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The Cross-Cultural Kingship in Early Medieval Kāmarūpa: Blood, Desire and Magic

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Abstract: Kingship in early medieval Kāmarūpa (Assam) was influenced by the collision of orthodox and heterodox Brahmanic traditions with various tribal cultures. Since the last part of the Śālastambha period (seventh–tenth century) the royal tutelary deity of Kāmarūpa was the menstruating Kāmākhyā, an ancient *kirāta* goddess. According to the Puranic tradition, the cult of Kāmākhyā was absorbed within Hindu religious folds by the mytho-historical king Naraka of Kāmarūpa. According to textual and epigraphic records, Naraka was conceived by Pṛthvī (Earth goddess) during her menstrual period, through a sexual intercourse with *varāha* (boar form of Viṣṇu). All early medieval dynasties of Kāmarūpa traced back their origins to Naraka, connecting their lines to the divine power but also to the menstrual blood—a substance considered extremely impure though powerful in Vedic and post-Vedic traditions. The king operated as a cross-cultural mediator: he was the only actor who was able to harness the produced polluted forces, through the Tantric rituals, in order to strengthen the political power. Thence, this essay aims to demonstrate, through inter- and intra-textual evidences, epigraphic records, and ethnographic data, that in Assam throughout the early medieval ages, the kingship grounded its roots in an osmotic cross-cultural process which was influenced by tribal traditions and orthodox and heterodox Hindu sects.

Keywords: Assam; Hinduization; Kālikāpurāṇa; śākta; supernatural; Tantrism; tribal; yoginī; yoni

1. Introduction

Through the interrelation of inter- and intra-textual evidence with historical religious, ethnographic, and epigraphic evidence, this essay aims to shed light on the relationship between political power and *śākta-tantra* ritual systems in early medieval Kāmarūpa¹, often considered the homeland of Tantrism (Eliade [1954] 1971, p. 305) because of its echoes of black magic², blood, and head-hunting practices. Since its early past, Assam was inhabited by a number of variegated ethno-linguistic tribe groups (and sub-groups)³, which were described in Sanskrit literature as *kirātas* and *mlecchas*; both these words alluded to peculiar characteristics of tribespeople who were

¹ The kingdom of Kāmarūpa roughly corresponded to the modern states of Assam, Meghalaya, the district of Koch Bihar (West Bengal), and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Sometimes in this essay, the modern term Assam is used in order to describe the whole kingdom of Kāmarūpa.

² In Assam still today, many are the cases reported of women murdered or beaten because they were suspected of practicing witchcraft and black magic (e.g., see (Anand 2017)). This popular superstition regarding witchcraft is closely linked to contention over the ownership of fields (e.g., see (Singh 2016; Bhonde 2016)), although its origin can be traced back to the early medieval belief that all of the Assamese women were *yoginīs* (Bagchi [1948] 1986, 22.9–11).

³ Ethnographically speaking, the word *tribe* is inaccurate because it is used to describe groups that differ in socio-cultural and political organization, although the term is used “by the Constitution of India without consideration of any anthropological definition of tribe” (Kumar 2005, p. 195). Historically speaking, *tribe* is a term applied “to those groups whom others wish to control” (Blackburn 2003, n. 4). Despite these conceptual and empirical problems, the term *tribe* here is applied to ethno-linguistic groups which cannot be comprised within the Indo-Aryan language family.

linked to a mountainous, hilly, or wooded ecosystem as well as to non-Indo-Aryan-speaking families (Van Buitenen 1975, 2.23.19, 2.31.9–10). There is no clear evidence of an ethnic connection between *kirāta* (and *mleccha*) to South Asian tribes; however, both the terms alluded to groups of people connected with the peripheral and liminal world and with activities described as “evil” by the Puranic compiler(s) (Shastri [1969] 2000, 2.5.6.35–42), thus marking at least a cultural distinction between mountain and forest dwellers and Brahmanic culture.

This essay avoids entering into the debate on the migration waves of language groups which affected northeastern India (see (Hazarika 2017)); however, a clarification is necessary regarding the cultural identity of the Indo-Aryan people who arrived in Assam somehow during an unknown historical period⁴. We are unsure about the exact time when their earliest migrations into northeastern India began (Choudhury 1959, pp. 96–111), but these migratory waves likely occurred between the second century BCE and the first century CE (Rosati 2016)⁵. After no less than one millennium following their penetration into South Asia (Bryant 2001, p. 141), these Indo-Aryan speaking groups had probably developed a religious system which did not match with the earlier Vedic religion. The migrants probably based their theological concepts on the worship of the male sky god and its various manifestations. It is still debatable whether the Brahmanic theological developments were influenced by local and tribal substrata, as was supposed by Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya (Bhattacharyya 1995, p. 87; 1974, pp. 1–2; Erndl 2004, pp. 145–46; Wedemeyer 2012, pp. 20–25), or by an “orthogenetic” development (see Samuel 2008, pp. 255–56).

For this reason, both ritual praxis and mythology play an important role in understanding the pattern, which was followed by the goddess cults’ rise to prominence in Hindu theology throughout the whole Indian sub-continent. More specifically, a great number of local and regional female deities were absorbed within the Hindu pantheon through different patterns of interaction (cross-fertilization⁶), and were later raised to the rank of *iṣṭadevatā* (chosen deity) of the royal family, symbolising the union between the Hindu ruler and the tribal inhabitants⁷. Indeed, India may be regarded as a *living and dynamic social body* (see Rosati 2016; Eck 2012, p. 114), reacting to any stimulus in different ways. Thus, to affirm or deny similar patterns of cross-cultural interactions could be an unwise methodological approach. Every Indian regional context produced distinct results from the interactions between Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic traditions, and this dynamic might explain the Epic and Puranic variations of the same myth (Rosati 2017a, p. 138), as well as additional distinctions between Brahmanism and Hindu religions.

The role in the cross-cultural process which was played by the autochthonous civilizations that had already developed what Geoffrey Samuel calls “proto-Śākta tradition” (Samuel 2008, p. 255) emerged in the well-known Rigvedic myth narrating the prohibited incest between the father (then Prajāpati) and the virgin daughter (then Uṣas [Aurora]) at the daybreak of the universe. However, the sexual intercourse was interrupted by the wild archer (i.e., Rudra-Śiva⁸), because the sexual act was considered extremely impure (Eliade 1971, p. 26). The prohibited sexual act mirrored the necessity of the feminine

⁴ The Indo-Aryan speaking groups who arrived in the northwestern offshoot of the Indian sub-continent around the middle of the second millennium BCE, bringing the Vedic tradition, were distinct from the Indo-Aryan speaking people who began to influence the Assamese cultures more than one millennium later. In fact, “at this time [they] introduced the Prakrit which was to evolve into Assamese” (Hazarika 2017, p. 234).

⁵ The arrival of Indo-Aryan speaking people in northeastern India is related to the rise of Kāmarūpa as a political entity (Hazarika 2017, p. 234).

⁶ This term is considered to describe the combination of two opposite processes: the “*identification brahmanica*” of the local deities and the “*identification deshika*” of the Brahmanic deities (Doniger 2010, p. 6). These socio-cultural processes may be roughly described also as Sanskritization processes (see Srinivas 1952, p. 30) and tribalization processes (Rosati 2017a, p. 140).

⁷ The adjective Hindu in this context is used to underscore a discontinuity with the Vedic ideology. Indeed, the Assamese Hindu culture was strongly influenced by local and non-Indo-Aryan traditions, thus marking a distinction between Brahmanism and the Hindu cultures (see Sahu 2001, pp. 5–6).

