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The alphabet goddess Mātr̥kā in some early śaiva Tantras^{*}

Judit Törzsök

1. Introduction. Mātr̥kā – mother of all mantras?

Mātr̥kā is a well-known alphabet goddess mentioned in many tantric texts, irrespective of their age or affiliation. Her name is traditionally explained as the matrix or source (*yoni*), i.e. the source of all mantras, all *śāstras*, and in general, of everything that is made of words. This explanation is commonly given by exegetes, who paraphrase her name with synonyms for Mother, *mātr̥*. Thus Nārāyaṇakaṇṭha, in his commentary on the *Mṛgendratāntra*, says that she is associated with Śiva, and that she is called Mātr̥kā because she is like a Mother: she gave birth to everything that is made of words.¹ Similarly, Kṣemarāja glosses her name as she who gave rise to all mantras and Tantras.² Kṣemarāja also points out in other passages that she is the cause of the universe, which is made of whatever is expressed and whatever expresses.³ He also adds that uninitiated bound souls (*paśu*) do not know her as such, but she is taught in various śaiva scriptures, and bestows supreme knowledge if one recognizes her identity with the universe.⁴ Kṣemarāja also adds a nondualist interpretation to the understanding of Mātr̥kā as the Mother of all mantras when he associates her with the insight of nonduality (*abheda*) through the alphabet god, Śabdarāśi.⁵

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¹Nārāyaṇakaṇṭha on *Mṛg kp* 1.2: *bhagavataḥ sambandhinī nikhilavānmayajananītvān māteva mātr̥kā*. The suffix *-kā* is glossed by the particle *iva*.

²Kṣemarāja *ad SvT* 1.31: *mātr̥kāṃ paśūnām ajñānām viśvamātaram sarvamantratantrajanānim*.

³Kṣemarāja *ad SvT* 10.1144ab ... *iyam mātr̥kā vācyavācakāśeṣaviśvavetutve 'pi paśubhis tathātvenāparijñātā mātā*

⁴Kṣemarāja *ad SvT* 11.199b “*na vidyā mātr̥kāparā*”: *sā hi bhagavatī aśeṣavācyavācakātmakajagadabheda-camatkātmakāśabdarāśivimarśaparamārthā sarvamantrārāṇis tatra tatrāgameṣu nirdiśyate | sā caiṣā viśvāva-marśanena param jñānam prayacchati*.

⁵Lit. ‘She concentrates on the consciousness of Śabdarāśi, which is made of the intuition of the nonduality of the world, the world consisting of everything that is expressed and that expresses.’

But is this goddess really omnipresent in *śaiva* scriptures? And what is her relation to other alphabet deities? This paper shall certainly not give definitive answers, but attempts to sketch a few possible lines of inquiry as to the early history of the alphabet goddess Mātṛkā.

As a preliminary, it must be noted that this alphabet goddess is almost always called Mātṛkā with the suffix *-ka*, and never simply Mātṛ, mother, contrarily to other Mother goddesses. This distinction of terms needs to be insisted upon because the secondary literature speaks more often than not of mother goddesses, especially of the seven or eight mothers, as *mātṛkās*. Calling these mother goddesses *sapta-* or *aṣṭamātṛkās* is thus misleading not only because our sources commonly name them *mātṛ*-s without the suffix *-ka*, but also because the term Mātṛkā seems to be reserved for the alphabet goddess. That the alphabet goddess is the only mother goddess to receive the suffix *-ka* is not just a hypothesis. As we shall see, Abhinavagupta uses this suffix to give an exegetical interpretation to the name, and thus confirms that it belongs to the alphabet goddess in particular.⁶

Nevertheless, the word Mātṛkā can also denote various other concepts. It may simply mean the alphabet without any reference to a deity, or in some contexts it refers to the vowels alone. The word may sometimes also denote a specific mantra.

At the same time, various other alphabet deities also figure in the *āgamas*. Vāgeśvarī or Vāgīśvarī, the goddess of Words, is often identified with Mātṛkā, although Vāgīśvarī is not taken to be an alphabet goddess. The Sanskrit alphabet is personified in other deities too: Śabdarāśi, the Heap of Sounds, is a male equivalent of Mātṛkā; while the goddess Mālinī, the Garlanded One, appears as an alphabet goddess whose letters are not in the traditional order. The appearance and development of these other alphabet deities are often inseparable from the ways in which the concept of Mātṛkā evolves.

