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The Self-Emptying God(dess):

Death and Salvation in the Iconographies of the Crucifixion and Chinnamastā

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ABSTRACT: Both Christ on the cross and Chinnamastā, the self-beheading goddess, share much in common visually and metaphorically. They both offer their bodies as a sacrifice, thus becoming models of selflessness to their attending spiritual communities. This study analyzes Christian and Tantric concepts of liberation through a comparative analysis of the images of bodily sacrifice in the crucifixion and in the iconography of Chinnamastā. I contend that (1) these images act as symbols of spiritual liberation when viewed within their specific context(s) and (2) that conceptions of liberation and salvation are directly related to “culturally specific” (e.g. Christian or Tantric) ontologies of self-identity. My assertions are based on a cognitive semiotic analysis of three major themes: the nature of self, conceptualizations of sacrifice, and the movement from self to selflessness. The final theme investigates parallels between the movement from kataphatic to apophatic notions of Kenotic Christology and from theories of dualism to non-dualism in Tantra.

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Images are like language, with individual symbols acting like words, pictures acting like sentences, and scenes acting as vignettes of larger stories. Some images and their stories are understood broadly between cultures, such as arrows that indicate location and movement, while other symbols, such as hearts and stars, are more culture specific. Humans consciously and unconsciously overlay their own interpretations on to symbols to create a gestalt of meaning — a device quite commonly used in advertising and the arts.

Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* did exactly that — it animated the static image of Christ on the cross, and in painstaking detail, the film took the viewer on Jesus's arduous and humiliating journey through the stations of the cross. Accusations of implicit anti-Semitism aside, the film raised more than a few eyebrows due to the almost constant barrage of gratuitous violence. ABC News anchor Bill Fisk comments on the abrupt manner in which the film disrupted his normal attitude toward the crucifixion. He says, "No one who screens *Passion* will ever be tempted to minimize the horrors of the cross. The Christian trinket industry may suffer. Good Friday services this year will feel different."¹

The Passion of the Christ is an example of how tightly our interpretive lenses are wrapped around certain signs, symbols, and images, and how we often respond with shock, terror, and awe when presented with something that challenges our fore-structures of thought. In the religious world, nowhere does this become more obvious than when comparing ritual and iconographic motifs. Two bludgeoned divinities — Jesus Christ on the cross and Chinnamastā, the self-beheading goddess — share much in common visually and metaphorically. They are both bloody, naked or almost naked, and though his crucifixion is enacted upon him and her decapitation is self-inflicted, they both offer their bodies as a sacrifice, thus becoming models of selfless action to their attending religious and spiritual communities. The primary interest of this paper is in how the crucifixion has come to be interpreted as a model for and symbol of self-sacrifice in the West and how these notions of Christ and self-sacrifice can help to illuminate the image of Chinnamastā as possessing a similar meaning and value to her devotees.

It is curious how these two striking images — one from the Christian tradition and the other from both Hindu and Buddhist and Tantric traditions — can be conceived of so differently. Śākta-Tantra goddesses like Chinnamastā are regarded as erotic, gruesome, and malevolent by many Westerners, while the image of Christ on the cross is almost ubiquitously regarded as the ultimate vision of compassion and selflessness. I contend that these disparate views say less about Chinnamastā and Christ, and

¹ Bruce N. Fisk, "Unavoidable Gore, Controversy in 'Passion'?" *ABC News*, Feb. 14, 2004, <https://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=132400&page=1>, accessed May 13, 2017.

more about colonialism's long-standing influence on perceptions of divinity. These perceptions, owing to a heritage of schismatic dualisms extant in Cartesian and Manichean theories, have rendered the body — particularly the female body — as the site of sin and impurity.

Though decapitation and self-sacrifice might seem off-putting to an outsider, these tropes are meant to illustrate a divine cosmology that acknowledges cycles of life and death within the scope of cyclic time. The image of self-beheading, when understood within the cosmology of Śākta-Tantra, is one of liberation and salvation not unlike the image of Christ on the cross. Although understandings of bodily sacrifice are different between Hinduism and Christianity, they come close to convergence within the specific religious milieu of Śākta-Tantra and Kenotic Christology. Kenotic Christology understands Jesus's crucifixion as "self-emptying" — an idea that transforms Christian concepts of divinity and sacrifice significantly.

This study analyzes Christian and Tantric concepts of liberation through a comparative semiotic analysis of the images of bodily sacrifice in the crucifixion and in the iconography of Chinnamastā. I contend that (1) these images act as symbols of personal, psychological, and spiritual liberation when viewed within their specific context(s) and (2) that requirements for and conceptions of liberation and salvation are directly related to "culturally specific" (e.g. Christian or Tantric) ontologies of self-identity. My assertions are based on a cognitive semiotic analysis of three major themes: the nature of suffering and self-identity, conceptualizations of sacrifice, and the movement from sacrifice to selflessness. The final contention, which attends to the movement from self-sacrifice to selflessness, investigates the interesting parallels between the movement from kataphatic to apophatic notions of Kenotic Christology and from theories of dualism to non-dualism in both Śākta and Vajrayana Tantra.