⁸ According to Nicholas Allen (Allen 2007, p. 204n1), the wild archer of the Vedic hymns was the ancestor of the god called in other Vedic hymns Rudra and “who in the classical text has a great variety of name”, such as Śiva, “Mahādeva, Śaṅkara and so on”.

element to begin the cosmogenesis. Indeed, the archer was able to stop the sexual act although he could stop neither the desire (*kāma*) which was originated into the mind of the god (Jamison and Brereton 2014, 10.129.3–4; Shastri [1991] 2008, 42.122), nor the consequent production of sperm—a drop of which fell on Earth, originating life (Rosati 2016; Jamison and Brereton 2014, 10.61.1–9). Therefore, since its Vedic origins, the Brahmanic mythology showed a dialectic between purity and impurity, prescriptions and taboos, so that what was considered orthodox was already blended with the heterodox developments of the Brahmanic system⁹. It can be argued that pure and impure were both necessary to generate life.

Consequently, the groups of Indo-Aryan speaking peoples who arrived in northeastern India over 200 BCE–100 CE entered into contact with autochthonous traditions which already worshipped sexual symbols and female deities, whose cultic systems were dominated by neither male deities nor orthodox performances (Rosati 2016). These groups might not have brought a unitary vision of the divine into Assam; on the contrary, they might have been composed of distinct sub-groups (e.g., *vaiṣṇava*, *śaiva*, etc.), some of which were already associated with a Hindu heterodox religious system.¹⁰ When these alien peoples met the local tribes who inhabited the Brahmaputra Valley, they were already prepared for an osmotic socio-cultural and religious exchange, which resulted in a fusion of norms and values.

Therefore, this cross-cultural negotiation—which began during the ancient and obscure past of Assam—was at the origin of the *yoni* (vulva) cult of the temple of Kāmākhyā. However, it may be that the cult of the *yoni*—which was practised at Nīlācala (Blue Mountain) where the *yoni* of Satī fell—was influenced by the Brahmanic negotiations with the local tribes or by extra-Assamese traditions (i.e., Nepal, Orissa, and South India) (Deka 2004, p. 14). In both cases, this led to a specific Assamese cult; indeed, while the *yoni pūjā* was a fundamental part of the Kaula ritual system, the temple of Kāmākhyā hypostatizes the female sexual aspect of the Goddess through the placement of the *yoni* stone inside its *garbhagr̥ha* (*sanctum sanctorum*). According to Karel Van Kooij (Van Kooij 1972, p. 36), the *yoni* cult of Nīlācala was an “eastern offshoot” of a typical religious phenomenon that interested the mountain dwellers across the northwestern and northern Himalayan regions of the Sub-continent. This diffusion theory was corroborated by the *Tīrtha Yātrā* section of the *Mahābhārata* (Van Buitenen 1975, 3.80.100–5, 3.82.80–85, 3.82.130–35), which described three ancient Himalayan *tīrthas* (Bhīmāsthāna, Udyantaparvata, and Gaurīśikhara¹¹) symbolizing the womb or the breast of the goddess, where the devotee needed to bathe in order to obtain the purification.¹²

The cross-cultural negotiations continued after the ancient past and during the early medieval ages, and resulted in the systematization of the non-Aryan cult of the *yoginīs* within the Kaula Tantric School called Yoginī Kaula (Dehejia 1986, p. 1)—a heterodox Hindu sect which played a fundamental role in the mediation between the Brahmanic cosmos and tribal ideologies and practices. Perhaps the Yoginī Kaula became the private religion of the royal families of Assam, influencing both the Assamese *śākta-tantra* religious system (Urban [2009] 2010, p. 77; Sharma 1978,

⁹ Conventionally, *upaniṣads*, *Epics*, *purāṇas*, and the commentary to the six *darśanas* (systems) were recognized as a “single whole of mainstream Hindu philosophy” (Nicholson 2010, p. 2). In the medieval period, the use of *āstika* (roughly orthodox, or better affirmer) and *nāstika* (roughly heterodox, or better denier) emerged; these terms were used to divide Hindus and non-Hindus (Buddhists, Jains, etc.) (Nicholson 2010, p. 176), though in the late medieval period *nāstika* was also used to classify the *mlecchas*, “allowing foreigners together with Buddhists and Jains” (Nicholson 2010, p. 200). In this essay, *orthodox* and *heterodox* are used as categories that roughly describe what is pure Vedic doctrine and ritual against what is perceived by the *orthodox Brahmanic priesthood* as anti-Vedic; hence, the *śaiva* and *śākta* Tantric sects are described as heterodox sects.

¹⁰ It is supposed that the *śaiva* groups who arrived in Assam were distinct from the orthodox Vedic-Brahmanic traditions associating their cult with impure symbols and practices. However they also displayed a connection to the Vedic paradigm. Thus, the ancient and medieval patriarchal tribes of Assam and the local cult of the *liṅga* (phallus) developed a proto-*śaiva* religion that was not explicitly aware of the Vedic roots that can be identified with Śiva (Rudra, Śambhu, etc.).

¹¹ The three sacred sites were located on the Himalayan range, although their identification is still uncertain (see Sircar 1998, p. 9; Bhattacharyya 1974, p. 55; Bhardwaj 1973, pp. 47–48).

¹² It might be argued that mutually influential ritual performances were practiced; a more detailed explanation, in contrast with Van Buitenen’s translation, will appear in my Ph.D. dissertation, “The *Yoni* Cult at Kāmākhyā: Cross-Cultural Implications in Myth, Ritual and Symbol” (Rosati 2017b, pp. 71–72).

p. 187) and the cult of the *yonī*. Hence, the political power was linked both to Hindu and tribal traditions, being influenced by their variegated compositions. Yet which was the dominant sectarian strand in the cross-cultural processes observed in northeastern India? According to Davidson (2002, p. 225), “what is clear from the ethnographic and historical records is that Hindus of every stripe—Śaiva, Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, and Smārta—have engaged in aggressive Hinduization of tribal people,¹³ beginning in the early medieval time”. On the contrary, in the early medieval Kāmarūpa there was no evidence for an aggressive absorption process of tribal traditions within the Brahmanic universe (Kulke [1978] 1986, pp. 128–29). Furthermore, Sanskritization (Srinivas 1952, p. 30) is a too-generic process (Carroll 1977, p. 366), while both parochialization and universalization processes (Marriott 1955, pp. 181–200) might have had a greater role in the religio-political formation of Kāmarūpa as a Hindu state entity (Rosati 2017a, p. 153). Of note is the absorption of the goddess Kāmākhyā, who was described in the *Kālikāpurāṇa* as an ancient *kirāta* goddess (Shastri [1991] 2008, 38.149–50), showing that the tribal traditions were not transformed and adapted to the necessities of the Brahmanic “great” tradition (see Dold 2004, p. 90). In fact, Assamese kingship based its stability on the anti-Vedic,¹⁴ heterodox, and perhaps tribal elements which emerged as a priceless source of political power in myth, ritual, and symbol.