2. The absence of Mātṛkā

Several texts of what one could consider to be the earliest phase of the evolution of *śaiva* scriptures lack any reference to the alphabet goddess Mātṛkā. It is of course difficult to conclude anything certain from the absence of something, especially since many texts have been lost or probably not preserved in their original form. Therefore, it cannot be affirmed that at the time of the composition or compilation of these texts the concept of this alphabet goddess did not exist, but if it did, it was not considered crucial enough to deserve much mention. For instance, the earliest layer of the *Niśvāsa* corpus, the *Mūlasūtra* does not seem to know about it, although it does mention Vāgīśvarī or Vāgīśī twice, in whom the initiate

⁶As pointed out above, Nārāyaṇakaṇṭha's commentary also shows that he considers the suffix an integral part of the name, which expresses comparison, 'like a mother.'

is ritually reborn in the course of the initiation for liberation (*muktidīkṣā*).⁷

Another, possibly early text, the *Vīṇāśikhātantra* of the Vāma current, does not appear to know of Mātṛkā either. The absence of this goddess here is potentially more significant, for two reasons. First, because the *Vīṇāśikhā* prescribes what is later known as the alphabet grid (*prastāra*) of Mātṛkā, but without mentioning her. Had it known of her, it could have or perhaps would have not omitted her name in this context. Second, because it attributes the power of mantric syllables to the highest form of Śiva, without mentioning any goddess or even any abstract concept of Śiva's power in the feminine.

Just as all the stars, the circle of planets and constellations is presided over by the pole star and revolves without moving [i.e. without the pole star moving], so too is the body of the God, for it is the multitude of all mantric seed syllables. Knowing them to be presided over by Śiva [as the stars are presided over by the pole star], one shall obtain success in magic.⁸

The world, up to the world of Brahmā, [is made of] the letters starting with A and ending with KṢA. Everything is born and dissolves therein. This is the highest subtle god, established as the *locus* and what is to be supported.⁹

Turning back to the Siddhānta, the short *Rauravasūtrasaṃgraha*, which is another demonstrably early text, does not mention Mātṛkā either. However, it does speak of the power of mantras and attributes it to Śiva or to Śiva's power. Śiva's power is not necessarily personified as a goddess, and is designated here not only by the word Śakti, but also by *kalā*. Two verses cited below attribute the power of mantras to Śiva and identify the god with them.

All gods are made of mantras and all mantras are made of Śiva. Knowing this [world] to be made of Śiva, one should always meditate on Śiva.¹⁰

To release [people] from the bonds of Māyā, seventy million mantras, endowed with Śiva's power, were produced from the imperishable Soul, the Lord.¹¹

Another passage, however, suggests that it is Śiva's power as a separate entity that ensures the efficacy of mantras.

⁷5.13 and 6.17. The latter passage also describes her mantra.

⁸248cd-250ab: *yathā tāraṅgaṇaṃ sarvaṃ grāhanakṣatramaṇḍalam // dhruvādhiṣṭhitam tat sarvaṃ acalam parivartate / tadvac charīraṃ devasya sarvabijagaṇaṃ hi yat // śivenādhiṣṭhitam jñātvā tantrē siddhim avāpnuyāt*. Alternatively, the last *pāda* could be translated as 'one shall obtain success according to the Tantra.' However, I propose that Tantra has the more conventional sense of 'magic' here.

⁹252cd-253cd: *akārādīkṣākārāntam ābrahmabhuvanaṃ jagat // asmiṃś codpadyate sarvaṃ tatraiva pralayaṃ bhavet / eṣa devaḥ paraḥ sūkṣma ādhārādheyasaṃsthitah*

¹⁰3.28: *sarve mantrātmakā devāḥ sarve mantrāḥ śivātmakāḥ / śivātmakam idaṃ jñātvā śivam evānucintayet //*

¹¹1.12: *māyābandhavimokṣāya kāraṇād ātmano 'vyayāt / mantrakotyo 'bhavan sapta śivaśaktisamanvitāḥ //* (°śakti° conj. J.T.: °bhakti° ed.)

All the female mantras that are associated with the [supernatural] effects of being infinitely small etc. and depend on the mastery of magic possess the power / a part (kalā) of Śiva. All these [mantras] are parts of Śiva's power / parts of Śiva and Śakti and have been taught by the Omniscient. They are auspicious and bestow magic effects, liberation, happiness, lordship, money and virility.¹²

Thus, The *Raurava's* description may represent a transition between the idea that Śiva is the source of mantras and the concept of Mātṛkā as Śiva's Śakti.

3. Mātṛkā in the Nīśvāsa, after the Mūlasūtra

Although Mātṛkā is absent in the *Mūlasūtra*, she is mentioned several times in the subsequent layers of the *Nīśvāsa*. The *Uttarasūtra* praises her as the source of all words, while the *Nayasūtra* describes a practice for *sādhakas* to imitate each letter. The *Guhyasūtra* elaborates on these elements and adds further homologisations, through which it identifies Mātṛkā with Vāgīśī and Kuṇḍalinī.

3.1 Uttarasūtra: Mātṛkā as a Vidyā, the source of all mantras and śāstras, also identified with Śiva (*mātṛkāśiva*)

The *Uttarasūtra* clearly speaks of Mātṛkā as the alphabet, stating that she consists of eight letter groups, *vargas*. She is said to be the source of everything made of words, mantras and *śāstras*, in the manner of later definitions. She is defined as a mantra or female mantra (*vidyā*) herself, and is accordingly listed in association with other mantras, notably the *piṇḍākṣara* or *navātman*, which is also said to consist of eight parts. In these passages she seems to be treated as a goddess. However, her gender and identity may not be entirely separated from Śiva's person, for in one passage the text uses the compound *mātṛkāśiva*, an expression that occurs in the *Guhyasūtra* too and will later be echoed by the *Svacchandantra's* *mātṛkābhairava*.