The image of Christ on the cross communicates to Christians the greater story of the Passion narrative, which includes Christ's teachings, his trial and conviction by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy, and his ultimate crucifixion and resurrection. The image of the crucifixion has been rendered in many ways by various artists and filmmakers. Some images are shocking and others more benign, but the symbol has become so pervasive

that it has practically become the *thing-in-itself*. Many non-Christians also understand the icon as: Jesus, a Christian symbol, and a sign of ultimate redemption, or all three.

Likewise, the image of Chinnamastā communicates both power and beneficence to her devotees, the latter being less obvious without knowledge of the metaphysics of Śākta-Tantra, which is symbolically conveyed in the icon. The gruesomeness of this image, unlike the crucifixion, acts as a kind of *kavacca*, or shield, in that it has been intentionally rendered to turn off the unknowledgeable or uninitiated. What is ironic is that through the lens of cognitive semiotics, the icon of Chinnamastā is much more direct in its use of metaphoric content than that of the crucifixion, and it might be its very directness of meaning that proves so disconcerting to the non-Tantric viewer.

Theoretical Considerations

I have, at some length, grappled with the difficult union of semiotics, postcolonialism, and religious studies. It has been difficult for me to ascertain why these three seemingly complimentary theoretical and disciplinary realms did not initially intersect harmoniously in my research. After reading through Saussure, Derrida, Barthes, Peirce, and several others I was left with the undeniable feeling that something was not quite right. Yet, how could the tradition of postmodernism and poststructuralism, which has given voice to some of the most astute feminist and postcolonial speakers of our time, be ill-fitting for a comparative and cross-cultural analysis of religious iconographies? I realized that if I were to 'read' my two different subjects of study simultaneously with a hermeneutic of generosity, I would need to directly address the contradictions between postmodern theories of self (or lack thereof) and the Self that is conveyed in both the iconographies and narratives of Christ and Chinnamastā. In short, I needed to consider the "meaning" of these iconographies, which both point to the realization of a supreme, or divine self (either transcendent or immanent), with theories that have sprung out of a philosophical tradition that denies the existence of any such essential self, as it were. The incongruity of theory and content

left me wondering how I could harness the best of semiotic theory, without upending the very ground upon which these religious traditions stand.

Interestingly, the solution to what once seemed like an insurmountable theoretical problem presented itself in the cognitive semiotic theories of George Lakoff² and Mark Johnson.³ Their theories of cognitive semiotics investigate meaning-making processes, not through speculation, but through the empirical basis of cognitive science. The irony (and possible difficulties) of using scientific theories to unpack religious symbols has not escaped me. The potential for reductive religious scholarship compounds exponentially when we attempt to view abstract and unobservable phenomena empirically. However, my aim is not to ascertain truth or falsehood of the notions of self (and/or selflessness) that are represented in the icons in question. Rather, cognitive semiotics offers an unprecedented way in which to look at two seemingly disparate traditions through their symbols and images comparatively *and* non-reductively.

Very generally, Lakoff and Johnson organize metaphors into three primary kinds—structural (which is similar to Saussure’s notion of the sign-signifier-signified, wherein signs are unrelated to the semantic referents), orientational, and ontological. These metaphors are structured in ways so as to be culturally coherent and function by way of metonymy (a part-for-whole relationship), which aids cognition and memory. The latter two metaphors — orientational and ontological — use the body as the starting point of reference.

Oriental metaphors do not structure one concept according to another, unrelated concept. These metaphors organize entire systems of concepts into an integrated whole. They are called orientational metaphors because their primary mode of organization deals with spatial orientation: up-down, in-out, back-front, and central-peripheral are just a few examples. They unequivocally state that “such metaphorical orientations are *not arbitrary*.”⁴ He goes on to state that these kinds of metaphors are

² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

³ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. Emphasis mine.

rooted in physical and cultural experiences. For instance, in some cultures — such as Western culture — the future is thought to be *ahead*, while in others, the future is conceived of as *behind* or *in back*. In both instances, the future is out of view — *unknown* and therefore *unseen* — and relative to a physical state situated in the present moment.

