

I am not sure how I was first introduced to Kulavadhuta Satpurananda. Regardless, thanks to social media, a few friends of mine were able to facilitate a formal introduction, and over the last year and a half we were able to communicate via email and instant message.

Though he writes poetry and lyrics (often to the goddess), Babaji does not write trade books or blogs, nor does he post weblogs like other contemporary Tantric teachers who have received international notoriety, like Jaggi Vasudeva, otherwise known as "Sadguru". Most of Babaji's teachings are oral and it seems that he prefers to keep it this way. Our conversations came to a

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131 He has written one book in Bengali, titled CHARYAGITIMALA, which is a collection of Milarepa's songs translated into Bengali.
halt at a certain point, when he said "If you want to know more, you can come visit me in India—there is too much to talk about on email." However, he was able to send me a word document of poems written to each of the Mahāvidyās and a brief write up on his lineage and perceptions of the Mahādevī, which he gives to Western students when he travels abroad.

There is an obvious limitation on this research since I was unable to visit Babaji and therefore was not able to ascertain exactly how many students he had and the general conditions of studying in Sikkim. I was only able to piece together an idea of his extended kula (school) through discussions with his two students, Jessica and Neela. Babaji has students and devotees who visit and stay with him in his home in Gangtok frequently, and there are others of his linage who teach throughout India. One of his students, Kumar, has attracted a large following of Western yoga students in Mysore, India—some of whom, like Jessica and her husband, have taken the initiative to travel north to see Babaji.

Of course, not all those who seek Babaji out are formally initiated into the kula. Jessica and her husband consider themselves students, but are not initiates. As such, Babaji has given them instructions on how to engage Tantric meditation, teachings on Tantric philosophy, but has not given them a mantra. Neela, on the other hand, received dikśa (initiation) from Babaji several years ago, at which time she received a mantra and a yantra. Jessica and Neela's relationship to the devī, which will be elaborated upon later, are somewhat different due to their very different cultural and personal histories.

According to Babaji, Tantra is a practical, cause and effect philosophy of life and practice. He does not use the term "religion" nor does he indicate Tantra to be the propriety of any particular religious group. He says that many religious groups—the Jains, Śaivas, and Buddhists—embody the wisdom of Tantra, therefore he sees no conflict between systems. He
conceives of the goddess, whom he refers to as Maya, as "nothingness which takes form as the trikāa," or trinity, which manifests as duality, non-duality, and qualified non-duality. His teachings fall within McDaniel's category of classical Śākta-Tantra, since he prescribes his students a mantra and instructs on the creation of yantra in relationship to a tutelary goddess, who is always, according to my understanding, one of the ten Mahāvidyās.

His view of the Mahāvidyās is two-fold: first, he notes that they represent the Tantric principles of practice in the form of ten chronological goddesses, Kālī being the beginning, and Kamalā the culmination; second, he states that the goddesses represent the ten temperaments of womanhood, which symbolize stages of understanding on the Tantric path. The ten temperaments of womanhood are: Kālī—arrogance, Tārā—motherhood, Tripura-Sundarī—desirability, Bhunanesvarī—domination, Bhairavi—temptation, Chinnamastā—suicidal tendencies, Bagalamukhī—craftiness, Dhumāvatī—silence, Mātaṅgī—enchantment, and Kamalā—beauty consciousness. He notes that goddesses are generally venerated in accordance with the various stages of one's sādhana.

In his poem to Chinnamastā, he refers to her as "the beheaded energy, representing the art of transmuting the physical identity to judgmental realization through the principle of Perception-less Perception." This statement does indeed follow the metaphoric references to maniṣṭhāra in Chinnamastā's dhyāna. Māṇiṣṭhāra, as noted in the previous chapter, governs assimilation and the movement of kūṇḍalinī sakti from subtle (pāra) to causal (paśyantī) awareness, where undifferentiated consciousness transforms into a subtle expression of the mind (manas).

