

## CHAPTER

# Cosmogenesis and Phonematic Emanation

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## Abstract

After noting the paramount importance placed upon speech and language in the Vedas, Upaniṣads, and philosophy of Bhartṛhari, this chapter charts models of divine sound, word, and phonemes in tantric literature, particularly as the source of all language, mantras, and, in certain sources, reality itself. In surveying numerous tantric scriptures on these themes, including the Nīśvāsa corpus, orthodox Śaiva Siddhānta, and traditions devoted to Bhairava and related goddesses, an extraordinary diversity of metaphysical accounts of divine resonance (*nāda*), phonemes of the syllabary (*mātṛkā*), and divine speech (*parāvāc*) surfaces. Whether depicted as condensing into scriptures, languages, or levels of reality, these models of sonic emanation were subjected to the harmonizing agendas of commentators attempting to develop systematic theologies, often in dialogue with the philosophical concerns of non-tantric scholastic traditions. This chapter summarizes both the primary sources and secondary literature on these topics. The latter is briefly evaluated on methodological grounds, noting a desideratum for text-critical scholarship that offers a more global assessment of language and reality in tantric traditions that simultaneously traces shifts in the conceptual and intellectual history of the literature. Numerous passages are cited that highlight views of *kuṇḍalinī* as a goddess of language related to phonematic emanation, and the current need for a comprehensive study of the early history of this divine power. Another lacuna in secondary scholarship touched upon is the lack of extensive theorization on the sudden preoccupation with script as a new medium for representing tantric deities, mantras, and doctrinal symbols.

**Keywords:** *mātṛkā*, *kuṇḍalinī*, *nāda*, resonance, phonemes, cosmogony, mantra, linguistic theory, tantric philosophy, metaphysics

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## Precedents

Speculation on the relationship between speech and the creative process of manifestation has a pedigree in Indian thought, beginning in the earliest period of the Vedic religion. The Ṛg Veda glorifies speech (*vāc*) as a goddess, who praises herself through a Vedic seer in this way: “I pervade heaven and earth. It is I who give birth to the Father, on the summit of this [world]” (Padoux 1990, 8).<sup>1</sup> The notion that speech deified is foundational to the structure of reality and pervades everything explains the great reverence placed upon the hymns and formulas of the Vedic seers, which take the form of a collection of mantras that comprise the Veda itself. It is in virtue of the goddess *Vāc* that the inspired poet-seers were able to give voice to the Vedic hymns on sacrificial ground, conceived as an activity that “creates and sustains the cosmos” (Jamison & Brereton 2014, 1603).

Another ancient premise subsequently elaborated in tantric cosmologies of word is the development of the signification of the syllable OM. By the time the Brāhmaṇas and the earliest Upaniṣads were originally compiled, OM had transcended its original liturgical function to assume a much broader meaning as a holistic symbol of Vedic revelation, a sound that permeates the universe, and a sonic emblem of absolute reality.<sup>2</sup> The generative power of speech and language and its component elements of phoneme (*varṇa*), syllable (*akṣara*), and prosodic instance (*mātrā*), which are elaborated in hymns, are fundamental to the religion of the Vedas, broadly construed. As Gerety explains, “in the Vedic worldview, sacred sound is cosmogonic and universal: anterior to creation, it gives form to the cosmos and maintains the cosmic order” (Gerety 2015, 126–127).

The notion of subtle language or vibration permeating and transcending the world sets a pattern that is amplified in the revealed literature of the Tantras. That said, the intervening theories of the grammarian Bhartṛhari (ca. 400–450 CE) permeate much of the basic vocabulary and conceptual repertoire of tantric linguistic mysticism. Bhartṛhari identifies “word” (*śabda*) as the essential principle of ultimate reality that is the ontological foundation of all human language and experience, and according to his “strong view,”<sup>3</sup> the source of the universe. For Bhartṛhari, this word-absolute includes the powers of time and space that order and structure the world (Aklujkar 2001, 463) and pervades all cognition and experience, from perception to the syntax of thought. This chapter provides recourse to the complex relationship of Bhartṛhari’s theories with tantric philosophies of language.

Tantric literature significantly expands upon these and other earlier notions of the relationship between speech and reality in a number of domains: yoga, ritual praxis, cosmology, the visualization of deities, and theorization and deployment of mantras.<sup>4</sup> This chapter primarily considers tantric streams devoted to Śiva and goddesses in which we encounter a variety of understandings on the relationship between divine speech, the emanation of sound, and cosmogenesis, employed toward distinctive religious ends and modes of empowerment.<sup>5</sup>

## Earliest Speculations

As we will see, the tantric literature under consideration does integrate the syllable OM as a source of the world and all speech, as well as a mantra to be enunciated in the course of rites and yogic exercises. Tantric scriptures and commentaries also adopt and reformulate Bhartṛhari’s term for the Word-absolute, *śabda-brahma*, his theory of *spṛṣṭa*, and the levels of speech. These notions are augmented by other concepts such as “supreme speech” (*parāvāc*), “speech goddess” (*vāgīśvarī*), the “source” (*mātrkā*, also “mother,” “syllabary,” or “alphabet goddess”), “resonance” (*nāda*), the “coiled-one” (*kuṇḍalinī*), and many more. These terms are polysemic in scriptural sources and often find themselves arrayed in models of sonic emanation and resorption that are mutually divergent and sometimes even incommensurable, regardless of the vigorous systematizing efforts of commentators. One important feature that distinguishes *mātrkā*, which will be central to this study, is its specific relationship to the symbolism of the series of phonemes that constitute the Sanskrit syllabary. That said, in what follows the syllable OM, Bhartṛhari’s philosophy, *nāda* or “divine resonance,” and the linguistic goddess Kuṇḍalinī will also be foregrounded.

The earliest extant textual record of Śaiva tantric revelation is the Nīśvāsa corpus, the first three layers of which (*Mūla-*, *Uttara-*, and *Naya-sūtras*) have been critically edited, translated, and annotated by Goodall, Sanderson, and Isaacson (2015). Already in the *Uttarasūtra* and the *Nayasūtra*, the vision of *mātrkā* is elaborate and becomes a touchstone for subsequent tantric views on the cosmic powers and ritual potencies of language. But there are also some general formulations that are significant for our overall inquiry. To begin with, we find the idea that at the source of all scripture is a resonance (*nāda*),<sup>6</sup> emerging from formless Śiva, which is then differentiated in a descent of scripture (*tantrāvatāra*)<sup>7</sup> into diverse metrical texts. The idea that Śiva is not at this ultimate level a visible form but, rather, the source of an extremely subtle pulsation that blossoms into mantras and scriptures, is echoed throughout later Śaiva tantric scriptures.<sup>8</sup> This paradigmatic conception of deity in tantric literature, as an embodiment of mantra, is encapsulated in an oft-cited dictum that is perhaps first recorded in the Nīśvāsa corpus: “all deities have mantra as their nature and all mantras have Śiva as their nature.”<sup>9</sup> The goddess of speech (*vāgeśī*) also makes a compelling appearance in the *Mūlasūtra* of the *Nīśvāsatattvasaṃhitā*, where she is described as the “mother” of newly consecrated initiates. A similar concept is found in relationship to the Gāyatrī mantra,

also described as the “mother” of a new initiate who is ritually reborn through the Vedic thread–investiture ritual (Haas 2022, 146).

Törzsök (2016) diachronically traces the earliest development of *mātṛkā*, showing how the concept develops from an abstract representation of the syllabary—the source of all phonemes and by extension mantras—to an independent goddess. She elucidates the depiction of *mātṛkā* in the *Uttarasūtra* as the alphabet, consisting of eight groups of letters, identified as a female mantra (*vidyā*), and presented as the source of all words, scriptures, mantras, and languages (Törzsök 2016, 139). The *Uttarasūtra* also presents the ritual worship of *mātṛkā*, in which the practitioner places the consonants and vowels that constitute *mātṛkā* on the “right and left sides,” respectively, likely referring to the practitioner’s body (Törzsök 2016, 140).<sup>10</sup> In the cult of *mātṛkā*, the deities are “worshipped in or as a vowel or a vowel group.” Given the way those vowels are presented as having distinct prosodical lengths, Törzsök speculates that the original derivation of *mātṛkā* may stem from the Sanskrit term for the relative length of a prosodical instance or mora (*mātrā*). The tradition itself will offer the semantic analysis of *mātṛkā* as “mother,”<sup>11</sup> which accounts for the way in which she is designated as the source (*yoni*) of languages, mantras, and eventually manifest world, and often translated with the cognate term “matrix.” In the *Uttarasūtra*, *mātṛkā* is related to mantras identified with Śiva, and characterized as *mātṛkāśiva*, evidence that the concept has yet to achieve the status of a fully independent goddess (Törzsök 2016, 141).