The archetypal Assamese king Naraka was an ambivalent ruler: he was described in an epigraphic record of the Pāla period as a *mleccha*, connecting the mytho-historical king to the dynastic line of Śālastambha, a usurper of the throne of the Varmans,¹⁵ and who was considered to have tribal origins (Sharma 1978, p. 91). However, all the early medieval dynasties of Kāmarūpa (Varmans [fourth to seventh century], Śālastambhas [seventh to tenth century], Pālas [tenth to twelfth century]) claimed to descend from the Naraka-Bhauma dynasty (Choudhury 1959, pp. 139–47).¹⁶

The ambivalence of Naraka was corroborated by his biography preserved in the *Kālikāpurāṇa* (Shastri [1991] 2008, Ch. 36–40), the earliest medieval *śākta purāṇa* devoted to the worship of the goddess Kāmākhyā, which was compiled in northeastern India (Hazra 1963, p. 232; Shastri [1991] 2008, pp. xxvi–xxvii; Urban [2009] 2010, p. 199n34; Van Kooij 1972, p. 3n4). The historical existence of Naraka lacks material evidence, although he can be considered the archetype of the Assamese *mahārājadhirāja* (king of kings) because he incorporated the ambivalence related to *divine* and *asuric* traits. More specifically, Naraka was either a semi-divine hero who represented the divine powers of *Prṥhvī* and *Viṣṇu* on Earth, or an *asura* who was influenced by the contact with the menstrual blood of *Prṥhvī* when he was a foetus in her womb. Naraka was also associated with the human skull, symbol of the Brahmanicide carried out by Śiva, when he beheaded one of the heads of *Brahmā* (Rosati 2016).¹⁷ The skull was the symbol *par excellence* of the Kāpālika sect—another element that cast a shadow on the Brahmanic origins of Naraka, although the *purāṇas* described him as a Hindu ruler well versed in the *Vedas* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 38.157).¹⁸

¹³ According to Anncharlott Eschmann (Eschmann [1978] 1986, pp. 79–80) the term “Hinduization” is used to emphasize its general character in contrast to Brahmanization, since not only the *brāhmaṇas* influenced the Sanskritization processes but also other castes, such as the *kṣatriya* (military order) (see also Kulke 1976, pp. 399–400).

¹⁴ In this context “anti-Vedic” is considered as every ritual practice and theological conception which does not follow the Vedic prescriptions. More precisely, blood offerings, the ritualization of sexual acts, consumption of meat and alcoholic beverages, and the association of secret rituals with cremation grounds are all considered anti-Vedic points, although they are a consistent part of the Hindu-Tantric ritual system in Assam.

¹⁵ How Śālastambhas succeeded to the Varmans is obscure; however, the Hāyūnthal Copper Plates of Harjaravarman (vv. 2–3) (middle of the ninth century) describes its founder, Śālastambha, as a *mleccha* (Sharma 1978, p. 91).

¹⁶ See, e.g., the Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman (vv. 5–6) and their attached seal (seventh century) (Sharma 1978, p. 33), the Tezpur grant of Vanamāla (vv. 1–19) (middle of the ninth century) (Sharma 1978, pp. 100–2), and the Bargāon Copper Plate of Ratnapāla (vv. 10–11) (1035 CE) (Sharma 1978, pp. 161–62).

¹⁷ Because of his prohibited act, Śiva was considered a *kapālin* (skull bearer); see *Kālikāpurāṇa* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 16.29–30), *Śivapurāṇa* (Shastri [1969] 2000, 2.2.27.22–23), cf. *Brahmapurāṇa* (Shastri 1985, 32.10–13, 37.29–33).

¹⁸ Regarding the symbolism of the skull that related Naraka to the Tantric ritual and the non-Aryan cultures, see (Dobia 2008, pp. 146–47).

The mytho-historical biography might have been influenced by religious and political events belonging to the ancient and early medieval history, although it was not a historical chronicle. It can be supposed that the Assamese kingship was based on *samkarajāti* (mixed-blood)—a fact that was supported by either the exogamic northeastern tribal system (Ehrenfels 1955) or the fluidity of the Hindu system of *jāti* (caste), which probably facilitated an ethno-linguistic mix (Dumont 1966; Srinivas [1968] 1970). A *samkarajāti* system politically justified the incorporation and fusion of tribal and Hindu traits as a result of intermarriages between tribal chief lineages and the *dvijas* (twice-born) (Kulke [1978] 1986, p. 129).

2. Kāmākhyā: Myth, Religion, and History

Assam is the famous homeland of the menstruating goddess Kāmākhyā,¹⁹ who according to the myth was an ancient tribal deity whose cult was continued by Naraka (Shastri [1991] 2008, 38.149–50)—the first Hindu mytho-historical king of Kāmarūpa. The main symbol of the Goddess Kāmākhyā is the “*yoni* of Satī” (Shin 2010, p. 15), which is preserved inside her *garbhagrha* on Nīlācala (see Dobia 2008, pp. 93–94). The mytho-genesis of the temple of Kāmākhyā is linked to the dismemberment of the lifeless body of Satī, an episode which happened after Śiva destroyed the *dakṣayajña* (sacrificial session organized by Dakṣa) (see Shastri [1991] 2008, Ch. 16–18).²⁰ Briefly, the story is as follows: Satī and her husband Śiva were not invited to attend the sacrifice of Dakṣa, the father of Satī; thus Satī, angry due to the insult, decided to go to the sacrificial arena where she either burned her corporeal body through her *tapas* (heat; ascetic power) (Shastri [1991] 2008, 16.46–50) or jumped into the sacrificial fire (Tagare 1992, 1.1.3.19b–23). Śiva, furious over his loss, destroyed the sacrifice with the help of Virabhadra. Then, Śiva took the lifeless body of Satī on his shoulder and started to wander through the universe (Rosati 2016), risking to destroy the whole cosmos because of his fury. Hence, the gods decided to dismember the corpse of the Goddess, so that her limbs fell on Earth (India), where Śiva reached her in his *liṅga* shape (Shastri [1991] 2008, 18.46–47). Among Satī’s limbs, her *yoni* fell on Nīlācala, the core of the *śākta pīṭhas* (seats of the goddess) network (Shastri [1991] 2008, 18.41–43; Pandey 1956, 7.30.53–102; Kumar 1983, 11.106–18), which became the abode of the goddess Kāmākhyā.

On an inter-textual analysis, the northeastern *śākta purāṇas* emerged as the only Puranic sources that described the dismemberment of the Goddess and the consequent rise of the *śākta pīṭhas* (Rosati 2016).²¹ More specifically, the *Kālikāpurāṇa*—whose actual recension is dated no later than the eleventh century (Van Kooij 1972, pp. 3–4; Urban [2009] 2010, p. 5)—intertwined the death of Satī with the biography of Naraka (Shastri [1991] 2008, Ch. 36–40), a demi-divine king who was

¹⁹ There the Ambuvācī Melā is the main festival, which, during the month of *āṣāḍha* (June–July), celebrates the annual menstrual period of the goddess Kāmākhyā. During the first three days of the festival, when the Goddess is believed to menstruate, the temple’s doors are closed and no pilgrims are allowed inside the sacred complex because of the inherent impurity connected to the menstrual blood. The fourth day the temple’s doors are opened and the celebrations begin. The festival is supposed to be a development of an ancient agricultural festival described in the *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa* (Pandey 1956, 9.9.27–34) which celebrated the sexual union between the Earth goddess and *varāha* (see Mishra 2004, pp. 51–54).

²⁰ This mythology and its *śākta* developments are analyzed in my forthcoming study (Rosati 2016). “The *Yoni* Cult at Kāmākhyā: Its Cross-Cultural Roots”. Briefly, two shorter versions of the myth are also preserved in the *Kālikāpurāṇa* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 61.6–11, 62.51–57); a similar story is preserved in the *Śivapurāṇa*, although it omits the particular of the dismemberment of the corpse of Satī (Shastri [1969] 2000, 2.2.26–27). Other variants of the myth are preserved in the *Brhaddharmapurāṇa* (Shastri 1888, 2.40), in the *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa* (Pandey 1956, 7.30), in the *Brahmapurāṇa* (Shastri 1985, Ch. 32, 37), in the *Līṅgapurāṇa* (Shastri [1951] 1998, 1.99–100), in the *Mahābhāgavatapurāṇa* (Kumar 1983, Ch. 11), in the *Matsyapurāṇa* (Basu 1916, Ch. 13), in the *Skandapurāṇa* (Tagare 1992, 1.1.1–4), in the *Vāyupurāṇa* (Bhatt 1987, 1.30), etc. Antecedents of the Puranic story may be traced in the *Mahābhārata* (see Allen 2007, p. 199; Belvalkar 1954, 12.274.34–59).