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132 Kulavadhuta Satpurananda, personal correspondence, December 2015.
133 K. Satpurananda, Daśa-Mahāvidyās
134 Ibid.
The following stories of Jessica and Neela convey the individual manner in which Tantric teachings are disseminated and understood, even when two students have the same teacher. Similarly, each woman has a relationship with one or more Mahāvidyās, whom they relate to in similar ways at times, and in other ways very differently. These relationships are infused with love and are highly self-referential. They both declined to comment on the role Babaji has played in their relationship with their goddesses, but they were more than generous in sharing their personal understanding and experience of her in their lives and within the scope of their individual sādhana.

Neela

_I could have never loved a god that I could not touch._

—Neela Bhattacharya Saxena

Neela Bhattacharya Saxena is a Bengali professor of literature and women's studies at Nassau University in New York. Similar to Babaji, she straddles two distinct cultures (Indian and American), and she approaches her study and veneration of the goddess from many different vantage points. She has written extensively on the goddess, particularly Kālī and Chinnamastā, from the perspective of an academic and a feminist, but mostly she writes through the lens of a Śākta devotee.

Neela's experiences growing up in India were not unique; her grandmother's _Iṣṭadevatā_ was Viṣṇu in his Nārāyaṇa form, and her father was a Kālī devotee. Her upbringing was defined by the worship of various gods and goddess and visits to the Kālī temple once a month. She notes that she "took religiosity for granted," and did not experience the goddess until she was in her teens. Kālī, she says, helped her to "come to terms with [her] newly emerging
womanhood." Though she does not identify herself as a bhakta she does say that Kālī bhava (emotional sentiment) has been a process of falling in love with a terrifying goddess. She says that Kālī has valorized her many experiences as a woman, such as childbirth and love, which are not always serene or benign. Through her own internal experiences, she came to adore the paper icons and images of Kālī, which became real to her insofar as they were symbols of her embodied reality as a woman.

Her link to Chinnamastā was also through her family. In her essay, "The Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā Chinnamastā," she recalls her uncle constructing a murti to Chinnamastā in his home, as well as an icon of Dhumāvatī, and the family's Tantric guru who oversaw the worship of the Mahāvidyās. However, her initial entree into Tantric sādhana with the Mahāvidyās did not occur until her early twenties in India when a series of turbulent visions and dreams threatened the bedrock of her sanity. It was not until many years later that Tantric sādhana, her guru (Babaji), and the Mahāvidyās helped her contextualize these occurrences as meaningful, transformative and life-affirming, rather than the irrational and chaotic symptoms of psychosis.

These experiences coupled with her own preexisting knowledge of Kālī and the fierce devī gave rise to a somewhat chronological movement through the Mahāvidyās, as Babaji has indicated in his treatise. Her process was organic and not prescribed by any guru or book; Neela simply followed what seemed to be a preponderance of thoughts, visions, and dreams of first Kālī, then Tārā, Tripura-Sundarī, and Chinnamastā. Likewise, her sādhana has been mostly self-

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135 Saxena, “Mystery, Wonder, and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā Chinnamastā: A Śākta Woman’s Reading,” 61–75.
136 Saxena, In the Beginning is Desire, 5.
137 Saxena, “Mystery, Wonder, and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā Chinnamastā: A Śākta Woman’s Reading,” 61.
directed, other than the mantra she was given by Babaji. It is comprised of visualizations of each of the goddesses in "chronological order," as it were.\textsuperscript{138}

In a private conversation she noted that the images that appear during deep meditation are not her creation. Even so, she does not equivocate or attribute these mental images to any particular god. In this state, she says that "the self completely vanishes, and the concept of god vanishes… and you experience emptiness." The images seem to arise out of nowhere, which, she admits, can bring about feelings of potential madness as one begins to shatter the boundaries between mental categories, such as the one that exists between "self" and "other." She says that her familiarity with the depth psychological concepts found in Carl Jung's autobiographical account of preternatural dreams and visions in The Red Book helped her understand what she terms the experience of "pregnant nothingness"\textsuperscript{139}. Jung theorized that the self is a composition of both light (seen/conscious) and shadow (unseen/unconscious) thoughts, characteristics, and drives. Neela used this model as a bridge between differentiated notions of self and other and the state of undifferentiated awareness that she first experienced intensely during her early twenties.