In the next level of the Nīśvāsa corpus, the *Nayasūtra*, there are teachings on *mātṛkā* related to a rare physical yogic discipline of manipulating the body to form the shape of different letters of the syllabary. Importantly, the *Nayasūtra* also includes a vision of *mātṛkā* and all the phonemes that constitute it (particularly the syllable A) as containing all levels of reality (*tattvas*). While not yet related to a theory of cosmogenesis, this connection of ontological levels to the phonemes of the Sanskrit syllabary is foundational to later maps of the process of creation. In the *Nayasūtra*, the knowledge of these homologies<sup>12</sup> is soteriological, since “he who recognizes the equivalences between his body, the letters, and the ontological levels of the universe is promised liberation” (Törzsök 2016, 141). The *Nayasūtra* also reports how such knowledge empowers a guru by granting them mastery over all mantras and, correspondingly, the capacity to liberate disciples.<sup>13</sup>

A few more details can be added to this summary. First, it is important to highlight that *mātṛkā* is paramount to the doctrine, ritual, and yoga of the *Nīśvāsatattvasaṃhitā*, and thus the earliest stratum of extant Śaiva tantric literature. Regarding the mantra system of the *Uttarasūtra*, it is based both theoretically and practically in *mātṛkā* (Goodall et al. 2015, 370). Consequently, the rite of liberating initiation (*nirvāṇa-dīkṣā*) utilizes *mātṛkā*, where there is an offering of oblations for each letter of the syllabary.<sup>14</sup> The thrust of the entire *Nayasūtra* can be understood as an elaboration of the *Uttarasūtra*’s teaching on yoga and its focus on *mātṛkāśiva* (Goodall et al. 2015, 401), and this involves embodying the syllabary through a complex system of hand and bodily gestures. This practice warrants a few additional observations. The first is the novel introduction of the script (North-Indian Gupta)<sup>15</sup> as a new visual medium of representation supplementing orality and effectively *entextualizing* the mantras (see Hayes, this volume).<sup>16</sup> This use of graphemes to visually<sup>17</sup> represent each phoneme of *mātṛkā* and serve as a guide for physical embodiment invites further theorization.<sup>18</sup> This teaching on embodying the graphic representations of *mātṛkā*, a rare physical form of yoga in classical Tantra, also requires more exploration as a background to the more body-based yogic praxis of Haṭhayoga.<sup>19</sup> Finally, *mātṛkā*, as the root of all mantras, with phonemes corresponding to ontological levels, and assimilable through yogic technologies of physical mimesis, is taught as bestowing a tantric yogi or guru power over all mantras, and much more. This exemplifies a salient principle of tantric systems: the ritual forging of connections between divine syllables, reality, and the body that “place the human organism into a relation of structural homology to the macrocosm ... rendering mastery of the external universe” (Hatley 2007, 353).

In the next layer of the Nīśvāsa corpus, the *Guhyasūtra*, we find *mātṛkā* first represented as an independent goddess and identified obliquely<sup>20</sup> with the coiled divine power, *kuṇḍalinī* (who goes on to a rather robust and eclectic post-tantric-age career) (Törzsök 2016, 142–143). *Kuṇḍalinī* as a mobile form of the alphabet goddess located in the body is developed further in the slightly later *Nīśvāsakārikā*.<sup>21</sup>

The scriptures and postscriptural literature of the Śaiva Siddhānta, a relatively orthodox tantric tradition largely congruent with Veda-based ritual norms, includes diverse models for the emanation of sound and an abundance of teachings on the integral relationships between language, scripture, mantra, and the world.<sup>22</sup> Thanks largely to the scholarship of Goodall (1998, xlvii–lxxiv), the extant Siddhānta scriptures that predate the twelfth century have been identified and also arranged into a relative chronology. This rough chronology will be kept in mind in the following presentation of the emanation and nature of sound in Siddhānta scriptural sources. This analysis will also integrate insights of important contributions on this topic by Goodall and Sferra.

In the Siddhānta scriptures, the presence of *mātṛkā* is less prominent than in Śākta-Śaiva sources, but there are a number of other concepts that recur, quite conspicuously resonance (*nāda*). One of the earliest of Śaiva Siddhānta scriptures, the *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṅgraha*, describes a deity who emerges from the absolute (*brahman*) identified with the word (*śabda*) as the collection of letters (*śabdarāśi*), a male counterpart to *mātṛkā*.<sup>23</sup> This formulation of Śiva as Śabdarāśi, perhaps the earliest (Törzsök 2016, 153), is consistent with the tantric conception of deity as mantra and the transcendent aspect of Śiva set forth in the *Niśvāsātattvasaṃhitā*. In the *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṅgraha*, this sonic nature of the deity encompasses all the syllables, the sixteen vowels (or “seeds” [*bīja*]) and thirty-four consonants (or “wombs” [*yonī*]). The power of this supreme deity permeates the universe and is described as the universal cause (*kāraṇa*) of all revelation.<sup>24</sup> Here the *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṅgraha* characterizes the supreme reality as a formless causal deity that needs to be decoded and transcribed into scriptural teachings.

Another early scripture, the *Sarvajñānottara*, describes itself as emanating from a subtle resonance, and this *nāda* is said to issue from a transcendent and all-pervasive deity who transcends all levels of reality.<sup>25</sup> This subtle sonic form of scriptural wisdom is then said to penetrate and awaken a level of reality associated with *bindu*, which may here refer to the subtle seed of phenomenal reality.<sup>26</sup> That *nāda* is then described as giving rise to the word (*śabda*), the pure language that constitutes all mantras, and which subsequently differentiates into the phonemes, which are presented as the source of all beings, both sentient and insentient.<sup>27</sup> This emphasis on the dynamic role of the phonemes, both vowels and consonants, in relation to the world (*carācara*) is noteworthy and is further magnified by the injunction to ritually worship the phonemes, the details of which follow this section. The exact relationship between *nāda* and the phonemes is not explicated in the earliest revelatory sources but will be explored by a later scripture, the *Parākhyatantra*, and more elaborately in Saiddhāntika commentarial literature. There we will find long-standing philosophical controversies, particularly between the grammarians and Vedic exegetes (Mīmāṃsakas), entering the tantric milieu.

The *Kiraṇatantra*, another demonstrably early Saiddhāntika scripture, does feature *mātṛkā* in a chapter dedicated to her origin (*mātṛkotpatti*). In this section of the text, the scriptural interlocutor Garuḍa questions Śiva on how a unitary wisdom differentiates into diverse streams of knowledge.<sup>28</sup> The *Kiraṇa* first threads multiple concepts together through the equation of (1) knowledge in the form of resonance (*nāda*), (2) a higher *bindu*, (3) supreme brahman, (4) the syllable OM, (5) the receptacle of syllables, which come to have fifty divisions, and are subsequently identified as (6) “the syllabary,” namely, *mātṛkā*.<sup>29</sup> In introducing *mātṛkā*, the *Kiraṇa* supplies an answer to Gāruḍa’s query, for “like a mother” she is generative, propagating multiple knowledge systems while pervading them. This explains how an original unitary body of knowledge becomes diversified.<sup>30</sup> Not only does subtle resonance, identified with the syllable OM, represent the source of all tantric revelation but also the phonemes of the Sanskrit language, and by extension all language. Thus, the *Kiraṇa* features *mātṛkā* as the fount of major Sanskrit knowledge systems: texts on rational inquiry and debate (*tarka*), courtly poetry (*kāvya*), and the great epics (*itihāsa*),<sup>31</sup> scriptural literature,<sup>32</sup> and even regional songs.<sup>33</sup> The *Kiraṇatantra* here adapts *mātṛkā* in a gesture that subsumes broader horizons of Sanskrit discourse to the prolific dissemination of this phonematic power.

The *Sārdhatriśatikālottara* begins with an oft-cited passage<sup>34</sup> that examines *nāda* as the supreme seed (*bīja*) of all communication, including non-Sanskritic languages, and the bestower of liberation and divine enjoyments.<sup>35</sup> Knowledge of *nāda* is presented in three gradations, supreme, subtle, and outer, which exhibit a general overlap with Bhartṛhari’s tripartite levels of speech, visionary (*paśyantī*), middle (*madhyamā*), and articulated (*vaikhari*),<sup>36</sup> particularly in the way that the outer/articulated levels are audible, subtle/middle are mental, and supreme/visionary comprise a subtle source of language

unconditioned by that discursive cognitive domain. This scripture also makes reference to *kuṇḍalinī*, characterizing the coiled goddess as an embodied power residing in the heart, connected to the three channels, and responsible for flooding the body with nectar.<sup>37</sup>

A verse from the *Mṛgendratāntra*, frequently leveraged by later writers to rationalize their schema on the emanation of sound, teaches:<sup>38</sup>

From the divine power (*śakti*) arises *nāda*, then *bindu*, then the imperishable (*akṣara*), and finally *māṭṛkā*, the original embodiment of Śiva that conforms to all that can be expressed in language.

The pairing of *nāda* and *bindu* here will become prototypical of the accounts given by Saiddhāntika exegetes, and *śakti*, the source of this process, is identified by the commentator Nārāyaṇakaṇṭha as *kuṇḍalinī*, who further glosses her nature as *parāvāc*, supreme speech.<sup>39</sup> In this account, *māṭṛkā* serves as a threshold between these subtle sonic powers and the groups of letters that form mantras, words, and sentences.