²¹ The *śākta purāṇas* are a group of texts compiled in northeastern India throughout the early medieval and medieval period, such as the *Devīpurāṇa* (Kumar 1976) (which is the only text that did not narrate the *dakṣayajña*), the *Brhaddharmapurāṇa* (Shastri 1888), the *Devībhāgavatapurāṇa* (Pandey 1956), the *Kālikāpurāṇa* (Shastri [1991] 2008), the *Mahābhāgavatapurāṇa* (Kumar 1983). However, the *Matsyapurāṇa* (Basu 1916, 13.23–25) already mentioned 110 seats connected to the Goddess’s power, although the source describes neither the dismemberment of the Goddess nor her limbs as source of the Goddess’s seats.

already known in the *Mahābhārata* (Van Buitenen 1975, 2.9.10–15; Garbutt 2008, 5.48.80–82; Vaughan 2009, 7.29.30–39). According to his biography, Naraka was conceived by Pṛthvī during her menstrual period, conferring upon him an asuric (i.e., demoniac) condition. This magical conception was caused by the touch of the boar *varāha* when it rescued the Earth goddess trapped in the cosmic waters (Wilson 1840, 5.29.22). The *śākta purāṇas* transformed this bodily contact into a sexual intercourse (Pandey 1956, 9.9.27–34; Shastri [1991] 2008, 25.29–31, 29.13)—a prohibited act that linked Naraka to a state of impurity. The impure origin of the first king of ancient Kāmarūpa was also recounted in the seventh century Dubi Copper Plates of Bhāskaravarman (v. 2):

[o]ne who, in the days of yore, in the form of a boar out of compassion recovered the lost Earth for the stability of the people and put the same in his mouth, begot a superior son, Naraka by name, who was powerful enough even to torment the ambrosia-drinking gods and who was all powerful on earth being the king of kings.²² (Sharma 1978, p. 20)

According to the myth, after the birth of Naraka, Pṛthvī entrusted her child to Janaka, the king of Mithilā, who found Naraka lying inside a human skull in his *yajñavāṭa* (sacrificial ground) (Shastri [1991] 2008, 37.48–51). When Naraka was sixteen, Pṛthvī revealed to her son that he was the son of Viṣṇu (Shastri [1991] 2008, 38.47–48). Then, Naraka with the help of his father Viṣṇu defeated the local tribes and won Kāmarūpa's throne (Shastri [1991] 2008, 38.110–13). Hence, the cult of Kāmākhyā, which was a *kirāta* goddess,²³ was absorbed and continued by Naraka, as requested by Viṣṇu (Shastri [1991] 2008, 38.148–49). In this way, the goddess Kāmākhyā was connected to the *Vaiṣṇava* ideology as well as to the Assamese kingship.²⁴

Kāmākhyā was described not only as the presiding deity of Nīlācala (Kumar 1976, 39.5cd), but also as either the beloved companion of Śiva (Shastri [1991] 2008, 62.73b–85a) or the *śakti* (power) of Kāma (Desire) (Shastri [1991] 2008, 63.8–9a).²⁵ It is worth noting that the links between the Goddess, Viṣṇu, and Naraka were cut off when Naraka prevented the *ṛṣi* (seer) Vasiṣṭha (i.e., Vasiṣṭha) from entering the shrine to worship the goddess Kāmākhyā. Thus, Vasiṣṭha cursed Naraka for his lack of respect, causing the disappearance of both the goddess Kāmākhyā and her *yoni* symbol from Nīlācala (Shastri [1991] 2008, 39.10–20). The misbehaviour of Naraka was influenced by the friendship that he had begun with Baṇāsura (Shastri [1991] 2008, 39.29–31), a “tribal king of Eastern Assam” (Urban 2011, p. 235) who was a *śaiva* devotee and a Tantric practitioner (Barua 1996, p. 40). This passage in the mytho-historical biography of Naraka marked the switching of the Goddess and of the kingship from a more orthodox *Vaiṣṇava* ideology to the heterodox *Śaiva* field. This religious change originated the war between Naraka and the Brahmanic gods, which ended with the death of Naraka at the hands of Viṣṇu (in the form of Kṛṣṇa), who placed Bhagadatta, a son of Naraka on the throne of Kāmarūpa (Shastri [1991] 2008, 40.114).

Unfortunately, there is no evidence sustaining the historicity of this myth, nor identifying the period when the Indo-Aryans arrived in Assam; according to the epigraphic records, the middle of the fourth century CE can be determined as the latest historical term for the Indo-Aryan migrations into Assam, being the term “when political power shifted from mytho-historical Naraka-Bhauma dynasty

²² Although Naraka was born from Viṣṇu and the Earth goddess, he will challenge the *devas* or the true Brahmanic gods (i.e., “the ambrosia-drinking gods”, a term that recalls the battle between *devas* and *asuras* to obtain the ambrosia after the churning of the milk ocean).

²³ In this instance it can be argued that the term *kirāta* indicates the connection of the Goddess with that world that was considered peripheral by the Brahmanic culture. Further, the goddess Kāmākhyā described in the early medieval Puranic source was a deity that fused together the traits of distinct local goddesses and of the mainstream Hindu goddesses which emerged from the *Devīmāhātmya* in the sixth century (Rosati 2016). Thus, it can be reasonably supposed that there was not a single local goddess worshipped by the Kirātas before the Indo-Aryan advent in Assam.

²⁴ Regarding the ancient association of the Goddess with Viṣṇu, see *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of Northwest India in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol* by K. Erndl (Erndl 1993, pp. 43–44); also cf. N. N. Bhattacharyya (Bhattacharyya 1974, p. 73), and particularly for the Kāmākhyā case-study, cf. (Rosati 2017a).

²⁵ The existence, on Nīlācala, of an ancient cave was corroborated through the Umācal Rock Inscription (470–94 CE) (Sharma 1978, pp. 2–3).

to Puṣyavarman, the first historical king of Kāmarūpa (Rosati 2016). However, “when and how the Aryans entered Assam from the west, is uncertain” (Choudhury 1959, p. 111). In any case, probably the invasion of Naraka, which was narrated in the *Kālikāpurāṇa*, reflected or was influenced by one of the ancient migration waves from the western borders into northeastern India.²⁶

The royal families of early medieval Assam traced their origins back to the Bhauma family (Choudhury 1959, p. 210), thus linking their lineages with Viṣṇu and Pṛthvī. However, Dinesh Sircar has refused to validate any connections between actual history and the Naraka myth:

[T]he story has here been made a caricature of its older and real Epico-Purāṇic type and is weaker than most legends of this class. In any case, no serious student can expect any trace of political history in the above legends about Naraka and his descendants. (Sircar 2007, p. 90)

On the contrary, Jae-Eun Shin has argued that

[K]ing Naraka [. . .] the most important figure in a fabricated genealogy and the consistent source of political authority of every ruling family from the Varmans to Pālas [. . .] [S]uitable genealogy [. . .] was probably fabricated when regional state formation reached a crucial phase around the seventh century in the Brahmaputra Valley. (Shin 2010, pp. 9–10)