Her relationship with Chinnamastā is a facet of her overarching relationship with Kālī, which is again, a reflection and metonym for her relationship with her womanhood. Despite her familiarity with the tropes and textual tradition of Śākta-Tantra, Neela approached her relationship with Chinnamastā from a purely experiential vantage point, which was grounded in her body. She says that "the icon of Chinnamastā has great spiritual significance to a Śakti-worshipping woman like me, starkly revealing the non-duality of life and death where women's

\textsuperscript{138} Saxena, Neela, personal correspondence, January 2016.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
bodies, sexuality, and nurturing potentials can be honored as mysterious sources of ultimate liberation.”

When asked the question why or how the fierce devī is important or necessary for the aspirant, she responded that the choice is not a simple one. She said that:

*I think it is part of [our] evolutionary imperative; the reason you are studying her is not a coincidence—something in you wants to reveal herself to you. All the divinities have a microcosmic and macrocosmic significance, [and it is] my theory is that it is part of our evolutionary journey to awaken to our fullness. These goddesses help you on that journey.*

This statement implies that the form of the goddess is determined by one's relative stage in the process of Tantric practice, which then determines the forms (name, sound, mythology, and image) that will meet the aim or goal of each stage. In the case of Chinnamāstä, Neela understands her as a deity that is markedly feminine and speaks first and foremost to female aspirants. She says that when she looks at the image, she sees and experiences the totality of śakti within her own body, which is the microcosm of the mother principle. This point of view stands in opposition to the popular idea that the woman of Tantra is merely an object of veneration. Quite the contrary, from Neela's purview, Chinnamāstä's image shows woman as the goddess, guru, initiate and initiator. In this sense, the goddess represents and presents the entire spectrum of existence—birth, life, and dissolution—and it is this totality, which is both experienced literally and symbolically, that Neela aims to identify with as a Śākta-Tantra practitioner.

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140 Saxena, “Mystery, Wonder, and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā Chinnamāstä: A Śākta Woman’s Reading,” 67.

141 Saxena, Neela, Phone conversation, January 2016.
Jessica

Jessica is a Midwestern, American-born woman in her late thirties, who was a counselor and yoga teacher when she first met her then meditation teacher, Kumar, one of Babaji’s students, in Mysore, India in 2008. This was her first introduction to Indian Tantra, even though she had been practicing and teaching hatha yoga for well over 15 years. This experience radically shifted the manner in which she approached her study of yoga, and she began to visit Mysore yearly primarily to continue studying with Kumar. Though she continued her asana studies, her immersion into Tantra became her primary focus. In 2014, she and her now husband met Babaji, and became his students.

Prior to meeting Babaji, she had not felt a connection to any divine form. Her family is not religious, and she does not affiliate herself with any particular religion. In fact, she stated to me during our personal correspondence that she had "always shied away from the concept of spirituality of Godliness that had any resemblance to idol worship or worship of God as a form." Her initial curiosity in Hindu and Tibetan deities piqued when she began studying Tantra with Babaji. She says that the Hindu deities seemed more "human" to her than the models of Christian divinity she had been exposed to in the Midwest. The myths and icons of Hindu gods and goddesses expressed a wider spectrum of emotion and experience and were therefore easier to identify with.