Ontological metaphors, however, do not deal with spatial orientations, but with how we experience physical objects and substances. This kind of understanding of objects lends itself to metaphors that allow us, in language and in images, to treat our experiences as discrete entities that can be picked up, looked at, interacted with, and handled. The manner in which space is defined with artificial boundaries, such as mountains, lakes, oceans, and the like are examples of the manner in which time, space, and experience are bounded so as to be more physically and psychologically manageable. They argue that the superimposition of artificial boundaries on experiences and external realities is a form of metonymy in that we ascribe our surroundings with our own experience of boundedness (not to be confused with Derrida's theory of *differance*).⁵

The implications of this kind of semiotic theory for visual culture and ritual are clear — ritual acts, iconographies, images found in the fine arts, advertising, and pop-culture all possess these kinds of metaphors. Reading images and actions with an embodied, cognitive semiotic hermeneutic reveal that spatial and ontological relations structure the metaphoric content of both Chinnamastā and Christ. The imagistic “death” of the deity is capable of communicating complex metaphysics by tapping into the common, human drive for bodily survival. The peripheral information surrounding the central metaphor (the bludgeoned deity) gives the viewer important culturally specific *ideas* about how survival (both physical and metaphysical) can and should be secured.

By approaching the study of religious imagery through the lens of cognitive semiotics, we begin the process of interpretation from a place of likeness rather than *differance*. In doing so, we also make a valiant effort to avoid sliding into implicit biases, which favor or disfavor certain perspectives. Such biases are more colored by their respective interpretive lenses, which is why the American pragmatist Charles S. Peirce considered

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

the interpretations of signs themselves — what he called *interpretants* — to be secondary signs, which could also be subject to semiotic analysis.⁶ If we apply Peirce’s rationale to certain interpretations of Tantric imagery, we are able to split apart the process of interpretation into several parts, which allows for a more critical examination of the sign itself, the interpretation of the sign, the interpreter, and the cognitive mechanisms and cultural contexts that undergird the interpretive process.

Take for instance Wendy Doniger’s feminist analysis of the trope of the beheaded woman in Indian mythology. Using her work “Put a Bag Over Her Head” as a template, we can roughly parse apart several elements: the sign (the headless woman), the interpretation (feminist), the interpreter (Doniger), and the context (the American academy in the latter half of the 20th Century). What results from this kind of semiotic analysis is a larger view of cross-cultural dynamics extant behind the interpretive process.

Wendy Doniger argues that the motif of headless women in Indian literature, who appears as Chinnamastā, Yellammā, and Renukā, is a symbol of chauvinism and the oppression and objectification of the female body in South Asia since antiquity. Such readings have been colored by Indology, which presupposes that the body is the locus of sin and transgression. In “Put a Bag Over Her Head,” Doniger makes an inaccurate assessment of beheading, using the comparative method inappropriately to support her psychoanalytic-feminist reading of the trope of beheading. She says:

From ancient myth to contemporary culture, the metaphor of beheading has been used to express the dehumanizing of women... The mythologically beheaded woman is seen... but does not see... she is transformed from a seeing subject to a merely seen object, a demeaned and faceless body.

Doniger “explores the implications of the beheading and blinding of women” by juxtaposing Indian stories of beheaded women against Western stories of women’s blinding, as in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*. She argues that “the two cultures, despite their distance in time

⁶ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Peirce’s Theory of Signs,” accessed March 15, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/peirce-semiotics>.

and space, share certain underlying attitudes to women [...] which should be regarded as cross-cultural, though not universal.”⁷ It seems that Doniger stops short of addressing the context in which these actions take place in the stories and how they align with other, similar and dissimilar stories.

Doniger, a prolific textualist and historian of Indian mythology, surely has a broader understanding of beheading as a trope in Indian literature. Thus, it remains a curiosity why she fails to mention stories about Kālī beheading men, men and women beheading themselves, and even the gods losing their heads in a variety of circumstances. Most importantly, she fails to acknowledge the rich narrative tradition of Śāktism and its pantheon of goddesses, in which self-beheading and beheading *devīs* like Chinnamastā and Kālī abound — neither of whom would ever strike one as “objectified” — even without a head. Within these Śākta stories are important ritual and soteriological ideas of self and selflessness, however these analyses cannot ignore the effects of colonialism and the biases of culturally situated perspectives, as evidenced by Doniger’s interpretation of Hindu mythologies.

THE ICONS

Chinnamastā

Even within Hinduism, Chinnamastā is a lesser known goddess, and, unlike many typical representations of the crucifixion, she is almost always shocking to behold. The descriptions of her form given in her ritual texts and mythologies make particular note of her terrifying appearance and, as such, it stands to reason that she is intentionally rendered as gruesome. Chinnamastā stands, headless, yet animated. Her decapitated head is often shown smiling while quaffing the center stream of blood issuing out of her neck.

Voluptuous and nude, she stands fiercely with her legs spread, exposing her *yoni*, which has been interpreted as both vulva and womb, and is represented aniconically as a downward pointing triangle. This image, which is most often shown in its aniconic form, is prevalent in goddess imagery and is said to be symbolic of feminine power (*śakti*). The

⁷ Wendy Doniger, “Put A Bag Over Her Head,” in *Off With Her Head! The Denial of Women’s Identity in Religion, Myth, and Culture*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 15.

representation of woman in the *yoni* in Indian imagery has a long history; it is found in fertility symbols, like the headless and naked *lajja gauri* from the second century, in Vedic aniconic representations of the *yoni-lingam*, and in Tantric geometric diagrams (*yantra*), such as the *Śrī Yantra*—to name just a few. In each of these examples, the female sex signifies *śakti*, the creative, active aspect of Hindu cosmology, and is less associated with “female sexuality” or “femininity” as gendered constructs.