In this instance it can be supposed that historical processes influenced the Puranic biography of Naraka, but the narrative cannot be considered as a historical chronicle because of a lack of any supporting material evidence, such as archaeological ones. Thus:

[m]yth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is *the* true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional, symbol or tool, archetype or stereotype. It is either strongly structured and logical or emotional and pre-logical, traditional and primitive or part of contemporary ideology. Myth is about the gods, but often also the ancestors and sometimes certain men. (Strenski 1987, p. 1)

The *Kālikāpurāṇa* was compiled throughout the Śālastambha and Pāla periods; the first one “raised the Goddess to the rank of *iṣṭadevatā* (royal tutelary deity), perhaps to facilitate the process of state formation” (Rosati 2016; Kulke 1992, pp. 57–58, 77–78), while the second one involved *tāntrikas* (Urban [2009] 2010, p. 77)—a fact that was supported by the epigraphic records (Sharma 1978, p. 187). In this way, the kings of Kāmarūpa traced their origin back not only to Naraka, but also to the impurity of his birth, which was due to the menstrual blood of the Earth goddess. As Pratap Chandra Choudhury pointed out, this connection between Assamese kingship and the divine is the only connection between the historical period and the mytho-historical one:

[t]he legendary accounts, with which we begin the political history of the land, are as varied and conflicting as doubtful in their authenticity. Much will depend on the tracing of a connection between the legendary proto-historical period and the historical one. The genealogy given in the epigraphs, as far as it goes, is, however, unchallenged. (Choudhury 1959, p. 9)

Unfortunately, during its history, Assam was affected by a great number of floods and earthquakes; thereby, there is a lack of archaeological and iconographic evidence to better understand its ancient and early medieval period, and what the origin of the Assamese Hindu kingship was.

²⁶ An armed penetration of Indo-Aryan groups in Assam cannot be corroborated by any material evidence, while, on the the account of the earliest Indo-Aryan speaking peoples migrations into northwestern part of the Sub-continent (around 1500 BCE)—the same unarmed pattern (Bryant 2001, pp. 63–67, 141–46, 217–20) might be supposed that affected the northeast of India. In fact, as theorized by Edwin Bryant, “the Aryan invasion theory” was no more than “a linguistic issue” (Bryant 2001, p. 141).

3. Death and Life at Nīlācala–Kāmākhyā

In northeastern India, between the ninth and the eleventh centuries (see Urban [2009] 2010, p. 199n34; White [2003] 2006, pp. 22–23, 278), the local cult of the *yoginīs* was systematized within the Yoginī Kaula school through the compilation of the *Kulajñānanirṇaya* (Bagchi [1948] 1986).²⁷ The *yoginī* cult grounded its roots “outside the heterodox Brahmanic traditions” (Dehejia 1986, p. 1), while its evolution into the Yoginī Kaula was influenced by both tribal traditions and heterodox Hindu sects (Davidson 2002, pp. 224–25). Around the middle of the ninth century the goddess Kāmākhyā was absorbed into the Brahmanic pantheon—a fact that found a confirmation in the Tezpur Copper Plates of Vanamāla (Sharma 1978, p. 104)—and she was already regarded as the leader of the *yoginīs* (Shin 2010, p. 14), who were described in two lists preserved in the *Kālikāpurāṇa* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 54.35–39, 63.37–43).²⁸ On the one hand, the *śākta* text legitimized the *yoginī* cult at Kāmākhyā, while on the other hand, it raised their cult from a local one to a pan-Indian cult, which was performed in the main *śākta pīṭhas* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 64.56).

The theological basis of this incorporation was sought in the brahmanical Śākta model which was postulated in the *Devīmāhātmya* around the seventh century. In this text the concept of Mūla Prakṛiti or Ādi Śakti from which all the goddesses emanated as her manifestations was already constructed and promulgated. It gives theological ground to accommodate any individual goddess and bring these diverse goddesses under a unifying umbrella. Hence, even though it contains many strands of non-Vedic, non-brahmanical, tribal, and local traditions, these strands appear to have been appropriated by brahmanas and reworked and re-cast within the brahmanical framework—especially in terms of theme, narrative structure, and conceptualization. The later *Purāṇas* of the eastern region often repeat, confirm, elaborate, or expand this model (Shin 2010, p. 15).

Both the goddess Kāmākhyā and the *yoginīs* were originated when the *yoni* of Sati, falling on Nīlācala, broke up into more *yonis* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 62.74–75). Thus, the *yoginīs* found a connection with the ideology of the *śākta pīṭhas* (Shin 2010, p. 16) as protectresses of the *yoni* symbol of the goddess Kāmākhyā (Shastri [1991] 2008, 54.35–45, 63.37–43), who resides inside the *yoni*-stone (Shastri 1990, 1.4) after the *yonis* re-united together into a single one. Symbolic connections between Kāmākhyā and her *yoginī* attendants emerged. The first vivifies Earth through her menstrual fluid that pour out from her *yoni*, on top of Nīlācala, every year during Ambuvācī Melā. A second links her to the *yoginīs*, whose cult was practised in secret areas (Bagchi [1948] 1986, 21.8b), such as *śmaśānas* (cremation grounds) and *śākta pīṭhas*, corroborating the idea that Nīlācala was an ancient funerary site (Rosati 2017a).

According to the northeastern *śākta purāṇas*, the *śākta pīṭhas* were religious centres connected to the worship of the goddess. Earlier, the *pīṭhas* were linked to *śmaśānas* (Snellgrove 1959, p. 68), such as the earliest known *catuspīṭhas* (four original seats) preserved in the *Hevajra Tantra* (Snellgrove 1959, 1.7.12)—a text compiled no later than the middle of the ninth century (Szántó 2012, p. 14). In this way, from the ninth to the eleventh century, during the proto-Tantric reformation hypothesized by Alexis Sanderson (Sanderson 1988, pp. 664–66)—which it may be supposed, also involved the northeastern Indian Yoginī Kaula systematization of the *yoginī* cult—the *pīṭhas* were gradually absorbed into the heterodox Hindu traditions. They switched from being cremation grounds, often connected to tribal traditions, to secret places where esoteric Tantric rituals were practiced, tied to both the aniconic worship of deities and ascetic performances. According to D.C. Sircar (Sircar 1998, p. 3), the *pīṭhas*

²⁷ The *yoginīs* could have been both supernatural beings and human women—the firsts were considered objects of worship, while the second were part of worship itself (Sherma 2000, pp. 39–42; White [2003] 2006, p. 10). Bhattacharyya (1974, p. 104) considered them as priestesses possessed by deities, while V. Dehejia (Dehejia 1986, p. 11) supposed they were the female counterpart of *yogins*. In any case, they emerged into the Yoginī Kaula as female adepts and counterparts of the male Kaula *siddhas* (Dyczkowski 1988, pp. 63–65).

²⁸ They were connected to the lists preserved in the sixth century *Agnipurāṇa* (Shastri 1967–1968, Ch. 52 and 146), where the *yoginīs* emerged as descendants of the ancient *mātr̥s* (*mātr̥kās* [mothers]) (White [2003] 2006, pp. 27–29).

were indeed altars used as objects of worship, perhaps influencing a later connection of the *śākta pīṭhas* with the worship of aniconic deities, because usually a non-anthropomorphic symbol is not allowed inside a Hindu *garbhagr̥ha*. On the contrary, the tribal deities closely associated with the characteristic of the Hindu ones were usually worshipped in their primeval aniconic (or non-anthropomorphic) form, even though they were absorbed into the Brahmanic pantheon (Mallebrein 1999, pp. 137–55).