Similar to Neela, Kālī came to Jessica in the midst of her meditation. She says that she started to experience śakti as the pulsation of her own body, and that the image of Kālī was
superimposed onto this pulsing, embodied experience. Just like her body's sensations ranged in intensity and subtlety, so too do her impressions of Kālī. She says that:

I started to feel Kali Ma as a representation of this Shakti energy in a way such that at times it felt as if She was there for me as a form for devotion with which I could identify personally (with her myriad of attributes both desirable and aversive) and also as a powerful spiritual guardian of sorts.\(^{142}\)

However, Kālī always exhibits herself within Jessica's consciousness as a fierce goddess. Even the times when Kālī "heard [her] prayers and calls for help," she answered with storm and fire. Jessica says that:

She will bring you face to face with your darkest reality. She will show you who you are and who you are capable of becoming, the good and the bad. After dealing with what I now consider to be an effect of the wrath of Kali Ma (a health issue and the near collapse of a relationship) I realize that She is real and powerful, fierce and accurate, and skilled beyond my wildest dreams at assisting devotees in their path toward spiritual awakening. Kali Ma, Shakti energy, and Mother consciousness is many things — loving and comforting as well as fierce and destructive.\(^{143}\)

Unlike Neela, Jessica had no theoretical box in which to place such experiences, and was thus left to define and interpret these experiences according to her own worldview, which is undoubtedly colored with her background in modern yoga, psychology, and the Tantric teachings of Kumar and Babaji. Though Jessica's lack of religious affiliation or familiarity with "idols" may seem like a barrier to the kind of unmediated experience so sought after in Tantra, it may have been of value. Jessica was perhaps better able to identify with Kālī as a goddess, since many of her ideas regarding goddess worship were self-created and not limited by religious or cultural mores.

Kālī continues to play a functional role in Jessica's spiritual life. Kālī gives form and value to the ambiguous landscape of emotion, and she offers a way in which to understand

\(^{142}\) Jessica, email correspondence, May 2015
\(^{143}\) Ibid.
difficult life experiences, such as ailing health and conflicted relationships. The fierceness of Kālī's form is important, since it reorients Jessica's relationship to adverse inner and outer circumstances so that they are seen as valid and necessary aspects of human life that are not to be ignored or suppressed.

Her experiences of śakti during her meditations have been physical, feminine, and sexual, but not erotic. She says:

*There is one specific meditation...that is intended to...channel...Shakti energy, directing it to my heart. In this specific meditation I am definitely focused on Shakti energy. The feeling that arises in me ...is definitely a powerfully feminine and sexual energy, though not sexual as in sexy. At times it does feel ‘erotic’... This powerful energy can certainly be used erotically but it also can be used spiritually and that is the true intention behind the use of this energy in Tantra. In my opinion and experience, any eroticism, which is a side effect of this energy, is only spiritually helpful if one is using it for expanded awareness... The dangers that can result from dabbling in this are far too great, and too vast to be described here. Tapping into this Shakti energy, through individual or couple’s meditation is a powerful source of inspiration that can I have found useful in my spiritual journey.*

She says that Tantra sādhana and experiencing Śakti has far surpassed any previous notions she may have had about the divine.

**Contemporary Renderings**

*Divine Light and Casting Shadows: New Interpretations of the Divine Feminine*

There is no one singular way to conceive of the fierce devī. She maintains meaning and appeal as an esoteric symbol of liberation and as living goddess that reigns over the earthly realm. Her significance shows no sign of lagging in South Asia, and as the lines between religions, cultures and people have become less defined, she has become more popular all over the world. An internet search for “Kāli” or “Chinnamastā” yields countless results, and almost

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144 Ibid.
half the images seen are interpretive renderings by contemporary artists. These artistic innovations exhibit a complex amalgamation of the many conceptions of the goddess over the last two millennia.

Contemporary representations of Chinnamastā and Kālī incorporate traditional themes with issues of cross-cultural appropriation, globalization, modern social issues, and post-modernity. These artists use the image of the goddess to make specific statements that are often not religious in nature. Rajni Perera, a Canadian South Asian artist re-interprets Chinnamastā in her body of work entitled *The New Ethnography* (figure 5.2). The headless goddess is clearly distinguishable as Chinnamastā, even though her name is not stated, since she is flanked by her two attendants who feed from the rainbow colored ribbon-like jet streams spewing from her neck. The multicolored blood, which mirrors the coloring of the copulating couple beneath the goddess, retains the basic metaphor of the transmutation of energy. The triangular pixels of color may be symbols of both the aniconic image of the yonī and digital media. The sexual overtones are subdued and what might be a
violent scene is rendered neat and tidy through the abstract use of color and geometric form. Therefore, it is possible that the energy passing through the devī is less corporeal and more conceptual, meant to convey the mass production and diffusion of cultural and religious ideas. This is affirmed in Perera’s artist statement, which says,