The basic elements of the image of Chinnamastā are defined by her headlessness, activity (indicated by her active stance and direct gaze), and embodied sexuality — giving the viewer a general sense of who she is. She is beyond human, dynamic and powerful in nature, and assertive. It is clear how such a complex image as Chinnamastā can invoke fear, disgust, and awe to a viewer who is not privy to the Tantric and Śākta theologies being signified with the icon

The origin story of Chinnamastā in the Śākta Upapurāṇas read on its own does little to illuminate her meaning without some fore-knowledge of the sacrificial motifs outlined in Vedas, concepts of *strīdharmā*, Tantric Śaivism, and Samkhya. For the sake of brevity, I have chosen to limit my interpretations to the act of self-beheading — grounding my reading in the textual history of sacrifice and creation found in the Vedas and Upapurāṇas. This limited analysis does not account for the complex philosophical readings that can be drawn from the presence of Ḍākīṇī, Varṇiṇī, and Śiva, because these interpretations would take us too far afield.

The Crucifixion

Since my scholarly work has been predominantly focused on the goddess iconographies in both the Tantric and Śākta traditions, my analysis of the crucifixion will be somewhat attenuated due to my lack of in-depth knowledge of Christian iconography, for which I am regretful. Yet, I offer this rather limited critique with the hope that others who are more conversant about Christian iconography will be able to contribute and contradict the limited research and analysis herein.

Unlike Chinnamastā’s opulent beheading, Christ’s death scene is rather sparse in comparison and necessitates a certain amount of

contextual knowledge to unpack the image. One must know that Jesus hangs on a “cross”, which points to the early Roman method of execution. The inscription on the cross, “*INRI*” — which represents the Latin, *Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum*, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (John 19:19), further supplies the viewer with necessary information. Thus, the viewer is able to ascertain that the basic image is one of a Jewish man put to death by the Romans. This very limited identification of the crucifixion reveals important information: (1) Crucifixion is punishment for a transgression; (2) Jesus was a Jew, which is somehow connected to the implied transgression that resulted in crucifixion; and (3) Jesus died and, in some manner of speaking, can be considered human.

Similar to Chinnamastā, one needs much more information to render metaphysical significance of crucifixion. What is consistent between the two images is the fact of the body, which is being either beheaded, or killed. The graphic depiction of the bodies in each icon acts to evoke what I would argue are biologically conditioned responses — fear, disgust, grief, and horror. I would further argue that the choice to use such emotionally and viscerally evocative imagery is no accident — both scenes are iconic precisely because of their ability to “awaken” certain responses in the viewer. The narrative, ritual, and liturgical contexts in which these images are viewed provides the viewer with a way in which to understand the meaning of death (and rebirth) that are in accord with Tantric and Christian ontologies and metaphysics.

The Nature of Suffering and Self

In both of our images, death of the physical body is of central importance. In almost all renderings of these two icons, the beheading of Chinnamastā and Jesus’s body on the cross occupy most of the visual space on a given canvas, and they are generally centered or shown so that the eye is drawn directly to the body in question. Chinnamastā’s image also brings with it the added complexity of sexuality. Yet, the *yoni* occupies a smaller space and the copulating bodies of the deities Rati and Kamadeva are below eye level, which leaves the beheading as the main attraction.

The crucifixion has been the subject of not only religious art, but surrealism and modern art. Australian Modernist painter, Roy de Maistre’s

oil painting of the *Crucifixion* (1957) while innovative in its use of color, adheres to a rather conventional form of the Christian iconography by placing Jesus squarely in the center, head down and adorned with a crown of thorns. Salvador Dali's surrealist rendering of Jesus in his *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* (1951), in contrast, is decentered and devoid of blood and nails, yet the top-down perspective of the image and the darkening horizon speak to any viewer familiar with the crucifixion in an equally compelling fashion. It is clear from the dark tones and the image of Christ which is made to appear as if emerging from the bottom of the frame that the central feature is of Christ, who is not quite dead, but *arising*. Both images give different visual and metaphoric perspectives, yet both view at the icon from upon the same Christological continuum that argues the relative divinity and humanity of Jesus.