Certain later Siddhānta scriptures feature a dialectical bent and draw significantly upon debates from diverse knowledge systems, quite prominently epistemology, grammar, Buddhist philosophy, Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, and Vedic exegesis.<sup>40</sup> One such scripture is the *Parākhyatantra*. Its account of the emanation of sound rehearses earlier philosophical disputes between the grammarians and Mīmāṃsakas on how language denotes meaning, which comes to be an important preoccupation in Saiddhāntika exegetical writing. In the *Parākhyatantra*, the primordial beginnings of mantra and language involve Śiva birthing seed syllables from the *bindu* or the “drop,” through an act of will that incites it to generate the totality of sounds (*śabdarāśi*), which is then identified with *māṭṛkā*, the ground of all communication and worldly discourse. This *bindu* is taught as the material cause of all phonemes that are inert, whereas Śiva serves as the efficient cause who is conscious. Here we have the initial stirrings of certain key theological distinctions that will be foundation to a mature Śaiva Siddhānta ontology.

The scriptural interlocutor of the *Parākhyatantra*, Pratoda, introduces a polemical tenor to the discussion by scrutinizing the account on the basis of the theory of *sphoṭa* as propounded by the grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari.<sup>41</sup> Pratoda characterizes *sphoṭa* as an all-pervasive and eternal power that, by manifesting through the phonemes, is the ultimate conveyor of meaning. He likewise dismisses the Mīmāṃsakas’ view<sup>42</sup> that phonemes serve as the meaning-bearer, which he argues is untenable given their ephemerality.<sup>43</sup> In the debate that ensues,<sup>44</sup> the ultimate conclusion is that there is no independent entity known as *sphoṭa* beyond the phonemes themselves, which are exclusively responsible for generating meaning. This final view will be contradicted by Rāmakaṇṭha (ca. 950–1000), an authoritative Saiddhāntika commentator who presents the basic arguments for *sphoṭa* in the guise of *nāda* in the *Nādakārikā*, discussed below.

The earliest systematization of the Siddhānta position from the commentarial tradition is found in the *Ratnatrayaparīkṣā* of Śrīkaṇṭha (early tenth century).<sup>45</sup> This text, whose teachings on the emanation of sound are elucidated in an article by Sferra (2007), provides a “standard series” that many subsequent authors follow: “bindu/kuṇḍalinī => *nāda* => *bindu* => *śabdarāśi/arṇa*” (Sferra 2007, 446).<sup>46</sup> The original *bindu* here is the “higher” or “unstruck” (*anāhata*) source, a level of sound that invites more synonyms, including *kuṇḍalinī*; *nāda* is the divine resonance whose presence in early Saiddhāntika scriptures is global; and this is then paired with yet another *bindu*, which gives birth to the collection of the phonemes (*śabdarāśi/arṇa*) that scriptural sources also designate as *māṭṛkā*. On the novelty of this sequence in commentarial sources, Goodall notes “there may in fact be no extant scriptural source that presents the emanation and nature of sound in the way that the writers of the mature Kashmirian Śaiva Siddhānta do” (Goodall 2001, 328).

Regarding the emanation of mantra and language, Śrīkaṇṭha offers another model that expands upon and reframes Bhartṛhari’s levels of speech in Śaiva parlance, noting four levels of *bindu* as subtle (*sūkṣmā*), visionary (*paśyantī*), middle (*madhyamā*), and articulated (*vaikhari*). The addition of a fourth level of speech, although apparently consonant with nondual Śaiva authors’ addendum of *parāvāc*, is here associated explicitly with a dualistic ontology. To explain, for Śrīkaṇṭha individual souls and Śiva are separate from all levels of language, and the latter is reduced to an insentient substance (Sferra 2007, 452–453).

In an interesting reversal of the *Parākhyatantra*’s proof of phonemes being the primary vehicle for denoting meaning, the *Nādakārikā* of Rāmakaṇṭha<sup>47</sup> argues that it is *nāda* that makes possible the basic synthesis required for semantics. Recapitulating salient refutations of Kumārila’s phonematic view (*varṇavāda*) of linguistic cognition found in the *Sphoṭasiddhi* of Maṇḍanamiśra,<sup>48</sup> Rāmakaṇṭha aims to logically establish



the reality of *nāda*, particularly in a role that is equivalent to the concept of *sphoṭa*.<sup>49</sup> He also follows Śrīkaṇṭha's theorization of sonic emanation, equating *nāda* with a range of terms<sup>50</sup> resonant with tantric meanings.

The earlier scriptures of the Śaiva Siddhānta trace a continuum between Śiva and *nāda*, which is then seen as the birthing mantras, scriptures, languages, and, more rarely, the manifest world through a descending arc. But the commentarial phase, motivated by concrete theological concerns, extricates *nāda*, and related subtle linguistic elements, from Śiva and the innately liberated Self<sup>51</sup> and relegates it to an ultimately insentient reality.<sup>52</sup> As we will see, this marks a contrast to the postscriptural theologies of the Śākta-Śaiva corpus, where the phonemes and their linguistic potential penetrate to the very heart of the deity (Torella 1987, 178), the unitary consciousness at the core of all reality. This consciousness is an infinite and unconstrained creative agency that differentiates into the world in virtue of being pregnant with the subtlest potencies of language, the catalogue of the phonemes, that serve as seeds of a diversifying unity. Before exploring this more philosophically robust view, we will track scriptural precedents in tantric literature centered on Bhairava and an array of goddesses and their retinues.

## Non-Saiddhāntika Śaiva and Śākta Tantra

In the foregoing survey of the Niśvāsa corpus and Śaiva Siddhānta sources, there have been allusions to divine speech, resonance, and the mass of phonemes pervading reality and corresponding to the ontological levels, which in other discussions serve as a map for the creative phase of the world's emanation (*śṛṣṭikrama*) or cosmogenesis. This notion, however, is articulated much more explicitly in the scriptural and commentarial literature of non-Saiddhāntika tantric streams.<sup>53</sup> Here too *mātṛkā*, and a related syllabary sequence, *mālinī*, are completely deified into tantric goddesses. The following analysis, which is for the most part diachronic, combines original scholarship with reference to important studies by Padoux, Torella, Bäumer, Törzsök, and Vasudeva. In consonance with our survey of the Siddhānta Tantras, we will move from divergent schema of phonematic emanation and linguistic speculation in scriptural sources to the exegetical agendas of Śākta-Śaiva commentators.

The *Svacchandabhairava*, an early Tantra of the Bhairava stream, assigns eight mother goddesses to the groups of letters that emerge from *mātṛkā* (Törzsök 2016, 143–144). In the *Brahmayāmalatantra*, the earliest scripture to focus on rites and *sādhana*s related to the cult of yoginīs, there is a description of the genesis of the fifty phonemes that coalesce into a retinue of mantra-deities surrounding Kapālīśabhairava, the central deity. They all emerge from the volitional power of Śiva, described as *avadhūtā śakti*. Awakening *bindu* and *nāda* and described as a “coiled” power (*kuṇḍalinī*), this *śakti* then transforms into the syllabary.<sup>54</sup> Hatley observes that “a number of passages in related literature share the theme of the formless, quiescent, supreme Śiva's power of volition (*icchā śakti*), in the form known as *kuṇḍalinī*, awakening the primordial resonance or vibration (and giving rise to the Sanskrit phonemes in successive stages)” (Hatley 2018, 417). Before propagating the sixteen vowels, the coiled shape of *kuṇḍalinī* is envisioned as the loop of an early-medieval grapheme<sup>55</sup> for the letter A, another early piece of evidence for the tantric preoccupation with the visual representations of syllabary-related goddesses.<sup>56</sup> The *Brahmayāmala* also maps the phonemes onto the tantric body, identifying the letters with goddesses and inlaying them in a sequence of inner *cakras* (Törzsök 2016, 145). And we find a vivid description of Mālinī, the alphabet goddess “par excellence,” in the Trika Śākta lineage, envisioned by the *Brahmayāmala* as a “honey comb with its cells,” and the metaphor relates her to cosmogenesis, since “creation is effected by the shaking (*kṣobha*) the beehive” (Törzsök 2016, 145).