*I seek to open and reveal the dynamism of these icons, both scripturally existent, self-invented and externally defined. I am creating a subversive aesthetic that counteracts antiquated, oppressive discourse, and acts as a restorative force through which people can move outdated, repressive modes of being towards reclaiming their power.*

Though her conception of the goddess is far removed from a normative Śākta view of the goddess, Chinnamastā is still rendered as a vehicle and symbol of power. In this postmodern context, śakti is defined nominally as the potential power of people to challenge the status quo. Perera interprets the Tantric goddess as a symbol of the subversion of normative and proper culture and religion. She uses her images to make a statement about society, but also about pretentiousness in the contemporary art world. She says, "I really like the idea of subverting the look of the bourgeois."

Contrary to Perera’s depiction of Chinnamastā, Anish Kapoor’s sculptures of the goddess are non-conceptual portrayals of the devī that are visually reminiscent of the devī’s aniconic forms. Kapoor points to themes that address the human condition, such as life, death, fear, and the unknown, whereas Perera’s concept of the goddess is more preoccupied with the particularities of self, such as gender, race, ideology, and culture. Kapoor’s piece, *At the Hub of Things*, is a dark blue concave fiberglass hemisphere inspired by the Holi colors of India and the womb-like darkness he perceives as the essence of Kālī (figure 5.3). He says of his creation:

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The form of this sculpture suggests the hidden depths of the womb, as well as the burial mound. It thus evokes both life and death and speaks in terms of eternity and timelessness. Just as the fascination of the voice rests in the overwhelming power of the notions of fear, darkness, and the unknown, so too the power and enchantment of the goddess Kali is built on feared darkness, and an apprehension of eternity. Gazing into that deep blue void is a dizzying experience that both alarms and exhilarates. This fear and exhilaration are elements celebrated also in the deep blue goddess Kali.  

Yet, this abstract representation of the goddess is quite distinct from the aniconic stone 

*pindī* deities common in folk Śāktism, which are presentational objects in which the divine is manifest. Rather, the sculpture is representational and symbolic, and not understood as the *devī-*

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147 Kapoor, *At the Hub of Things.*
herself. It refers more to internal, psychological states, and is suggestive of a relationship with the divine that is primarily self-referential.

Both Perera and Kapoor use the goddess to break boundaries and redefine notions of gender, culture, and the arts. Even though the goddess is not construed as a religious symbol in these contemporary art rendering, she indeed maintains her inherent multiplicity and ability to not only break boundaries, but create and represent new categories of thought and culture.

Conclusion

Piecing together the few personal accounts, textual references to Chinnamastā that are both experiential and academic, it becomes clear why such an apprehending image is essential for the viewer. Each viewer and devotee had several motivations behind their identification with the fierce devī. At Rajrappa and Chintpurni, Chinnamastā is venerated as a temple goddess—local to the region. As a temple goddess, she functions in much the same way she might for any other temple deity in that her temple is a place of pilgrimage where people come for darśan and to offer sacrifices. Yet, each person determines their own reasons for coming to worship her, whether for an auspicious marriage, increased wealth, or longevity. In this Śākta-bhakti context, the gruesomeness of her form seems inconsequential. Rather it is her connection to the Mahādevī and her manifestation as Śakti in the form of the pindī, mūrti and water that is most important. Here, her form is a given, and she is as real as are the rocks and the river.

The ritual texts say that one should worship any one of the Mahāvidyās for specific outcomes, such as defeat of one's enemies, or intellectual and poetic acumen. The Mantramahodadhi uses Chinnamastā's visual and auditory forms as objects of contemplation that
are intended to be ritual expedients toward the attainment of specific goals that range from the material to the spiritual. However, several of the fierce goddess, like Tārā and Dhumāvatī, offer similar boons to their devotees.