In early medieval Kāmarūpa, the sexual symbolism of the *yonī* was superimposed onto the primeval death imaginary of Nīlācala, which is supposed to have been an ancient tribal cremation ground (Davidson 2002, p. 209). Additionally, the Puranic and Tantric mythologies evoked this primeval status of the sacred mountain, which was described as a mountain made by the ashes of Kāma (Desire) (Shastri [1991] 2008, 62.89), or made by the ashes of Keśin, a *dānava*.²⁹ Kāma was incinerated by Śiva (Shastri [1991] 2008, 42.102–76a; Shastri [1969] 2000, 2.3.17–18),³⁰ because the god of desire violated and disturbed the deep meditation state of Śiva with his supernatural arrow called *sammohana* (deluding; infatuating) in order to instil the love for Satī, or Parvatī, into his mind. In another instance, Keśin was incinerated by the goddess Kālī (i.e., Kāmākhyā) (Shastri 1982, 1.15.23–24; Rosati),³¹ who created the demon from a part of Brahmā's body to punish his arrogance (Shastri 1982, 1.15.9).³² Thus, both Kāma and Keśin disturbed the prior order, being aware that they will have renounced their existence to set in motion the process of cosmogenesis. Through these apparent deaths, the Sanskrit scribes maintained a symbolic connection between Nīlācala and its primeval function as cremation ground, when it was identified with Heruka, its ancient presiding deity:

The cremation ground at that place [Nīlācala], named Heruka, is being of red colour, bearing a knife and its hide looks extremely terrible; (Heruka) is consuming human flesh, is resplendent by three wreaths of severed human heads from which bloods are dripping down, is crowded by ghosts, stands on a corpse, whose teeth have been bared because of being burnt by the fire, is adorned with ornaments, provided with weapons, and has a mount; the worshipper should worship Heruka (cremation ground) by meditation only. (Shastri [1991] 2008, 63.135–37a)

Nīlācala–Kāmākhyā thus emerged as a unique entity which symbolized both sexual concepts related to the Śiva–Śakti union, and the dynamics that grounded its roots in its ancient status as *śmaśāna*. Thus, Nīlācala–Kāmākhyā combined the liminal powers which were connected to both death and sex. Therefore, the goddess Kāmākhyā is experienced as either an amorous deity (Shastri [1991] 2008, 62.2; Rosati) or as a terrifying *eater of raw flesh* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 80.36–54) who is neither represented anthropomorphically inside her temple nor outside.³³

Her *garbhagr̥ha* is extremely dark and claustrophobic, recalling the mother's womb. Within it there is a water stream flowing over the *yonī* stone, symbolising the sexual fluids of the Goddess (Shastri 1982, 1.11.37a). Usually, her *garbhagr̥ha* was regarded as place where the *sādhaka* (adept) went to worship the *yonī* of the Goddess as the source of the whole universe (Shastri 1982, 1.15.52), such as the womb of the mother is the source of all life. Although related to sexuality, this symbolism can be considered an *ordinary interpretation* of the *garbhagr̥ha* of a Hindu temple as homologue of the *hiraṇyagarbha* (golden germ) (Bosch [1960] 1994, pp. 51–64)—the original source of the cosmos (Jamison and Brereton 2014, 10.121). However, a hidden significance associated with the *garbhagr̥ha* may be supposed, which is as a threshold that must be overcome to enter into contact with the

²⁹ The *dānavas* were considered a class of *asuras*, or anti-*deva*; however, both are conventionally described as demons.

³⁰ There are many variants of the story of Kāma, see Benton (2005, pp. 23–36), Doniger (1973, pp. 141–71) and Kramrisch (1981, pp. 216–18).

³¹ At the beginning of the myth, Śiva explained that Kālī was no other than Kāmākhyā (Shastri 1982, 1.15.1–2).

³² A longer analysis of the Puranic and Tantric myths will appear in Ch. 4 of my Ph.D. thesis (Rosati 2017b, pp. 216–50).

³³ The only known images of goddess Kāmākhyā are modern lithographs and a metal *calanta mūrti* of the goddess, although its production period cannot be stated until metallographic analysis can be done (Deka 2004, pp. 43–44). We have no solid evidence of anthropomorphic representations of Kāmākhyā belonging to the ancient or medieval ages.

underworld. This process is also a psychological one; in fact, the *sādhaka* has to climb down a number of steps to reach the *garbhagṛha*, in a symbolic descent to the subterranean world. Most of the studies on the goddess Kāmākhyā and her preeminent temple on Nīlācala have noticed the extreme relevance of fluids, as Gioia Lussana pointed out in her recent study:

... *fluid essence* is one of the most archaic and universal features of the sacred, closely linked to Mother Earth, whose very nature is arid and dry because through her monthly menstruation she loses her generative power and so needs to reintegrate it constantly by absorbing liquids. (Lussana 2015, p. 76)

Chthonic symbolism has had an important influence on the temple, which is the abode of a polarisation of antithetical elements, such as pure and impure, masculine (Śiva) and feminine (Śakti), life and death, chthonic and aquatic elements. Thus, the *garbhagṛha* of Kāmākhyā not only symbolizes the mother's womb where the matrix of the universe—the *yoni*—is concealed, but it is also the access point to the power of the ancestors.

The temple of Kāmākhyā is a *dynamic organism* which is connected to the endless cycle of life and death—the two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, being the womb of the universe, everything is originated from its cosmogonic powers mirrored by the *yoni* and its sexual symbolism. Yet, the ashes of dead bodies and the blood of sacrifices also represent the necessity of death to set the cosmogenesis in motion. This link between Nīlācala–Kāmākhyā and an ancient cult of the ancestors reconnected the sacred site to an ancient tribal cremation ground which was nourished through the blood and corpses of dead people, such as evoked in the following verses of *Kālikāpurāṇa*:

If a human being is sacrificed in the *pīṭha* (of the goddess), it is to be sacrificed in the cemetery [*śmaśāna*], called Heruka, which has already been stated.³⁴ (Shastri [1991] 2008, 67.69)

Thereby, the goddess Kāmākhyā as presiding deity of Nīlācala inherited various functions and traits of Heruka, who was the presiding deity of an ancient cremation ground on Nīlācala as already stated.³⁵ Who was Heruka? From the Puranic account he emerged as a terrifying and dangerous deity, who was thirsty for blood, flesh, and heads, such as a *bhūta* (ghost), which Van Kooij describes as “gods of the non-Aryan folk religion, in which bloody rites were quite regular and which became more and more important as the Vedic sacrifices fell into decay” (Van Kooij 1972, p. 21). The prominence of Heruka during the early medieval age, and his eventual identification with the *pīṭha* corroborate the idea that there was a fusion between the traits of Heruka and the traits of a more peaceful female deity resulting in the ambivalence of the goddess Kāmākhyā, who incorporates the symbolism of life and death.

4. The Assamese Tantric Kingship and the Supernatural Powers

What was the relationship between Nīlācala–Kāmākhyā (and its dangerous and liminal powers) and the Assamese kingship? As was already seen, all early medieval dynasties of Kāmarūpa claimed descent from Naraka, linking their lineages to Viṣṇu and Pṛthvī. Thus, Assamese kingship has been related not only to the divine, but also to the impurity of the sexual act. It was this sexual act, occurring during a physically impure condition for Pṛthvī, that led to the birth of Naraka. In this way, the connection with menstrual blood was symbolically transmitted from the Earth goddess to Kāmākhyā, originating the myth of the menstruating Goddess that presides over the temple on Nīlācala. However, the kings as well as the sacerdotal caste were aware of the anti-Vedic implications connected to the mythology of Naraka. In fact, the mytho-historical king transmitted to the historical rulers of Kāmarūpa a close relationship, firstly, with the menstrual blood, secondly, with the skull—symbol of

³⁴ *poṭhe ced doyate martyo baliṃ dadyāt śmaśānake | śmaśānaṃ herukākhyāṃ tu tatpūrvā pratipāditam |* .