The earliest Tantra of the goddess tradition called the Trika, eponymous for the “triad” of goddesses that organize its tantric liturgy, is the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*. This Śākta source develops teachings from the *Svāyaṃbhuvāsūtrasaṅgraha* (detailing the worship of Śabdarāśī in a cremation ground as Bhairava) (Törzsök 2016, 148–149), the *Svacchandatantra* (describing eight mother goddesses who govern the eight groups of the syllabary) (Törzsök 2016, 147), and the *Brahmayāmalatantra* (elaborating Mālinī as an alphabet goddess and also referring to *kuṇḍalinī*). *Kuṇḍalinī* is therein described as the source of the world (*jagadyoni*) and the phonemes.<sup>57</sup>

Further comment is required on *mālinī*, who unlike *mātṛkā*, is represented in what has been generally considered a disarrayed sequence of Sanskrit phonemes, beginning with NA and ending in PHA. Thanks to the astute decoding of Vasudeva (2007), we now know otherwise. Key to his breakthrough was noting the

original pragmatic context of *nyāsa*, the purifying and empowering installation of each phoneme upon the body, which represents the corresponding portion the mantric form of *mālinī*. Vasudeva notes that there is a “flawless preservation, despite the frequent divergence of sequence, of the association of a corresponding phoneme and body part” (Vasudeva 2007, 530). The reason for this “unexpected uniformity,” Vasudeva argues, is based upon the visual appearance of the graphemes, in the Gupta Brāhmī script, that correspond to the shape of each body part, from the goddess’s topknot formed by the character NA down to her left foot, composed of the character PHA.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the sequence is not jumbled but rather vertically arrayed to reveal the goddess herself, standing forth with a body of phonemes, offering a visual map for the ritual divinization of the body. This practice, Vasudeva contends, creatively blurs the mediums of sound and script, causing a fusion that forges a “synaesthetic icon” in the space of the body. This allows one to “see the alphabet as a goddess—strikingly apt for the creative power underlying and manifesting the universe” (Vasudeva 2007, 535). The Śākta scriptures that detail this practice include early Trika sources, primarily the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, *Mālinīvijayottara*, and *Tantrasadbhāva*, as well as scriptures devoted to the goddess Kubjikā that are indebted to the Trika.

Another important Śākta scripture, the earliest to focus upon the Goddess Tripurasundarī in a tradition subsequently named Śrīvidyā, is the *Vāmakeśvarīmata*. Tripurasundarī is introduced at the outset of this text through twelve benedictions that herald her as *mātṛkā*.<sup>59</sup> This alphabet goddess is exalted as “the thread on which the three-worlds are strung.”<sup>60</sup> Further developing this cosmological reference, she is then described as taking the visual form of an inverted triangle, which is the shape of the grapheme used for the vowel E, envisioned as the source from which all worlds emanate.<sup>61</sup> This phoneme, and its corresponding shape in the script,<sup>62</sup> comes to symbolize the downward triangle at the center of the *śrīcakra* (Padoux 1990, 265), the tradition’s central deity-enthroning diagram. Within that triangle is a dot, termed the *mahābindu*, which comes to be understood as containing three *bindus* within it, comprising a subtle figure described as the *kāmakaḷā cakra*. This figure is formed by the seed mantra Ȑm. In early post-Gupta scripts, the grapheme for Ȑ is three dots, which thus serves as the visual representation of this theologically and symbolically laden image of the goddess (Khanna 1986, 122–123).

In addition to the prominent place given to *mātṛkā* at the outset of this foundational scripture, we also find a description of the female deity as the “coiled-one” (i.e., *kuṇḍalinī*). In the *Vāmakeśvarīmata*, she flashes upward, pierces the sun that is Śiva, causes the orb of the moon to shower nectar, merges with the transcendent Self, and then returns to her original abode in the body<sup>63</sup> after blissfully roaming the universe.<sup>64</sup> Less focused on phonematic emanation, this account models *in nuce* the *kuṇḍalinī-yoga* further developed by this tradition and Haṭhayoga sources. Later Śrīvidyā texts, such as the *Kāmakaḷāvīlāsa*, will map the phonematic emanation through four stages of speech, *parāvāc*, *paśyantī*, *madhyamā*, and *vaikhārī*, and represent this as a process of cosmic unfolding (Khanna 1986, 143ff.).

Before moving to the postscriptural literature that is grounded in these non-Saiddhāntika scriptural streams, we must address one more Śākta scripture that is quite consequential in the history of phonematic emanation in tantric literature—the *Parātrīśikā*. Serving as the root text of the Anuttara Trika tradition devoted to the solitary Goddess Parā and her seed mantra SAUḤ, the *Parātrīśikā* presents, to my knowledge, the earliest fully explicit account of phonematic emanation as cosmogenesis. This is notwithstanding significant precedents in earlier tantric sources for *mātṛkā* or *nāda* being identified as the source of language, mantra, revelation, and the world, not to mention numerous correspondences between phonemes and reality levels (*tattva*).

The *Parātrīśikā* provides an “order of emission” (*śṛṣṭikrama*) by correlating the vowels to phases of time (*tithi*), and then moving sequentially through the consonants that are mapped to the *tattvas*.<sup>65</sup> The group of sixteen vowels, exalted among the phonemes, comes to be understood as an ur-movement within the highest level of reality, *śiva-tattva*. Therefore, the threshold of creation is really the transition point between vowels and consonants. The elaborated version of this theory of phonematic emanation is found in Abhinavagupta’s commentary (*vivaraṇa*) on the *Parātrīśikā*, as well as the analogous versions found in chapter three of his *Tantrāloka* and *Tantrasāra*. These accounts are comprehensively documented in the scholarship of Bäumer (2011, 146–157) and Padoux (1990, 233–304). The latter comprises a chapter of a truly pioneering, thoroughly researched, and far-ranging monograph on the reality of word, levels of speech, and phonematic emanation in tantric speculation.

One of the earliest Śākta-Śaiva sources associated with a human author is the *Śivasūtra* or Aphorisms of Śiva, purportedly revealed to Vasugupta (ca. 825–875) by either a siddha or the deity Śiva.<sup>66</sup> The text begins

with the thesis that the self is consciousness, and then proceeds immediately to provide an explanation of ignorance, which effectively conceals this inexorable truth. The source of ignorance is limited knowledge, which is grounded in *mātṛkā*.<sup>67</sup> In his commentary, Kṣemarāja elucidates the inner workings of *mātṛkā* as a power of obscuration, noting how she generates conceptual notions that become the basis for limited identities, given that she permeates the mind with language that conditions and delimits one's self-conception.<sup>68</sup> However, when recognized—that is, when one awakens to the matrix of all language that undergirds experience and the phenomenal world—*mātṛkā* engenders liberating knowledge, as the *Śivasūtras* will go on to teach.<sup>69</sup> Here we have an emphasis on an epistemic dynamic, wherein *mātṛkā*—etymologically glossed by Kṣemarāja as the “unknown” mother (*ajñāta* construing the *ka* affix)<sup>70</sup>—limits human beings when she is invisible, but awakens them to the vast dynamism of their own innate self when she is seen, and even more so, intimately known.<sup>71</sup>

This brings us to one of the most influential postscriptural authors on this topic, Abhinavagupta (fl. 975–1025). Abhinava's robust account of phonematic emanation across his exegesis is not only explanatory on a metaphysical level but is situated squarely within a path to liberation through divine means (*śāmbhavopāya*). By mapping the phonematic emanation as the creative flux of a dynamic and self-differentiating awareness, he traces not only a map of emanation but also a pathway for self-limiting consciousness to rediscover its own original freedom. This is accomplished not through physical or mental disciplines, or even conceptually rooted teachings, but by aligning with a precognitive impulse that spontaneously apprehends the phonematic nature of reality as one's own creative freedom. This nonconceptual vision of reality is an act of recognizing oneself as the consciousness in which all the phonemes, and the realities they disclose, ultimately repose; in other words, the union of Śiva (A) and Śakti (HA), which combine to form the first-person pronoun (AHAM).<sup>72</sup> Since the syllabary begins and ends with these two phonemes, the sense of identity born of their union includes the divine power at the source of all language, all mantra, and, by extension, all reality. It is an experience of the totality of the universe arising *subjectively*, encompassed by an all-embracing and all-absorbing sense of Self.

Abhinavagupta views this inclusive awareness that is the material and efficient cause of the world as penetrated by the highest resonance (*paranāda*), the source of all phonemes.<sup>73</sup> That said, at its heart, this resonance is “phonematic,” and here Abhinavagupta, as Torella (2004) demonstrates, departs from a Bhartṛharian notion of *śphoṭa* advocated by Rāmakaṇṭha with the term *nāda*. Instead, in alignment with the Mīmāṃsakas,<sup>74</sup> Abhinavagupta opts for the view that the phonemes are the primary, irreducible constituents of the process of conveying meaning<sup>75</sup> and are “the only reality which is not swallowed by supreme consciousness ... because they are not a content of consciousness but consciousness itself, amounting to its energetic, cognitive aspect” (Torella 2004, 178–179). It is precisely this divergence, between the dualistic Saiddhāntika's *nāda-vāda* and the nondual Śākta's *varṇa-vāda*, that helps us apprehend how each tradition conceived of language and its ultimate reach. The Śaiva Siddhānta exegetes are anxious to exclude the subtlest layers of language from the self and Śiva, which are ultimate distinct from the transformations involved in the unfolding of the manifest world. By contrast, Abhinavagupta, in light of his “higher nonduality,” embraces supreme speech and its phonematic kernel as the inherent dynamism at “the very core of divine, and also human, consciousness” (Torella 2004, 186).

## Conclusions and Future Directions

In Śaiva and Śākta sources we find the word, and particularly the subtle resonance and sonic power that illuminates it from within, woven into the subtlest structures of reality. Often envisioned as originating beyond visible or audible form, this power unfolds and condenses in the proliferation of scripture, liberating mantras, and human languages, and in certain scriptural witnesses, the creation of all life and the totality of worlds. By virtue of pervading the universe and being endowed with extraordinary creative potency, this sonic substratum is manipulated by tantric initiates, adepts, and gurus to release beings from all forms of limitation and transform them into living centers of reality-altering power.