Contemporary, western devotion to Chinnamastā and Kālī is largely self determined, sometimes following or during emotionally and physically transformative experiences. These experiences affirm and oftentimes require the necessity of a deity as *rajasic* as Chinnamastā. These powerful experiences must be framed according to an equally powerful spiritual model. The experiences described were not one-dimensional, but a kaleidoscope of feelings, sensations, and thoughts. One could say that these variegated impressions themselves can be viewed as manifestations of *śakti*.

I fear that at the end of this lengthy treatise on Chinnamastā, the answer to the question of why such an image is necessary is a rather obvious one—it is necessary insofar as each individual deems it to be. What has become most evident is that she is *not* fierce, as the title "Fiercely Devoted" might suggest. Through conversations with her devotees and a critical analysis of her texts and images, I have started to appreciate her in a different way; a way in which I believe is a more accurate to her innate diversity as a manifestation of Śakti. She is all things and all sentiments integrated into one very curious image that breaks all the boundaries of compartmentalized thought. It is because of this that she is not only an exemplary Mahāvidyā, but an exemplary form of the Mahādevī.

Her beheading and blood consumption—the two markedly fierce aspects of her icon—are in fact deterrents from the beautiful mosaic of her characteristics. The *Mantramahodadhi* says that veneration of Chinnamastā is reserved for those of "a particularly heroic nature." This is undoubtedly because one must be willing to see past her apparent ferocity in order to apprehend
the nuances of her form. If I recall my own introduction to the goddess in that cramped textiles shop in Devaraja Market, I was not struck with either the beheading or the nudity. It was the entire image that hypnotized me. She was alive and joyful, yet bleeding and without a head. Other goddesses, like Saraswatī, were beautiful and benign, but did not speak to me in the same way as Chinnamastā. She threw convention out the door, as it were, along with her clothes, her head, and her propriety. Despite her precariously, she danced and drank gleefully in the company of friends. Her icon was strangely comforting to a Western woman in India, shopping for what looked like exceedingly bright pajamas and scarves in an attempt to “fit-in.”

What is assuredly “fierce” about Chinnamastā are the intense feelings and actions she elicits from those that gaze upon her fiery form. Certainly, looking upon an image such as hers is not a tranquil experience. In my own attempts to visualize her, I have felt the urge to stop thinking about her, disgust, curiosity, and confusion, but at no point did she ever render me complacent or apathetic. True to her name, as Śakti, she is active and provocative. And even within the limitations of a singular form such as Chinnamastā's, she remains ever-adaptable, capable of occupying both the charnel ground and river bank, and molding herself into traditional models of Śākta-bhakti worship as well as into the non-religious arena of postmodern art. Her many iterations have spanned a great chasm across time and space, and just like her image suggests, she dies and is reborn again and again, reemerging in the endless flux of time.
Appendix A: Chinnamastā *Dhyāna, Mantra, and Stotra*

**Dhyāna**

**Mantramahodadhi of Mahidhara**

I resort to the Goddess Chinnamastā who shines in the Middle of the Solar Disc, who holds in her Left Hands her own cut Head that has curly locks of Hairs, that has the Mouth wide open and that drinks her own Blood dripping down from the Neck, who is stationed above Rati and Smara who are zealously engaged in sexual dalliance and who is extremely pleased on perceiving her Girls Friends Ḍākinī and Varṇīṇī.  

**Tantrasāra by Kṛṣṇānanda Āgamavāgīśa**

Visualize in your navel, a half-opened white lotus and in its center is a solar disc red as a hibiscus flower and resembling a red *bandhūka* flower. This disc is decorated with an equilateral triangle pointing downward which is formed by three lines, each representing a *guna* (beginning in the left in a counter-clockwise direction) rajas, sattvas, and tamas. Standing in the middle is the Great Goddess who is as effulgent as ten million suns. In her left hand she holds her own head; her mouth is wide open, and the tip of her tongue is lolling. She drinks the sanguine stream issuing from her recently-severed throat. Her hair is loose, disheveled and decorated with various flowers. In her right hand she brandishes a scimitar (*kartṛ*); she is nude, extremely fierce to behold, decorated with a skull rosary, and stands in the *pratyālīḍha* stance. She wears a bone necklace and has a snake as her sacred cord. She is a perpetual sixteen-year-old with full firm breasts. She stands on Raṭi and Kāma who are in reverse sexual embrace. One visualizes in this manner saying the mantra. [Which mantra? The bija?]