³⁵ Heruka was substituted with Kālī as the presiding deity of the main (eastern) cremation ground on Nīlācala, near the bus stand, on the opposite side of the football field (Rosati 2017a, figs. 1–2).

Brahmanicide—and the death imagery of the cremation ground and its presiding deities. Nevertheless, Naraka was raised to the status of a hero who was able to rule over ancient Kāmarūpa with the *vaiṣṇavāstra* (bow of Viṣṇu) (Vaughan 2009, 7.29.30–39), a magical weapon. This supernatural bow was incorporated within the *Kālikāpurāṇa*’s biography of Naraka as *vaiṣṇavīśakti* (Shastri [1991] 2008, 40.123), stressing the role of the *śakti* inherent to every god (Pargiter [1888] 1904, 81.75–81). *Śakti*, indeed, “is not female power or energy in particular”, but it “is all power and energy, and it is the attribute of the Goddess” (Eck 2012, p. 259; Urban [2009] 2010, p. 32). The *vaiṣṇavīśakti* passed to his son Bhagadatta after the death of Naraka and, metaphorically, to every king of Kāmarūpa—the pivotal actors in the state formation process who were able to rule over a Kāmarūpa kingdom blending the Vedic ideology with the tribal religions, mediated through the work of heterodox Hindu priests (Rosati 2016) or *siddhas*. Furthermore, a king, symbolically, without *vaiṣṇavīśakti* would have been unable to operate, as a *śava* (corpse) without the female energy, *śakti* (Pandey 1956, 3.6.18–19), who is often shown in modern artworks and lithographs dancing above the corpse to awaken it.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence of the ethno-linguistic origin of Assamese royal families. Even if epigraphic records suggest a *mleccha* root, it can be argued that they were the result of intermarriage between an Indo-Aryan élite and tribal peoples (Hazarika 2017, p. 234), as the exogamic tradition is a common custom between the matrilineal tribes of Assam (Ehrenfels 1955, p. 306). Therefore, it might be reasonably speculated that the Assamese kings, during the early medieval period, were mixed blood *samkarajāti* rulers—a fact that from a political perspective strengthened their political power in a region which was dominated by diverse tribal groups. From a religious perspective, the cross-cultural negotiations which resulted in the *samkarajāti* kings sustained the affirmation of the heterodox *śākta-tantra* sects, which were linked to a type of ritual praxis that may also be observed among local tribes.

At this point, we could easily fall into generalisations stating that everything described as *tantra* or *śākta-tantra* derived from a tribal substratum. Christian Wedemeyer (Wedemeyer 2012, pp. 24–30) criticised this association as a flawed theory because there are no primary sources produced by tribal people during the early medieval ages which may corroborate the ritual praxis followed by the tribes before the end of the first millennium CE. However, among Tantric groups, many different schools emerged, so that while the local traditions could have had a small impact on the sophisticated Tantric-Śaivism of Kashmir, they played a greater role on the formation of the performance-based Assamese Tantra (Urban [2009] 2010, p. 10). In fact, the lack of tribal records regarding their early medieval uses and customs cannot be taken as proof to show that the tribal people did not have such uses and customs. As David V. Zou pointed out:

[t]races of past survive in diverse linguistic and ideological forms, and local people themselves add a new dimension to custom when they creatively appropriate and translate their historical heritage of headhunting into an evocative metaphor of modern practices. (Zou 2005, pp. 76–77)

However, *śākta-tantra* is not everywhere a mainly tribal and non-Aryan phenomenon, because it is not a *monolithic* religious system. Indeed, in the Assamese case study an “orthogenetic development” of a proto-*śākta* ideology within the folds of Brahmanic orthodoxy may be considered dubious (Rosati 2016). Northeastern India was eventually affected by Indo-Aryan ideologies (Choudhury 1959, pp. 103–14), while since the very ancient times, matrilineal tribes—which based their society on agriculture, the cult of the deads and the worship of sexual fetishes (Bhattacharyya 1995, p. 87; 1974, pp. 1–2; Erndl 2004, pp. 45–46)—influenced the regional religious systems.

Thus, the kings of Assam—even if they belonged to the Indo-Aryan speaking élite or were Hinduized tribal chiefs—operated as cross-cultural mediators in a variegated socio-religious and historical background. They subverted the Vedic ritual prescriptions and harnessed the polluting forces produced throughout the ritual uses of blood and sexual fluids, thus strengthening their political power (Urban 2001, pp. 779–81). Therefore, bodily fluids acted as magical instruments: the king, through blood offerings, as any *sādhaka*, was able to reach the heaven, while as a ruler he

was able to defeat the enemies (Shastri [1991] 2008, 67.5b–6a, 85.79–80) and to maintain the stability within the kingdom (Shastri [1991] 2008, 85.13–14a). The king emerged as a peculiar political actor, performing sacrifices and thus placing himself in close contact with supernatural beings which were often considered malignant, such as *yoginīs* and *bhūtas*, both linked to cremation grounds as well as to blood consumption (Babb 1975, p. 205).

5. The Kings and the Magical Menstrual Blood

According to the Puranic tradition, when Naraka banned the *ṛṣi* Vasiṣṭha from entering inside the temple of Kāmākhyā to worship the Goddess (Shastri [1991] 2008, 39.10–20), he emerged as guardian of both Nīlācala and its menstruating Goddess. The Assamese kingship emerged as the preeminent worshipper of the goddess Kāmākhyā, who gave back to the king supernatural powers if he performed the prescribed blood rituals. He was also the protector of the Goddess, thus being the only one able to decide who could gain access to the temple to worship Kāmākhyā. Therefore, only the *sādhakas* admitted by the king could obtain *siddhis* (accomplishments) and other boons, such as mercury/quicksilver—an essential metal for alchemical practices, which is considered to have a rich vein in Nīlācala (Van Kooij 1972, p. 27). However, the greatest supernatural powers were released by the waters that flowed inside the Goddess' *garbhagrha*. Beyond this, the devotees who drank the reddish water obtained magical powers (Shastri [1991] 2008, 62.88b–90), the *paranirvāṇa* (highest extinction) (Shastri [1991] 2008, 80.87), after their death (Shastri [1991] 2008, 72.78–89; Van Kooij 1972, p. 26).³⁶ The reddish water signifies the menstrual blood of the Goddess—a fact that highlights the mystic-erotic practices developed since the ninth century throughout the sub-continent (White [2003] 2006, pp. 8–12).

The *Kālikāpurāṇa* explained the divine water which flowed inside the symbolic womb of the goddess Kāmākhyā as the greatest elixir (*amṛta*); and the act of drinking this reddish water probably influenced the later Tantric literature that described *rajaṣāṇa* (drinking female discharge) rite or the kissing of the female vulva (Shastri 1990, 4.24),³⁷ with the purpose of obtaining *siddhis*—a common Kaula practice. During these mystic-erotic practices, the women were identified with the “blood and flesh” *yoginīs* that only male *vīras* (heroes) and *siddhas* (perfect beings) may approach (White [2003] 2006, pp. 8–10; Bhattacharyya 1974, p. 104), although some Tantric sources identified the woman as a mere ritual object (Biernacki 2007, p. 54).