*Mātṛkā*, originally referring to the repository of phonemes, is a key concept for further elaborating this motif, since it introduces the phonemes (essential to seed mantras), identifies them with goddesses, maps them into *cakras*, and correlates them to the emission of all ontological levels of reality. The *Kiraṇatantra* deploys *mātṛkā* as an explanatory key for how a unified body of knowledge pervades all literary genres, from the epics to dialectic philosophy, and the *Sārdhatriśatikālottara* conceives of *nāda* as underlying the



communication of fish, cowherders, and even foreigners. Theorizing expands from here to the relationship between *sphoṭa* and the phonemes in argumentation on the philosophy of verbal cognition (*śābdabodha*) in the *Parākhyaatantra*, a prominent theme continued in the commentarial literature. We also find, across many of our sources, the central practice of *nyāsa*, the deposition of *mantras* on the body, which is extended to the syllabary goddesses *Mātṛkā* and *Mālinī*, and this practice continues to have a vibrant afterlife at the heart of tantric praxis.<sup>76</sup> Not included in the foregoing exploration is a discussion of phonematic emission and emanation of sound in the *Pāñcarātra*,<sup>77</sup> that is, tantric traditions devoted to Viṣṇu, and also significant parallels in esoteric Buddhism,<sup>78</sup> in both South and East Asia.

The scholarship tallied in this nonexhaustive study has many complementary virtues. To elaborate, the majority of studies cited are anchored to a single concept (i.e., *mātṛkā*), text (i.e., *Parātrīśikā*), or lineage (i.e., Śaiva Siddhānta), and the text-critical character and close readings of the relevant sources provide a solid foundation for future research. What it is missing is a more global perspective, which Padoux (1990) formidably achieves, but without tracing shifts in intellectual and conceptual histories, particularly between the milieux of scriptural redactors and later expositors. This brief study, by combining both approaches, gestures to a more synthetic approach in future scholarship. It does so, in a preliminary and condensed fashion, by perusing the topic from a broader, interlineage perspective and arranging textual sources in an approximately chronological sequence with an eye toward generating historical insights.

Other ideas for future directions on phonematic emanation and cosmogenesis are also immanent in the above analysis, one being the need for a systematic appraisal of *kuṇḍalinī* in classical tantric sources<sup>79</sup>—a project that could be aided by the citations collated above. This is a desideratum for a deeper appreciation of the way in which this micro- and macro-cosmic power, closely associated with *mātṛkā* and phonematic emanation, is creatively adapted in early and late Haṭhayoga texts, and yet again in colonial and postcolonial/global settings. The other theme advanced above, also inviting further study, is the advent of the script and visual graphemes to represent mantras, goddesses, and sonic powers and the way in which this new technology of textualization mediated and transformed the character of tantric ritual worship and tantric yoga.

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## Notes

- 1 For a contrasting interpretation, see the reference to "summit" as the head of father sky, namely, Agni, in Jamison and Brereton (2014, 1603–1605).
- 2 As demonstrated in Gerety (2015), particularly chapters 7–9.
- 3 See Aklujkar (2001), which presents a strong and a weak view between which Bhartṛhari toggles in his "perspectivist" philosophy. The former sees language as the ontological source of the universe while the latter considers language as determining and pervading the way in which the world appears to us.
- 4 For an important albeit preliminary consideration of the significant continuities between Vedic and tantric philosophies of language, particularly related to the fourfold partition of speech, the intrinsic connection between language and breath, and the "logic of correspondences between humans, rites, and the cosmos," see Padoux (1990, 20–29).
- 5 What marks out a tantric religious context from a non-tantric one is not often easy to delineate, but Padoux does a fine job of collating and elaborating a set of prototypical domains features. See Padoux (2017, chap. 1).



- 6 *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, Uttarasūtra, 1.23: *adṛṣṭavagrahe śānte śive paramakāraṇe | nādarūpaṃ viniṣkrāntaṃ śāstraṃ paramadurllabhaṃ*.
- 7 *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, Uttarasūtra, 1.24: *sadāśivas tu vettā vai sa ca māṃ prati bodhakaḥ | nādarūpasya śāstrasya ahaṃ gr[anthanibandhakaḥ]* (Now Sadāśiva understood it and he enlightened me; I redacted [this] scripture [that I had received] in the form of sonic energy into books). Translation by Goodall et al. (2015).
- 8 For parallels, see Goodall et al. (2015, 344).
- 9 *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, Nayasūtra, 4.149cd: *sarve mantrātmakā devas sarve mantrāḥ śivātmakāḥ*. Goodall et al. noted that this influential idea “occurs verbatim” in *Rauravasūtrasaṅgraha* 3.28ab. See Goodall et al. (2015, 502). Judit Törzsök also notes a few passages in demonstrably early Śaiva Tantras that identify Śiva’s power with the efficacy of mantras without mentioning *mātrkā* specifically. See Törzsök (2016, 137–138), particularly her citations from the *Vīṇāśikhatantra* and *Rauravasūtrasaṅgraha*.
- 10 The verse in question is *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, Uttarasūtra, 2.8. Törzsök’s speculation about the body being the substratum is confirmed by Goodall et al. (2015, 351–352: “What is plain from the first half of this verse is that the worshipper should join the consonants ... to the right and the vowels to the left. But to the right and left of what? Until now, we have been speaking of the *yāgabhūmi*, but here, since the following half-line begins with *śivībhūtaḥ*, it must rather be the worshipper’s body on which the alphabet is installed, thus identifying him with Śiva before worship begins, and this is confirmed, as Peter Bisschop has observed, by the parallel in the account of *mātrkāyāga* in *Dikṣottara* 9:86–86c.”
- 11 See Goodall (2004, 322, n. 646): “Accounting for the name *mātrkā* in this fashion is commonplace in such contexts: compare, for example, *Kiraṇa* 11:6a: *māteva mātrkā saiva*; *Pauṣkara* 8:21cd *sarvajñā mātrkā jñeyā jatato mātrvat sthita*; *Pauṣkara* 8:24cd *jñānaśaktis tathā jñeyā mātrkā lokamātrkā*.”
- 12 It should be noted that homologies between the syllables of *navātman* mantra and levels of reality (*tattva*) are found in the Uttarasūtra, but without any explicit connection to *mātrkā*. See Goodall et al. (2015, 339).
- 13 Törzsök (2016, 142). It should be noted that the *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā* places great emphasis on empowerment and inner experience in the credentials of guru who has the capacity to liberate others. See, e.g., *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, Nayasūtra, 4.37–42b.
- 14 Goodall et al. (2015, 384), which translates *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, Uttarasūtra, 4.46c–47.
- 15 For details on the script used in the *Nayasūtra*’s section on embodying *mātrkā*, see Goodall et al. (2015, 36 & 406ff). See also where the authors note: “Emphasis on this visual aspect appears to have retained its importance in Tantric Buddhism, but its importance appears gradually to have waned in Śaivism, which stresses rather the sonic aspect of mantras and of their building blocks, the sounds of the syllabary” (8). This final point can be further nuanced, given that the visual aspects of script do indeed play an important role in Śākta tantric traditions rooted in Śaivism. A few examples will be furnished below.
- 16 In appreciating the role and significance of the medium of script contra sound, I am indebted to conversations with Finnian Gerety, who theorizes this in Gerety (forthcoming, introduction and chap. 8).
- 17 *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, Nayasūtra, 1.29–30: “Without knowing the *tattvas* [as] situated in the body, and all the letters as they are situated in the body, one cannot be liberated. All these I shall teach you [as they are] written visibly. Some have the shape of parts of the body; some have the shape of the [whole] body [arranged in particular ways].”
- 18 Studies that initiate this process include Vasudeva (2007), Gerety (forthcoming), and Gough (2021).
- 19 See Goodall et al. (2015, 74 n. 102): “If one were determined to find in the *Niśvāsa* a precursor for such a physical yoga, one could, as James Mallinson has pointed out to us, draw attention to the passage instructing the *sādhaka* to shape his body into the written form of all the letters of the syllabary in Nayasūtra 1:32ff.”
- 20 *Niśvāsaguhyasūtra* 12.41: *śivena na vinā mokṣo na vidyā lokamātrkā | [...] khyate mātrā kuṭilā ūrdhvagāminī* (Without Śiva there is no liberation; there is no *vidyā* [other than] *mātrkā*, the creative source of the world. She is the coiled [goddess] that moves upwards). This translation is speculative, given the lacunae in the verse.
- 21 *Niśvāsakārikā* 13.60–63 *yā sā kuṇḍalinī proktā mayā pūrvam udāhṛtā | nipatanti tridhābhūtā prakṛtiḥ sā parā matā || sāṇumātrā hṛdisthāne karṇasthā dviraṇusmṛtā | jihvāgre triraṇum viddhi niṣṛtāṃ mātrkāṃ viduḥ || caturvidhā yā deveśi likhyate yāgrakuṇḍalī | likhyate paṭhyate naiva aṇur nādena veṣṭitaḥ || svarārdhasparśārdhañ ca śaktinātho ‘tha bindukam | śivatattvan tu boddhavyaṃ varṇe varṇe vyavasthitam*.
- 22 On the murky identity and some of the disparate forms of worship of Sadāśiva’s consort in the Siddhānta scriptures, see Brunner (1992, 20–22). These orientations are compatible in many ways with the general features of brahminical orthopraxy mentioned above.
- 23 *Svāyaṃbhuvāsūtrasaṅgraha* 5.1–3: *athādāv abhavac chabdaḥ kāraṇād akṣaraṃ tataḥ | kāraṇaṃ mokṣadaṃ brahman*