She is flanked by Ḍākinī and Varṇīṇī to her left and right respectively. Varṇīṇī is drinking from the nectar like sanguine stream which is shooting up from the Goddess' neck. She is red with a smiling face, has loose hair and is nude. She holds a skull and a scimitar in her left hand and right hands respectively. She wears a snake as a sacred cord and has a fiery splendor. Decorated with various ornaments and a bone rosary, she stands in the *pratyālīḍha* stance and is a perpetual twelve year old.

On the goddess' left side is Ḍākinī whose brilliance equals the fire at the end of an aeon. Her matted hair glistens like lightening, her teeth with protruding canines are as white as cranes and she has swelling breasts. This great goddess is terrible to behold—nude with loose hair, has a great flickering tongue and is ornamented with a skull rosary. Her left and right hands hold a skill and scimitar respectively. She drinks the ambrosial sanguine stream issuing from

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Chinnamastā’s neck. She is extremely terrifying and holds a terrible skull. A wise devotee should meditate upon this Goddess attended by these two, Varṇīṇī and Ďākinī. The Bhairava Tantra states: she holds in her left hand her own head with a skull and drinks her blood with her mouth. The Tantra states that whoever performs this worship without meditating on Chinnamastā, the Goddess will sever his (or her) head and drink his (or her) blood.149

**Mantramahārṇava**

I meditate upon the Goddess Chinnamastā who is seated in the center of the Sun’s disc and holds in her left hand her own severed head with gaping mouth, her hairs disheveled and is drinking the stream of blood gushing out from her own neck, she is seated on Rati and Kāmadeva, engrossed in sexual dalliance and rejoicing with her friends named Ďākinī and Varṇīṇī.150

**Śāktapramoda**

*Oṃ ma chinnamastā dḥyānaḥ atha chinnamastādhyānaṃ*  

Pratyālidha-padāṃ sadaiva dadhatīṃ cinnā śiraḥ kartṛkām  
Dīgvastrāṃ svakabandha-śonita-sudhā pibantiṃ mudā |

Nāgābaddha-śiromaniṃ trinayanāṃ hṛdyutpalālāṃkṛtāṃ  
Ratvā-sakta-manobhavo-pari-dṛḍham dhyeyej-javā(japā)-sannibhāṃ ||I||

Dakṣe-cātisitā-vimuktacikurā kartrī tathā kharparaṃ  
Hastābhyaṃ dadhaṭi rajoguṇa-bhavā nāmnā pisā ’pi sā) varṇīṇī |

Devyaśchinnakabandhataḥ patasṛgdhūrām pibanī mudā  
Nāgābaddha-śiromaniḥ-manuvīdā dhyeyā sadā śā-suraiḥ ||2||

Pratyālidha-padāṃ kabandha-vigalad raktaṃ pibanī muda  
Saiśā yā pralaye samstabhuvanāṃ bhoktuṃ kṣamā tāmasī |

Śaktīḥ sāpi parātparā bhagavatī nāmnā parā dākinī  
Dhyeyā dhyānaparaiḥ sadā savinayaṃ-bhakteṣṭabhūtipradā ||3||

**Mantra**

**Mantramahodadhiḥ & Mantramahārṇava**

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Om śrīṁ hrīṁ vajravirochanīye huṁ huṁ phat svāhā

Śāktapramoda

Om śrīṁ hrīṁ klīṁ aim vajravirocanīye huṁ huṁ phat svāhā

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152 Khanna, Śāktapramodaḥ
Appendix B: Mantramahodadhi of Mahidhara

Selected verses from *Taraṅga 6* on Chinnamastā\textsuperscript{153}

1-2. I shall now explain the Mantra of Chinnamastā that yields benefits quickly.