The *Kālikāpurāṇa*'s vision of the menstrual blood was ambiguous and it cannot be explained through the association with menstrual blood impurity. The actual recension of the *Kālikāpurāṇa* was attested between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, although a previous version, now lost, is hypothesised to have been compiled around the sixth century (Hazra 1963, pp. 194–259). There is no indisputable evidence that a previous version existed; however, the *purāṇas* were “influenced by changing ideas and practices, and subject to interpolation” (Rosati 2016; Mackenzie Brown 1990, pp. 4–5). Thus, it can be postulated that in this instance there may have been an earlier version or an earlier source that influenced the eventual rendition of the *Kālikāpurāṇa*. According to Sylvia Wendt (Wendt 1996, p. 180), the *Kālikāpurāṇa* is divided into three distinct sections:

1. A mythological section (Shastri [1991] 2008, Ch. 1–51), which “includes a number of myths of different levels of narration;
2. A ritualistic section (Shastri [1991] 2008, Ch. 52–76) that includes “a number of hymns, descriptions of rituals, of *mantras*, *mudras* etc.”;

³⁶ According to Sravana Borkataki-Varma (Borkataki-Varma 2016, pp. 77–78), the *sādhakas* were able to obtain minor supernatural powers and the final *mokṣa* (liberation) through “awakening” their internal *cakra* centers and “mastering” *kuṇḍalinī* yoga.

³⁷ The Sanskrit passage has to be amended according to the philological interpretation of Antonio M. Sacco (Sacco 2001, p. 121); here is Sacco's literary translation (in Italian): “Il *sādhaka*, con la faccia ricoperta di canfora, baci con gioia la sua parte inferior (cioè la *yoni*) come un'ape sconcertata dal loto, o Propizia”.

3. A geographical section (Shastri [1991] 2008, Ch. 77–90) that describes “sacred places, hills and rivers,” including “the story of the Brahmaputra connected with that of Paraśurāma/Reṇukā and some dynastical chapters are told”.

In the mythological section there are no references to the Tantric ritual praxis, although there is a contradictory position on the anti-Vedic elements, such as the menstrual blood. Additionally, throughout the ritualistic section there are many Tantric references, showing a connection between the text compiler(s) and the Tantric developments of the cult, such as the Yoginī Kaula.

Most scholarly studies have considered *śākta-tantra* systems as a vehicle to spread religious and political ideas (Orzech 1998, p. 8), while the Tantric king was considered either as a Tantric specialist or as a non-specialist involved with Tantric practices (White [2003] 2006, pp. 123–24). Hugh Urban observes:

Hindu Śākta Tantra has often been closely related to kingship and political rule in various periods of South Asian history. For *śakti* is not simply a spiritual or transcendent sort of metaphysical energy; it is also the material power that flows through the social body and the state as well as the physical body and the cosmos. (Urban [2009] 2010, p. 73)

Hence, the king was the groom of Earth, linked to its powerful energy (*śakti*) (Urban [2009] 2010, pp. 74–76), while the Tantric religious system “harnesses the dangerous power of kingship—the power of rule, warfare, and the necessary violence that comes with the office of the king” (Urban 2001, p. 779). The Assamese ruler was the only one who could authorise the most powerful among the blood sacrifices—the human one. In fact, a *brāhmaṇa* would lose his status for officiating at a human sacrifice, while a *kṣatriya* needed the king’s permission to officiate it (Shastri [1991] 2008, 67.116–18). Therefore, “On the one hand the blood became a medium to preserve and develop the political power, on the other hand the bloodshed is an anti-Vedic system of ritual, it grounded its roots inside the tribal cultures” (Rosati forthcoming). In this way, the Assamese king was the only one who owned the power to oversee the dangerous liminal powers connected to the tribal cultures that were absorbed within—or that at least influenced—the heterodox Tantric rituals performed at Nīlācala–Kāmākhya.

6. Conclusions

Textual evidence and ritual praxis suggest that early medieval kingship in Kāmarūpa was influenced by an osmotic cross-cultural process, which was established by the dialectic between a number of distinct socio-cultural, ethno-linguistic, and religious groups. In this complex early medieval context, the compiler(s) of *Kālikāpurāṇa* built a mythology around Naraka, who was described as the first Hindu king of Kāmarūpa.

Hence, the rulers of Kāmarūpa, tracing back their origins to Naraka, justified their *saṃkara-jāti* status, which linked the royal power to both Brahmanic and tribal traditions. In order to maintain political stability, the Assamese king continued the tradition of blood offerings to the Goddess—a ritual performance that was often associated with tribal traditions. Yet the ruler also performed the most secret sexual practices, such as the *raja-pāna*, a sexual rite on which was based the Yoginī Kaula’s concept of gnosis transmission (White [2003] 2006, pp. 102–5). In this way, through the act of drinking the reddish water flowing inside the womb chamber of the goddess Kāmākhya, the king, such as every *sādhaka*, obtained supernatural powers (Van Kooij 1972, pp. 24–25). Thus, the northeastern kingship, through public blood sacrifices and consuming sexual female discharges, was closely connected to the Assamese *śākta-tantra*. The role of the Goddess’s menstrual blood as a source of power was derived from the worship of the *yoginīs*, which linked the kingship to both the explicit sexual symbolism and the hidden death imaginary. Both the symbolisms were unified into the *yoni*-stone of Kāmākhya, which was the primordial source of cosmogenesis—from her *yoni* everything was created, and everything will be absorbed into her *yoni*.

The origin of the *yoni* symbol is uncertain—because there is no clear evidence either of a local origin or of an extra Assamese one—and is not recognised that it grounds its roots in the tribal world.

In this instance, it can be postulated that it was at least influenced by tribal traditions, and then developed by the heterodox *śākta-tantra* theology. In fact, the association of the *yonī* cult with blood offerings, sexual fluids consumption, and *śmaśāna* corroborates the idea of a cross-cultural influence on the cult, given that these elements are also fundamental in many tribal groups' customs.

Therefore, the Assamese kings were influenced by cross-cultural elements that connected the kingship during the ancient and early medieval Kāmarūpa to Hindu heterodox traditions, which were influenced by an osmotic exchange with local tribes. Hence, tribal customs were partially transformed and integrated within Hindu cultural and religious folds, resulting in the Hindu *śākta-tantra* cult of Kāmākhyā. As Hermann Kulke pointed out:

... one of the main problems during this period was the relationship of the Hindu rājās—often themselves descendants of tribal chiefs—with the tribes which surrounded the insulated nuclear areas. On the one hand, the rājās depended on their support for the security of the internal communication and borders. On the other, the rājās needed their land for the gradual extension of the peasant agriculture, which alone was able to yield sufficient surplus crop for the maintenance of the increasing court (e.g., the member of the ruling family, Brahmins, officials, and soldiers). Tensions with the tribes were also due to the efforts of the local dominant Hindu castes to extend their economic base at the cost of their tribal neighbours. (Kulke [1978] 1986, p. 128)

In conclusion, it is clear that in a region dominated by tribal groups, the kings—either Indo-Aryan rulers or Hinduized tribal chiefs—needed the tribal support to maintain their political power. Hence, the Assamese kingship incorporated and blended cultural contradictions necessary to build a state entity based on cross-cultural negotiation. Therefore, the only actor who emerged to be able to control the necessary power that derived from the more heterodox ritual praxis—which was closely connected to what the Vedic tradition perceived as a taboo and thus impure—was the king, who was either a hero, a descendant of Viṣṇu, or a demi-demon who inherited the sins related to Naraka.

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