brahma brahmavido viduḥ || tasmāt sarvaprado devaḥ śabdarāśir iti śrutaḥ | navaparvaśatārdhātāmā yonibijātmakaḥ paraḥ || akārādivisargāntaṃ bījaṃ tat soḍaśākṣaram | šeṣā yoniś catuṣtriṃśat avyayā hy akṣarātmikā (Now in the beginning there arose the word. From this [primordial] cause there was the [divine] syllable. Those who know *brahman* understand that [primordial] cause as the absolute, brahman, which bestows liberation. Therefore, God, who gives forth everything, known [in this form] as the “mass of syllables,” has the nature of the fifty divisions [of the letters] characterized as both the supreme “womb” and “seed.” The “seeds,” beginning with the letter “a” and ending with “ḥ,” total sixteen letters. The remaining members [of the syllabary], the “wombs,” consist of thirty-four letters).

- 24 *Svāyaṃbhuvasūtrasaṅgraha* 5.5: *vedādijñānabhedena śivajñānavibhedataḥ | cintāmaṇir ivātrāsau sthitaḥ sarvasya kāraṇam* (This [God], existing like a wish-fulfilling gem in this [world] as the different types of knowledge found in [scriptures] such as the Veda, [and] as the various types of the scriptural wisdom of Śiva, is the [divine] source of everything [or all scriptures]).
- 25 *Sarvajñānottara* 1.8–9: *yo ‘sāv atīndriyo ‘grāhyas tattvātīto nirañjanaḥ |sarvajñāḥ sarvagaḥ śānto sarvātmā sarvatomukhaḥ || tasmāc chāstraṃ viniṣkrāntaṃ nādarūpaṃ nirāmayam | atyantagahanaṃ sūkṣmaṃ paramaṃ sarvakāmikam* (From that immaculate reality [nirañjana], which is beyond the senses, inconceivable, transcending the reality levels, omniscient, all-pervasive, quiescent, the ubiquitous self of all, the salutary scripture emerged in the form of resonance [nāda]. Exceptionally deep, subtle, and supreme, that fulfills all desires).
- 26 *Sarvajñānottara* 1.10: *praviśya baindavaṃ tatvaṃ bodhayitvā tu taṃ vibhum | punaḥ sadāśivāt prāptaṃ mamedam sūkṣmalakṣaṇam* (Upon entering into the ontological level of *bindu*, and awakening that divine reality, this [scripture] of mine whose characteristic is subtle was received from Sadāśiva).
- 27 *Sarvajñānottara* 1.12–13: *babhūva paramo nādo nādāc chabdaḥ prajāyate | śabdāmātrā smṛtā mantrā mantre mantrārdhidevatāḥ || sarvān kāmān prayacchanti vidhinārādhitā yadā | svaravarṇasamāyogāt dṛśyādṛśyaṃ carācaram | tasmād upāsayed\* varṇān svarasaṃ yogapūrvakam ||* [corr: tasmād ipāsayed] (That supreme *nāda* arose. From *nāda*, the word was born. The mantras are traditionally understood as nothing but that Word. In a mantra there are mantra deities that grant all desires when they are ritually propitiated. It through a connection to the vowels and consonants that animate and inanimate beings, both visible and invisible, exist. Therefore, in connection to yoga, one should worship the phonemes, according to their inclination).
- 28 *Kiraṇatantra* 11.1: *jñānam ekaṃ kathaṃ bhinnam na jñātaṃ tat sphuṭaṃ mayā | etad brūhi mahādeva jñānamūlaṃ yato ‘khilam* (How does the one scriptural wisdom become divided? I do not clearly understand this. Teach this, O Śiva, since the root of scriptural wisdom is complete).
- 29 These equations are noted in Sferra (2007, 444).
- 30 *Kiraṇatantra* 11.6: *māteva mātṛkā saiva saṃkhyājñānādibhedagā | tarkakāvyetihāsasthā sarvaṃ vyāpya vyavasthitā* (That very [goddess] *mātṛkā* is like a mother inasmuch as she divides [herself] into such knowledge systems as Sāṅkhya, is present in logic, poetry, and the epics, and becomes determinate while pervading everything).
- 31 *Kiraṇatantra* 11.6: *māteva mātṛkā saiva saṃkhyājñānādibhedagā | tarkakāvyetihāsasthā sarvaṃ vyāpya vyavasthitā* (That very [goddess] *mātṛkā* is like a mother inasmuch as she divides [herself] into such knowledge systems as Sāṅkhya, is present in logic, poetry, and the epics, and becomes determinate while pervading everything).
- 32 *Kiraṇatantra* 11.7: *śivajñānaprabhedena sthitaikā nāmabhedataḥ | bisinī yad yathā bhinnā rudrabhedāt parā satī* (That unitary [*mātṛkā*] is present through the Śaiva revelatory knowledge based on the divisions of their titles just like [one] lotus [has many petals], since that supreme [matrix] is made diverse on the basis of the Rudra [and Śiva] divisions [of scriptures]).
- 33 *Kiraṇatantra* 11.8cd-9: *gadyapadyādikāvya ye geyā deśānugāś ca ye || bījaṇḍakalākūṭamantraśaktivinirgatā | śaktir vāgiśvarī tasya vāñmayam vyāpya saṃsthitā* (Those poems in prose and verse that are the subject of song, corresponding to [various] regions, emerge from the power of the mantras, such as the seed, *piṇḍa*, *kalā*, and *kūṭa* mantras. That divine power, the goddess of speech, is established as pervading [all] literature of that [unitary wisdom]).
- 34 For a list of texts that cite this passage, see Sferra (2007, 444 n. 3).
- 35 *Sārdhatṛisatikālottara* 1.5–8: *nādākhyam yat paraṃ bījaṃ sarvabhūteṣv avasthitam | muktidaṃ paramaṃ kiṃ ca divyasiddhipradāyakam || tad viditvā mahāsena deśikah pāsahā bhavet | āgopālāṅganā bālā mleccāḥ prākṛtabhāṣiṇaḥ || antarjalagatāḥ sattvās te ‘pi nityam bruvanti tam | sthūlaṃ sūkṣmaṃ paraṃ jñātvā karma kuryād yathepsitam || sthūlaṃ śabda iti proktaṃ sūkṣmaṃ cintāmayam bhavet | cintayā rahitaṃ yat tu tat paraṃ parikīrtitam* (What is that reality called *nāda*, the ultimate source that is present in all beings that bestows liberation and divine attainments? Knowing that [*nāda*], O Kārttikeya, a teacher becomes empowered to dissolve limitations. Children, foreigners, speakers of local language, including cowherders and women, and even aquatic beings always articulate that [*nāda*]. By becoming aware of its outer, subtle, and supreme forms, one is able to perform any action as they desire. Outer resonance is “sound.” Subtle resonance is permeated by thought. But that resonance, which is beyond thought, is supreme).
- 36 On Bhartṛhari’s levels of speech, see *Vākyapadīya* 1.142 and the *vṛtti* on that verse, translated in Ferrante (2021, 65).