3. Her mantra is *Om Śrīm Hṛīm Vajravairocanīye Phaṭ Svāhā*

4-5. Her Ṣāḍāṅga Nyāsa is as follows:

\begin{itemize}
\item *Oṃ ām khḍagāya hṛīm hṛīm phaṭ ṭṛdayāya svāhā* (little fingers)
\item *Om īm khḍagāya hṛīm hṛīm phaṭ śirase svāhā* (ring fingers)
\item *Om uṃ vajrāya hṛīm hṛīm phaṭ sikhāyai svāhā* (middle fingers)
\item *Om aim pāśāya hṛīm hṛīm phaṭ kavacāya svāhā* (index fingers)
\item *Om aum aṅkuśāya hṛīm hṛīm phaṭ netratrayāya svāhā* (thumbs)
\end{itemize}

6. **Dhyāna:**

“I resort to the goddess Chinnamastā, who shines in the middle of the solar disc, who holds in her left hand her own severed head with disheveled hair, with gaping mouth, who drinks her own blood that drips from her neck. She is stationed above Rati and Smara who are passionately locked in *viparita rati.* She is very pleased to see her friends, Ḍākinī and Varṇīṇī.

7. After the dhyāna, the devotee should repeat the mantra four lakhs and perform homa with flowers and fruits (*palāśa* or *bilva*).

12-13. The yantra for this adoration consists of a triangle and another two triangles that form a hexagon, which is situated in a lotus and a square. Worship should begin from the exterior of the yantra and progress inward. Thunderbolts should be worshipped on the outside of the square.

14-17. Inside the square the devotee should worship Indra and others as the guardians of the four corners. Karāla, Vikarāla, Atikāla and Mahākāla should be worshipped as the *dvārapāla* (Four door keepers). Eight Śaktis (Ekalingā, Yoginī, Ḍākinī, Bhairavī, Mahābhairavikā, Indrākṣī, Asitāṅgi, Saṁbhāɾinī) should be worshipped inside of the lotus. The *aṅga mūrti* should be worshipped inside of the hexagon. Chinnamastā and her two companions should be worshipped inside the yoni.

18-19. Ḍākinī and Varṇīṇī’s mantra is *Om aim.*

If the devotee masters the mantra, all desires will be attained immediately, thanks to the goddess.

If the devotee performs the homa with Śrī Puṣpa, wealth and glory will be received and all desires attained.

20-22. *Homa* with jasmine flowers will grant eloquent speech.

*Havana* with campaka flowers grants happiness.

Offerings of goat flesh that has been smeared with ghee 100 times every day for one month grants the favor of all kings.

1,000 *homas* with white karavīra flowers grants health and happiness for 100 years.

\textsuperscript{153} Paraphrased from *The Mantramahodadhi of Mahidhara*, 107-11.
23. *Havana*... with milk pudding grants the ability to write poetry.

24. *Bandhūka* flowers grant good luck.

25. The menstrual blood grants the ability to influence people.

26. To kill an enemy one should perform *homa* with cuckoo feathers in the cremation ground.

29. Oblations with liquor should be offered in at night in order to attain magical powers. Now a certain rite is mentioned that should be kept as a secret, which will grant all power.

30-32. At midnight, on the fourteenth day (new moon) of the dark half of the lunar month, one should bathe and wear red clothing, flowers, and unguents. A beautiful young woman should be worshipped in place of Chinnamastā. She should be in the prime of her youth and strong enough to satisfy five men. She must be kept happy with offerings of jewelry. She must be kept smiling continuously, with her hair loose and disheveled, and completely naked. One should repeat the *mantra* 10,000 times.

33. At the end of the evening, oblations should be offered and the woman should be sent away with monetary gifts.

40. Chinnamastā is reputed to be a quick bestower of desires in the *Kālī Yuga*. 
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