What is revealed from looking at these traditions' two icons side by side, even in their less conventional renderings (such as Dali's), we see a universal identification with the body and with life, which is challenged through the gruesome portrayal of death. Each image, even without broader contextual information, intimates how suffering is perceived in each respective milieu. We might say — perhaps over generally — that the Tantric *devī*, though bludgeoned, does not suffer the pain of death, while Christ not only suffers, but dies — a necessary preface to the salvific act of resurrection and redemption. What we find embedded in the icons are subtle and deeply ingrained attitudes toward the body and toward materiality. These alternate conceptions of the body, read according to Lakoff's theories on ontological metaphors, reveal how attitudes toward the corporeal shape how one regards suffering, sacrifice, and release from suffering. We might infer that the notion of the temporal, bounded body in Tantric metaphysics is an illusion, illustrated quite clearly in the animation of Chinnamastā's decapitated head that quaffs her own life blood. It could also be inferred that the bounded body in Christianity is seen as a "mortal coil" which separates humanity from the transcendent divine.

Unequivocally, what is considered "suffering" in Christian and Tantric contexts is rather disparate. Suffering in Christian contexts is attached to many theological dimensions, such as sin, evil, and theodicy, whereas suffering within the Dharmic traditions points to ignorance of one's true

self (*avidya*) as the primary cause. These different ideas are indicative of wholly different ontologies and conceptions of selfhood. Yet, it is not my intention to argue that Christian and Tantric concepts of self are similar, but that the experience of suffering is an embodied fact for the religious and non-religious alike as one moves through the vicissitudes of life. Physical ailments, such as illness and hunger, and emotional and mental dis-ease, such as sadness and anxiety, affect one and all regardless of race, creed, or gender.

The “self” as it is construed in Christianity is a self that is mired in original sin, which opens to a larger discussion on theodicy and Jesus’s role and relationship to sin and Christians. Verses 12-21 juxtapose the fall of Adam against the salvific and redemptive power of Jesus’s death and resurrection. The Christian self is defined according to Paul’s doctrine on sin, which views Christ’s loving grace as redemption and salvation. The concept of original sin is formalized in the second century and is based on the theology of Paul in the book of Romans, which states:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. ... For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many... Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁸

⁸ Rom 5:12-21.

What is of semiotic interest in these lines is the manner in which “sin” is treated as an ontological metaphor. Sin is treated as a bounded object, which is considered separate from humanity, yet housed in the internal, separate space of the human body — “Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin.” This verse shows a complex system of ontological metaphors, which state that sin is death and, since death is an embodied fact, the conquering of sin equals the conquering of death. Such is indicated through the passion narrative.

Contingent upon Jesus’s role as Savior is his dual incarnation as both fully human and fully divine. The affirmation of Christ’s Incarnation at the Council of Chalcedon affirms this analogue between Christ and humanity:

We confess one and the same Son, who is our Lord Jesus Christ, and [...] this very same Son is complete in his deity and complete [...] in his humanity, truly God and truly a human being, this very same one being composed of a rational soul and a body, coessential with the Father as to his deity and coessential with us...as to his humanity, being like us in every respect apart from sin.⁹

The affirmation clearly states an analogy but not a homology between Christ and humanity. Therefore, Christians see potentiality in the nature of Christ but, unlike Śākta-Tantrics, do not see the divine as an expression of the self.

Concepts of self in Tantra differ depending on branch. Since Chinnamastā exists at the intersection between Śākta-Tantra and Vajrayana it is important to give a brief explanation of the nuanced difference in ontology between Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. Both systems seek identity with the divine and do not entertain notions of an innately sinful or impure self as does Christianity. The closest equivalent to *sin* in most Tantric traditions is the concept of *avidya*, which obscures the true nature of self with the veil of *māyā*. However, such an understanding needs to be

⁹ Richard A., Norris Jr., “The Council of Chalcedon’s ‘Definition of the Faith,’” in *The Christological Controversy: Sources of Early Christian Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980), 159.

qualified through philological analysis in order to account for the evolution of the concept of *māyā*.

Māyā is sometimes understood as synonymous with the notion of *śakti* — Jan Gonda defines *māyā* as “incomprehensible wisdom and power enabling its possessor, or being able itself to create, devise, contrive, effect, or do something.”¹⁰ Śākta-Tantra views *māyā* as the progenitor of creation and *prakṛti*, which equates the self with creation and the creator. *Māyā* is the self, and since *māyā* is the macrocosmic divine, so then is it the microcosmic self.

Tantric Buddhism retains the ontological vision of Mahayana and thus regards *māyā* as *śunya*, and as such renders the self as similarly devoid of substantial reality. These two views are amenably communicated in the iconography of Chinnamastā (Trikāyavajrayoginī in Vajrayana), who represents and *presents* either the insubstantiality of conditioned existence in Vajrayana, or the unified whole of creation and self in Śākta-Tantra. In either case, the icon of the *devī* is understood as an aspect of the self, even if the self that is referenced in either tradition maintains a different attitude toward and relationship to *māyā*, as is the case in Vajrayana. This radically transforms the act of beheading from punishment or oppression to one of ultimate agency. This is further supported by the emphasis placed on Chinnamastā *karṭṛ* (scimitar) in her *dhyaṇa* (meditation mantra). The *karṭṛ* is well-understood as a symbol of the kind of wisdom that cuts through *avidya*, enabling the wielder of knowledge to attain liberation from false conceptions of self and reality.