- 37 *Sārdhatrīśatikālottara* 12.1–3, 12.5–6ab: *candrāgniravisamṃyuktā ādyā kuṇḍalinī tu yā | hr̥tpradeśe tu sā jñeyā aṅkurākārvatsthītā || sṛṣṭinyāsaṃ nyaset tatra dvirabhyāsapaderitam | sravantaṃ cintayet tasminn amṛtaṃ sādhaḥkottamaḥ ||* [...] *svadehaṃ cintayed vidvān divyarūpam anaupamam | yasya yatkarma coddīṣṭaṃ tatkarma paricintayet || idaṃ ca yo 'bhyased evam amṛtaṃ sarvatomukham | acireṇaiva kālena sa siddhiphalabhāg bhavet* (The primordial *kuṇḍalinī*, naturally connected to the moon, fire, and sun, should be known as abiding in the space of the heart in the form of a sprout. In that [*kuṇḍalinī*] one should install the creation [mantra OM], which is inspired by the supreme state through practice of both [breaths] ... That wise one, contemplating his own body as an unparalleled divine form [filled with nectar] should reflect on the rite, which he was previously taught. The one who practices [visualizing] this nectar spreading in all directions, in no time comes to enjoy the fruit of extraordinary powers). Note: clarifying concepts in brackets are supplied from Rāmakaṇṭha's commentary.
- 38 *Mrgendratāntra*, Kriyāpada 1.2: *śakter nādo 'bhavad bindur akṣaraṃ mātṛkā tataḥ | mūrtir ādyā maheśasya sarvavācīnuyāyinī*. This verse is mentioned in passing, in Sferra (2007, 444), and its translation is indebted to Brunner (1985, 5), who follows Nārāyaṇakaṇṭha on the list of terms in the nominative case arising in a sequence of causes.
- 39 *Mrgendratāntravṛtti*, Kriyāpada ad 1.2: *śaktimataḥ praśāntasya bhagavataḥ parāvākṣvarūpā yā kuṇḍalinī śaktiḥ tasyāḥ sakāśāt nāda ity anāhataparadhvanilakṣaṇaḥ... abhūt* ([*śakti*] refers to *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, whose nature is supreme speech, belonging to the blessed Lord [Śiva], who is quiescent and the possessor of *śakti*. From her appearance, resonance (*nāda*) arises, characterized as the highest unstruck sound).
- 40 Watson (2006, 75): “In the *Parākhya*, the *Mataṅga* and the *Mṛgendra* the dialectical dimension becomes more pronounced, and we find the questioners putting objections from the point of view of non-Śaiva traditions such as Buddhism, Sāṅkhya, Vedānta, Nyāya, Lokāyata and Mīmāṃsā.”
- 41 For a clear description of the theory of *sphoṭa* across multiple grammarians, see Sato (2020, 80–81). An illuminating metaphor for understanding this theory is found in Reich (2021, 53).
- 42 For the view of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, who elaborated Śabara's view against Bhartṛhari's understanding of *sphoṭa*, see Sato (2020, 84).
- 43 *Parākhyatantra* 6.9: *varṇānām kṣaṇavidhvamsāt sphoṭa 'rthapratipādakaḥ | varṇavyaṅgyo vibhūr nityaḥ so 'rthaṃ sphoṭayate* (Since the phonemes must perish in an instant, *sphoṭa* must be that which effects the understanding of the meaning. This all-pervading, eternal entity, manifestable by the phonemes, is, they say (*kila*), what makes the meaning clear). Translation by Goodall (2004, 324).
- 44 Particularly, in *Parākhyatantra* 6.9–18. See Goodall (2004, 325–328) for a translation of this section.
- 45 This date, which is admittedly imprecise, is based on the lineage chart provided in Goodall (1998), and making generational calculations from Rāmakaṇṭha II (ca. 950–1000).
- 46 The verse that teaches this is *Ratnatrayaparīkṣā* 22: *jāyate 'dhvā yataḥ śuddho vartate yatra liyate | sa binduḥ paranādākhya nādabinduvarṇakāraṇam* (The [reality] from which the pure path is born, in which it exists [and] dissolves, is *bindu*, called *paranāda*, the cause of *nāda*, *bindu* and *aṇṇa*). Translation by Sferra (1991, 465). In verse 70cd–71 we find the following synonyms given for this initial *bindu*: *śabdatattva*, *aghoṣā vāc*, *brahman*, *kuṇḍalinī*, *dhruva*, *vidyāśakti*, supreme *nāda*, *mahāmāyā*, *vyoman*, and also *anāhata*.
- 47 For a French translation of this text with the commentary (*vyākhyā*) of Aghoraśiva, see Filliozat (1984).
- 48 On Rāmakaṇṭha's indebtedness to the *Sphoṭasiddhi*, see Sferra (1991, 317 n. 27).
- 49 Sferra (2007, 447 n. 21): “The *nāda* theory, as elaborated by Rāmakaṇṭha, can be seen as the result of an attempt to assimilate the *sphoṭa* theory according to Śaiva Siddhānta tenets. As has already been noted, there are no radical differences between *nāda* and *sphoṭa* theories.”
- 50 *Nādakārikā* 16cd–17: *tatsiddho nādaḥ paraḥ sumaṅgalā mālinī mahāmāyā || samanānāhatabindur aghoṣā vāg brahma kuṇḍalinī tattvam | vidyākhyam tattvam ity uktaṃ tais tais tadāgameṣv itthaṃ* (Thus a higher *nāda* is established. In this way, in the scriptures, it is taught through various [terms] such as *sumaṅgalā*, *mālinī*, *mahāmāyā*, *samanā*, *anāhata-bindu*, *aghoṣā vāc*, *brahman*, *kuṇḍalinī*, and the reality called *vidyā*).
- 51 An interesting example of this diversion, which is conceded by Rāmakaṇṭha, is found in his commentary (*vṛtti*) to *Kiraṇatantra* 3.23cd, where he cites a number of scriptural sources, namely, *Sārdhatrīśatikālottara* 1.6c–7b, *Vākyapadīya* 1.66, *R̥gveda* 1.164.45, and the *Mahābhārata* 14.12.16, only to disagree with them: “These hold that these [levels of speech] are necessarily merely inseparably connected with the soul (*ātmāsamavetāḥ*); be we have shown in the ‘Proof of Sound’ [*Nādakārikā*] that because the soul is not subject to transformation, they are attendants (*parigrahavartinyah*).” This entire section is translated, with extensive annotations, in Goodall (1998, 289–296).
- 52 *Nādakārikā* 19–20: *avikāry atrātmoktas tacchaktiś cāpy ato na yogyau tau | bahudhā sthātum yadvā caitanyavinākṛtau vikāritvāt || tatpumśakter bhinnā nādapādānakāraṇatvena | acid api śuddhatvān māyāto 'py anyā tadūrdhvagā kathitā* (The self as well as its power are taught as free of transformation in this [system]. For this reason, they are not fit to exist in

[internally] diverse states or else they would be devoid of consciousness, because of being subject to transformation. Therefore, that [higher *nāda* or *mahāmāyā*] is different than the power of the self, because of being the material cause of [common] sounds. Although it is insentient, it is distinct from and higher than *māyā*, due to its purity).