Concepts and Categories of Sacrifice

The construction of the self as being either genetically sinful or prone to misidentification informs the manner in which the individual seeks either salvation from sin or liberation from *samsara*. In both Christian and Tantric contexts, the field upon which freedom is sought is embodied; sacraments, rituals, and proscribed and prescribed behaviors are all formed in accordance to how one perceives the role and status of the body. Yet the kind of sacrifice that I intend to address in this analysis is not limited to

¹⁰ Tracy Pinchman, *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2001), 88.

sacrifices of the body. The “body” is multimodal and occupies the material, causal, and subtle realms simultaneously. The material body — its psychology, individuality, and biology are constrained by time and space, while the subtle and causal bodies transcend time and space. At least in Tantric contexts, the subtle and causal bodies are homologues of the divine.

The multimodality of the Tantric body allows for multiple conceptions of *sacrifice*. Sacrifice can be purely physical and material in nature, as one offers blood or grains to the *devī*; it can be a metaphoric offering of the self, such as in the *chöd* rites of Vajrayana where one visualizes cutting away at the self; and it can be experienced as both material and metaphoric through *tapasya* such as fasting wherein physical restraints give rise to emotional and spiritual release. Whether metaphoric or literal, the idea that sacrifice of the mundane offers sublime rewards is communicated through the profound imagery of the deity giving up his or her own life and identity.

Kenotic Christology and Sacrifice

With his gentle hand he wounded my neck
And caused all my senses to be suspended.
I remained, lost in oblivion;
My face I reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased and I abandoned myself,
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.

—Saint John of the Cross

The Council of Chalcedon presented Christ as a conduit between the bodily and the divine, symbolically depicted by the cross. Accordingly, Jesus’s self-sacrifice became the bridge between humanity and God the Father. Kenotic Christology develops this into a *kenotic ethic*, which is an ethic of sacrifice symbolized as and actualized through Jesus’s crucifixion. The Greek term *kenosis* comes from the word *kenoō*, which appears five times in the New Testament in regard to the incarnate nature of Christ, who lets go of his divinity in the presence of God, which gives much importance to his bodily death both in narrative and in image. Kenotic Christology is best

captured in Paul's letter to the Philippians to mean "to let go," or "to empty oneself."¹¹ Paul says:

Though his state was that of God,
Yet he did not deem equality with God
Something he should cling to.

Rather, he emptied himself,
And assuming the state of a slave,
He was born in human likeness.

He, being known as one of us,
Humbled himself, obedient unto death,
Even death on the cross.¹²

Kenotic Christology interprets Paul's passage as an example of self-sacrifice through Jesus' humility before the Lord. Here, Christ does not equate himself with God. Rather he "made himself nothing" (*ekonosen*), by willingly making himself a servant of God and taking human form, and suffering death on the cross.¹³

There are, however, more mystical interpretations of *kenosis*, which understand self-emptying to be a spiritual experience that not only unites humanity, but also serves as a form of "self-revelation of the inner Trinity [...] and the unity of mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*)."¹⁴ These interpretations of *kenosis* are similar to Meister Eckhart's teachings on detachment, described as a negative state wherein one can become "full of God."¹⁵ He notes four things that must be let go of: something, everything, oneself, and God. The last phase of detachment "from God" describes the movement from kataphatic to apophatic theology, which requires purging the intellect of categories that cannot possibly contain the fullness of God.

¹¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2008), 63.

¹² Philippians 2:7-15

¹³ Ronald J. Feenstra, "A Kenotic Christology of Divine Attributes," in *Exploring Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150.

¹⁴ Chan Tak-Kwong, "Kenotic Theology: A Perspective from 'Regress' Theory Traced in the Thought of Chiara Lubich and Meister Eckhart," in *Chinese Spirituality and Christian Communities: A Kenotic Perspective* (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

Eckhart says in his German Sermon 48: “It (intellect) wants to penetrate to the simple ground, to the still desert into which distinction never peeped, neither father, Son nor Holy Spirit.”¹⁶

Chan Tak-Kwong says of Eckhart’s apophatic theology that:

What is particular to his theory of “Oneness” is that, by the grace of God, man can attain the realm of life before time or creation [...] where there is not yet any distinction between life and death [...] free from causal relations, where one is the cause of oneself. What one wants is what one is, and what one is, is what one wants.¹⁷

Such a movement from kataphasis to apophasis resounds with the same tone as the relational dynamics between the *tāntrika* (Tantric practitioner) and her *Iṣṭadevatā* (tutelary deity), which move one from a state of difference to a state of identity with the divine. For instance, Eckhart likens the state of nothingness to creative potentiality, saying that the noblest human action is achieved through “detachment from the nothingness of creation [...] to attain the nothingness of God [...] the divine source that is free of everything so it can *become* in everything [emphasis mine].”¹⁸ Eckhart’s apophatic theology radically departs from Augustinian and Pauline notions of original sin and debates surrounding theodicy seem irrelevant when placed within the “nothingness of creation.”