- 53 For a seminal characterization of the distinct “non-Saiddhāntika” streams of tantric revelation about to be treated, including the Bhairava tantras, Śakti tantras, and the Kulamārga, see Sanderson (1988).
- 54 *Brahmayāmalatantra* 1.127cd–133: *tasyecchā nirgatā śakti jñānarūpā manomanī || pravartate nirābhāsā avadhūtetī sā smṛtā || prabodhayati sānantā bindunādaḥ kṣaṇena tu || kuṇḍalākṛtisaṁsthānā svarādaḥ saṁvyavasthitā | caturbhāgavibhaktā sā caturbhāgavibhājītā || evaṁ kuṇḍalinī śaktiḥ svaraiḥ ṣoḍaśābhiḥ sthitā || catuṣkapathakopetā pañcavyoma-alakṛtā || evaṁ pañcavidhā sā tu śakir ādyā manomanī | navākṣaravidhānena punaś caiva prajāyate || svaravyaṅjanasamṣṛktā pañcāśāksarasamṣṛutā | avadhūtā mahādevī navabhedair vyavasthitā || atra devyō ‘tha dūtyas ca yoginy ucchuṣmamātaraḥ | sarvās tāḥ sṛjate devī śivecchām anuvartinī*. Translated in Hatley (2018, 417–419).
- 55 Hatley (2018, 418 n. 183) provides images of phonemes in protoregional scripts from Northern India inscriptions and copper plates that demonstrate the representative looped or coiled shape.
- 56 See Hatley (2018, 418 n. 183), where he goes on to note that this is a “key theme in the parallel passage of *Tantrasadbhāva* 1.215–29, which describes various forms of the *śakti* as the grapheme’s components.”
- 57 The related verse from the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* on *kuṇḍalinī* is cited in *Tantrāloka* 3.220cd–221ab: *sātra kuṇḍalinī bījaṁ jīvaḥ hūṭā cidātmikā || tajjaṁ dhruvecchonmeṣākhyam trikaṁ varṇās tataḥ punaḥ* (That *kuṇḍalinī* is the seed, it is endowed with life and has the nature of consciousness. The [first] three [vowels], representing the “eternal” (A), creative impulse (I) and expansion (U) arise from that [*kuṇḍalinī*]. From those, all the phonemes arise). In Jayaratha’s commentary (*viveka*) he cites another verse that he ascribes to the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*: *yā sā kuṇḍalinī sātra jagadyoniḥ prakīrtitā | tuṭirūpā tu sā jñeyā jīvaḥ hūṭā jagaty api || bījarūpā samākhyātā cidrūpāpi prakīrtitā* (That which is *kuṇḍalinī* is taught here as the source of the word (*jagadyoni*). She has the form of the [sequence of] “moments” and is known as life itself in this world. She is described as having the nature of a seed and revealed also as the nature of consciousness). These references are mentioned in Wallis (2022).
- 58 A reconstruction of the image of the goddess Mālinī, composed from the phonemes, can be found in Vasudeva (2007, 536).
- 59 For an excellent study of this text and some of its antecedents, see Golovkova (2017).
- 60 *Vāmakeśvarīmata* 1.5: *yadākṣaramahāsūtraprotam etaj jagattrayam | brahmāṇḍādikaṭāhāntaṁ vande tām siddhamāṭṛkām* (This triple world, from the realm of Brahmā down to the lowest hell, is threaded through with the great string that are Her syllables. I venerate that perfect syllabary [*māṭṛkā*]).
- 61 *Vāmakeśvarīmata* 1.6: *yadekādaśamādhārābījaḥ aṭratrayodbhavam | brahmāṇḍādikaṭāhāntaṁ jagad adyāpi dīśyate* (Even today it is seen that the universe from the realm of Brahmā down to the lowest hell emerges from the triangle that is her eleventh supporting vowel).
- 62 Abhinavagupta also capitalizes on the shape of E in his description of phonematic emanation, describing it as a triangle, whose three angles are correlated to the three powers of will, knowledge, and action. See Padoux (1990, 263–264).
- 63 Jayaratha glosses her original location in the body as a triangle within the *janmādhāra*, the base that is generative organ, whereas Śivānanda glosses it as the triangle in the center of the four-petaled lotus located in the root center or *mūlādhāra*.
- 64 *Vāmakeśvarīmata* 4.12ab–15: *yadollasati śrīnāṭapīṭhāt kuṭīlarūpiṇī || śivārkaṁaṇḍalaṁ bhittvā drāvayantī dumaṇḍalam | tadudbhavamṛtaspaṇḍamadirānandananditā || kulayoṣṭikulaṁ tyaktvā paraṁ puruṣam eti sā | nirlakṣaṇaṁ nirguṇaṁ ca kularūpavivarjitaṁ || tataḥ svacchandārūpā tu paribhramya jagat punaḥ | tena cāreṇa saṁtuṣṭā punar ekākinī satī*.
- 65 *Parātrīśikā* 5–9ab: *athādyaś tithayaḥ sarve svarā bindvavasānakāḥ | tadantaḥ kālayogena somasūryau prakīrtitau || pṛthivyādīni tattvāni puruṣāntāni pañcasu | kramāt kādiṣu vargeṣu makārānteṣu suvrate || vāyagnisālilendrāṇāṁ dhārāṇānāṁ catuṣṭayam | tadūrdhve śādivikyātaṁ purastād brahmapañcakam || amūlā tatkrāmāñ jñeyā kṣāntā sṛṣṭir udāhṛtā | sarveṣāṁ caiva mantrāṇāṁ vidyānāṁ ca yāśasvini || iyaṁ yoniḥ samākhyātā sarvatanreṣu sarvadā | caturdaśayutaṁ bhadre tithiśāntasamanvitam*.
- 66 For a survey of all the extant descriptions of the emergence of the *Śivasūtra*, see Williams (2017, 182ff).
- 67 *Śivasūtra* 1.2: *jñānaṁ bandhaḥ* (Limited knowledge is binding); *Śivasūtra* 1.4: *jñānādhiṣṭhānaṁ māṭṛkā* (The ground of that limited knowledge is *māṭṛkā*).
- 68 *Śivasūtravimarśinī* ad 1.4: *tasya ādikṣāntarūpā ajñātā mātā māṭṛkā viśvajananī tattatsaṁkucitavedyābhāsātmano jñānasya apūṛṇo ‘smi kṣāmaḥ sthūlo vāsmi, agniṣṭomayājyāsmi ityādittadavikalpakasavikalpakābhāsaparāmarśamayasya tattadvācakaśābdānuvedhadvāreṇa śokasamayaharṣarāgādirūpatām ādadhānā* (The mother or source of that [limited knowledge] is *māṭṛkā*, [the alphabet goddess] beginning with “A” and ending with “KṢA”. That [*māṭṛkā*] who is [normally] unrecognized, is the mother of the universe. She is generating a cognition consisting of the shining forth of a given object of knowledge that is contracted.

That cognition is itself an awareness of indistinct or conceptual narratives such as “I am incomplete,” “I am thin or fat,” or (I am ritual performer of the Agniṣṭoma sacrifice.” That cognition, because it is permeated by language that denotes distinct [valences], takes the form of grief, surprise, joy, attachment and other states of being).

- 69 *Śivasūtra* 2.7: *māṭṛkācakrasambodhaḥ* (Awakening to the wheel of *māṭṛkā*).
- 70 For other likely etymological meanings of the term *māṭṛkā*, facilitated by the *-ka* affix, see Vasudeva (2004, 52 n. 90): “The affix *ka* may denote not unknownness as noted above, but rather, following Pāṇini 5.3.76: *anukampāyām*, it may have the sense of a diminutive or convey affection, eg. ‘little mother, dear mother’. Or, following Pāṇini 5.3.77: *nītau ca tadyuktāt*, the *ka* may denote the object by which compassion is shown, eg. ‘compassionate mother.’ This possible polysemy of *māṭṛkā* should be borne in mind.”
- 71 This echoes a principle taught in the earliest Veda; see *Rgveda* 10.71.4 *uta tvaḥ paśyan na dadarśa vācam uta tvaḥ śṛṇvan na śṛṇoty enām | uto tv asmai tanvaṃ vi sasre jāyeva patyauśatī* (In looking, one does not see Vāc, in listening, one does not hear her. To another she reveals her beautiful form like a loving wife to her husband).
- 72 *Tantrāloka* 3.203cd–204ab: *anuttaravisargātmaśiśaśaktiyadvayātmani | parāmarśo nirbharatvād aham ity ucyate vibhoḥ* (This awareness of the all-pervasive deity in the self which is the oneness of Śiva and Śakti consisting of the unsurpassable reality (A) and the [immanent] emission (H), is thus described as [the all-embracing] “I” (AHAM), because of being complete).
- 73 *Tantrasāra* chapter 3: *āmarśaś ca ayaṃ na sāṅketiko ‘pi tu citsvabhāvatāmātranāntariyakaḥ paranādagarbha uktaḥ sa ca yāvān viśvasyāvasthāpakāḥ parameśvarasya śaktikalāpas tāvantam āmṛśati* (Furthermore, self-reflective awareness is not based in conventions, but is inseparable from the innate nature of consciousness and is taught as pregnant with the supreme throb or resonance. This supreme *nāda* becomes aware of the way in which Śiva’s collection of powers bring this universe into being).
- 74 For an even earlier concordance with Mīmāṃsaka views on language within Abhinavagupta’s own lineage, see Nemec (2019), which examines the way Somānanda defends the Mīmāṃsā doctrine that the relationship between speech and the object it denotes is real and permanent, even while subsuming this understanding within a nondual metaphysical framework.
- 75 Torella (2004, 174): “To this old problem—what is the *vācaka*?—quite unexpectedly Abhinavagupta furnishes the oldest of the solutions, that of the Mīmāṃsā: ‘Ultimately, the power of verbal signification, consisting in the identification with meaning, only pertains to the phonemes.’”
- 76 See, for example, *Tantrāloka* 15.117–120 for a description of *māṭṛkānyāsa*, further detailed in Jayaratha’s *viveka*, and *Tantrāloka* 15.121–125ab for *mālinīnyāsa*. For more on this practice, see Padoux (2011, 71–80).
- 77 The *Lakṣmītantra*, translated by Sanjukta Gupta, includes references to *śabdabrahma* (chap. 18), the origin of phonemes (chap. 19), the correlation of phonemes to the four *vyūhas* (chap. 20), and the practice of *māṭṛkānyāsa* (chap. 23). See Gupta (2000). Padoux (1990) also includes numerous references to this tradition, particularly the account of phonematic emanation in chapter 16 of the *Ahīrbudhnyasamhitā*. See Padoux (1990, 225–227).
- 78 One example is found in Payne (2018, 127–130), which examines the fundamental practice of visualizing the syllable A in Indian, Tibetan, and Japanese tantric Buddhism, and the symbolic resonances of this syllable as the primordial seed of all language, the encapsulation of scriptural wisdom, and so on. See also Payne (2018, 61–63), which touches on the identification of Buddhist deities with mantra in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* and the *Abhisamayamañjarī*. Another compelling parallel to the Śākta Śaiva sources collated in this paper is found in self-generation stage in the *Vajravārāhī Sādhana*, which involves the visualization of the letter E. In north Indian post-Gupta scripts, this letter is represented by an inverted triangle, and in the visualization it symbolizes the origin of all dharmas and is equated with the female sex organ or womb. See English (2002, 149).
- 79 Such a study would do well to integrate the insights of Silburn (1988), which analyzes a number of passages in the *Tantrāloka* and other tantric sources, but without tracing the historical development of the concept, particularly in earlier Trika texts like the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, and importantly, the *Tantrasadbhāva*. Padoux (1990) does include an analysis of an important passage from the *Tantrasadbhāva* but does not treat or account for the divergences in the depictions of *kuṇḍalinī* across tantric lineages. The scholarship of Bang (2018), which edits and translates chapters 1, 3, 9, 18, 28, is an important resource to build upon in the study of this text and *kuṇḍalinī*’s role therein. Finally, Hatley (2016) offers what is probably the clearest discussion of the general features of *kuṇḍalinī* in classical tantric literature, mentioning some important early references, including the *Sārdhatrīśatikālottara*; his short essay is an important resource for a more comprehensive text-critical study of the early history of *kuṇḍalinī*.