The Textual History of Tantric Sacrifice

Śyamā wakes on the cremation grounds
to take Her child
at the final hour to Her lap.
The peaceful Mother sits on the pyre
its fire hidden by Her sari of love.
To hold him on Her lap
She left the Kailasa of Her joy, and

¹⁶ O. Davies trans., *Meister Eckhart, Selected Writings*, quoted in Tak-Kwong, “Kenotic Theology: A Perspective from ‘Regress’ Theory Traced in the Thought of Chiara Lubich and Meister Eckhart,” 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

with blessings and fearlessness in Her hands
made the cremation grounds Her home.
Why fear this place
when you'll sleep peacefully at the Mother's feet?
Who dies ignited by the flames of this world,
to him the Mother calls:
"Come to My lap; come to My lap."
To lull you to sleep, Oh Wearing by Life,
Ma takes you to Her lap
disguised as death.

— Najrul Islām¹⁹

This poem by Najrul Islām, an early twentieth-century Bengali Muslim, illustrates the ubiquity of the goddess in the Indian subcontinent. Even in Kālī's fierce form, as the mistress of death, she is felt by those who are closest to her to bestow grace and beneficence. It is through this relationship with her that the concept of sacrifice is understood and carried out in ways that are not solely transactional. Yet, sacrifice in the Indian milieu had been regarded as barbaric by early Orientalists and colonizers who rendered their views from uncritical readings of the Vedic texts, which dealt in large with sacrifices to the gods. The Tantric tradition with its, at times, intentional emphasis on the antinomian and transgressive rites of blood offerings, did not do much to improve the view of Indian sacrificial traditions by outsiders. Iconographies of Kālī and Chinnamastā were viewed through the lens of puritanical Christian constructions of good and evil, and their nudity and assertiveness became symbols of Hindu savagery.

Yet, whatever it is we term "sacrifice" is widely varied, and while comparisons can mutually illuminate the disparity between "Eastern" and "Western" constructions of self, using one tradition's black-and-white categorical structures to interpret the nuanced shades of another is extremely distorting. A more apt comparison of structures, rather than ideal types, acknowledges that there are many "types" of sacrifice extant in each tradition. Just as there are shocking folk stories of self-beheading

¹⁹ Trans. Rachel Fell McDermott, in *Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Kali and Uma from Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 122.

sisters in Tantra, so are there very real accounts of self-mutilation by Christian mystics. Just as Chinnamastā chops off her own head to feed her devotees, the crucifixion of Christ stands as symbol of ultimate redemption. A comparison of sacrificial structures seeks to locate the significance of Tantric sacrifice, which is grounded in the sacrificial motifs and injunctions outlined in the Vedas. As evidenced through the rituals themselves, the *itihāsa-s*, and the iconographies of the *devatā-s*, sacrifice is central to Indian religious identity in which the human body and all of materiality are homologues for the divine.

There are innumerable Vedic texts that discuss the critical relationship that is sought with the divine through the act of sacrifice. The *Puruṣa Śākta* of the *Ṛg Veda* explains the creation of the universe and how the gods performed the sacrifice with Puruṣa as a victim (RV, X, 90, 6). The *yajñāsāla* (sacrificial house) encompassed the whole universe, and performance of the ritual resulted in the creation of all things.²⁰ The *Brāhmaṇas* indicate that the offering to the gods is represented by the sacrifice, or *is* the sacrificer himself. The *Ṛg Veda* states that the gods are the sacrificial template by which all other forms of sacrifice follow. It regards the god Agni as the first sacrifice in the act of creation where energy (heat) and matter come together to create the universe. It says, *yajasva tasmīn tava svām*, “Oh Agni, sacrifice thine own body,” and “For the Gods’ sake he chose death, for his offspring’s sake chose not immortality: they made Bṛhaspati the Sacrifice, Yama gave up (*arirecīt*, emptied out) his own dear body.”²¹

Implicit in the Vedic texts is that creator, creation, and means of creation are all sacred, and this sanctity is ritualized through the *yajña* (sacrifice). The means of creation is described with the verb *śak*, meaning “able to,” which is later declined as the noun *śakti*, meaning “power” or “ability.” This concept metamorphoses into a female deity, eventually elevated above all other gods as the *Mahādevī* in Śākta literature, such as Durga in the *Devī Mahātmyā*. The *Devī Bhāgavata*, for instance, adapts the

²⁰ Jose Thanchil, *The Vedic and Christian Concept of Sacrifice* (Kerala, India: Pontifical Institute of Theology and Philosophy, 1985), 25.

²¹ Ananda Coomaraswamy’s trans., *Ṛg Veda*, X. 13. 4, in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “Atmayajna: Self-Sacrifice,” in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 3/4 (February 1942): 359.

creation story of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* by presenting the *devī* in the form of Mahālakṣmī, present as baby Viṣṇu’s mother (and own wife) at the time of creation.²²

It follows then that the *Kausitaki Upaniṣad* admonishes one to perform mental sacrifices, which could perhaps offer an analogy to the losing of one’s head in Chinnamastā’s mythology. This can be overlaid onto Upanishadic thought along with the concept of the homology between sacrifice and sacrificer. “The fundamental teaching of the Upaniṣads can be summed up as: “The universe is brahman, but brahman is atman.” In this example, there is no plurality. If we can view the triple-bodied goddess Chinnamastā — as she is an aspect of the Mahādevī who is synonymous with Brahman — then her self-beheading, first, makes perfect sense when viewed within the cosmology of the Vedas wherein sacrificed and sacrificer are one, and second, is not a transgressive act as such, but an act of ultimate beneficence.²³

Chinnamastā’s beneficence is resoundingly clear in her origin narrative found in the *Nārada-pāñcarātra*:

One day Parvatī went to bathe in the Mandākinī River [...] with her attendants, Jayā and Vijayā [...]. 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 Dākinī and Varṇiṇī begged 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 Fulfiler of Desires” [...]. Hearing this true

²² C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devī-Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 24-27.

²³ Thanchil, *The Vedic and Christian Concept of Sacrifice*, 83.

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.²⁴

Here she is synonymous with Parvatī and, as such, she is the creator of the universe. As creator of the universe, she is also destroyer as well as the world itself; she sacrifices herself so that the world might be perpetuated. This seemingly paradoxical theme is executed beautifully in the narrative where she feeds Ḍākinī and Varṇiṇī. This act communicates her beneficence to her devotees — that she is willing to cut off her own head for the benefit of others. The story also clearly illustrates Chinnamastā as Divine Śakti, or ultimate divine power, since the action of beheading does not result in her demise—indeed, she lives on. A more philosophically complex reading sees Chinnamastā and her attendants as the triple goddess that represents the three *guṇas* (or qualities of embodied life) and the three *naḍīs* (nervous channels in the human body), who is self-perpetuating and thus must engage in sacrifice for her survival. Also, since they are the *guṇas* and they are Śakti, also known as *Parabrahman* (the Supreme Brahman), means that she *is the world*. As the world, she is contiguous with the devotee, and therefore her image is intended to reflect back to the viewer her own inherent nature, which at times must be pruned so that new evolution and growth may occur.

This vision takes a subtle shift within Vajrayana, in accordance with the doctrine of *śūnyata* found in Śūnyavada (Madhyamika) Buddhism, wherein the phenomenal world has no reality as all phenomenon is understood as dependently arising, and is therefore void of substance. This subtle but significant shift in ontology between Śākta and Buddhist Tantra sees a transformation in the meaning of Chinnamastā, who is understood in the literature and in the iconography as a Buddha of *Anuttarayoga*

²⁴ Trans. Elisabeth Bernard, in *Chinnamastā: The Aweful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 7-8.

Tantra — the highest yoga tantra. Chinnamastā’s role as a Buddha is illustrated in her *maṅgalam mantra* (invocation) that is recited before the initiation of her *sādhana*, which reads: “Homage to Chinnamuṅḍā Vajravārāhī. May she help all sentient beings to realize that the offerer, the offering, and the recipient of the offering do not ultimately exist.”²⁵ Deity yoga, as it is called, is viewed as a necessary step toward the apprehension of reality, which is void of substance.

There are many reasons for us to better understand the Chinnamastā, even in her most gruesome manifestations. Admittedly, it is tempting to see all naked, bludgeoned women as a symbol of chauvinism, as in the case of Doniger’s interpretation, since women, nudity, and blood have been propagated to us through popular media, religion, and culture to be either signs of depravity or signs of oppression. While I can sympathize with feminist readings of androcentric literature, it seems that the assertive and powerful rendering of Chinnamastā is difficult to reconcile as an image mired in patriarchal hegemony. My own physical and psychological impressions of the Tantric Devī suggest that she speaks to the viewer on a level that is beyond gender and its performativity. I have thus attempted to unpack her image through rigorous readings of cognate images, texts, and symbols. Evermore, her textual and ritual histories affirm what I have always seen — a goddess of power and beauty, full of agency and compassion. Just like the images of Roman gladiators and Greek gods, and not unlike the image of Jesus on the Cross, she stands defiant over death and triumphant over time.

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²⁵ Bernard, *Chinnamastā: The Aweful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess*, xv.

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