In the first occurrence, Mātṛkā is the personification of the alphabet, i.e. of the eight *vargas*. These eight are, as later parallels show, 1. the sixteen vowels (including the Anusvāra and the Visarga), 2-6: the five groups of stops with the nasals, 7. the semivowels, 8. the sibilants with HA. The conjunct KṢA, which is later listed as the last letter of the alphabet, may not have been included here, or it was included in the last group. Mātṛkā is also said to be the source of all words.

¹²4.44-6: *aṇimādiguṇair yuktā yogaiśvaryaavalambitāḥ / yāvatyāḥ kathitā vidyāḥ sarvāḥ śivakālānvitāḥ // śivaśaktikalāḥ sarvā etāḥ sarvajñabhāṣitāḥ / yogamokṣasukhaisvaryadhānavīryapradāḥ śubhāḥ //*

And these are the eight letter groups (homologisation with the *piṇḍākṣara*), due to which it is also called Mātṛkā, from whom the śāstras and whatever is made of words have been born in due order, from whom all divine, nondivine and semi-divine words, of mantras and of languages, were produced.¹³

A subsequent line confirms that she is the source of śāstras and mantras, and that perhaps she herself is considered to be a mantra.

Several thousands of millions of śāstras and innumerable millions of mantras were all produced from Mātṛkā. There is no mantra beyond her.¹⁴

The next chapter starts with a similar praise:

Lord, if Mātṛkā is said to be the supreme mantra, then tell me her worship; a branch grows from the root [and similarly, the worship of other mantras derives from the worship of Mātṛkā].¹⁵

This chapter describes a *mūlayāga*, which is identified with the worship of Mātṛkā. Indeed, it is performed with various single letters for each deity. More precisely, the consonants are used only at the beginning, when it is enjoined that the practitioner must place the vowels (considered male and called seeds, *bijas*) on the right, and the consonants (female, called *yonī*) on the left.¹⁶ Thereafter, each deity is worshipped in or as a vowel or a vowel group. This may be important, for it attests the possible early usage of the word *mātṛkā* in the sense of vowels, similarly to several passages of the *Brahmayāmala*.

The *yāga* described is in fact partly based on using various prosodical lengths of the vowels (*brasva*, *dīrgha*, *pluta*) for the worship of various deities. If this is what the text calls *mātṛkā* worship, then it suggests that the use of the word *mātṛkā* may be based on the meaning of *mātrā* in the sense of prosodical length. This in turn suggests that originally the word Mātṛkā may have been derived from *mātrā*, prosodical length (of vowels), rather than *mātr-* in the sense of mother. This meaning was then perhaps first extended to the vowels and finally to the whole alphabet.

Whatever the origin of Mātṛkā's name is, she is also identified with Sadāśiva's Śakti in the

¹³Or: from whom all perfect divine and worldly mantras, speeches and words were produced. 1.20cd-21: *tāny eva cāṣṭavargāṇi mātṛkā yais tu kathyate // anukrameṇa jātāni yataḥ śāstrāṇi vāṇmayam / divyādivyāni siddhāni mantrabhāṣapadāni tu //*

¹⁴Or: there is no mantra beyond what is produced by her. 1.41: *śāstrakoṭisahasrāṇi mantrakotiyā hy anekāṣaḥ / mātṛkāśambhavāḥ sarve nāsti mantram ataḥ param //*

¹⁵2.1: *mātṛkā paramo (paramo em. H. Isaacson : parato mss) mantrō yadi deva nigadyate / mātṛkāyāgam ākhyābi mūlāc chākhā prarohate //*

¹⁶2.8ab: *dakṣiṇe yojayed bijāṃ vāme yonin tu kalpayet*. It is not clear where these should be placed. Perhaps on the place of worship, *yāgabhūmi*; but it is also possible that the practitioner is to place them on himself, for it is followed by the line *śivibhūtaḥ prasannātmā śivasyārcanam ācāret*, having become Śiva, with appeased mind, he should perform Śiva's worship.

Uttarasūtra.

Piṇḍākṣara and the eight letter groups: these two are in fact one. They stand for Sadāśiva and Śakti, and [the one is] Śiva, beyond both.¹⁷

Furthermore, she is praised as the most important mantra in a passage which later became particularly popular, for it was borrowed by the *Svacchanda* as well as by the *Tantrasadbhāva*.

There is no liberation comparable to [what] initiation [bestows], there is no mantra beyond Mātrkā; there is no knowledge higher than that of the *tattvas* (*prakriyā*), there is no yoga without a meditational target.¹⁸

In spite of the independent existence of Mātrkā in the *Uttarasūtra*, she is still often identified with various forms of Śiva himself. The above examples showed that she is homologised with the Piṇḍākṣara mantra. In another passage, a yogic practice prescribes the use of Mātrkā-śiva (sic!) for visualisation at the level of Vidyā (*vidyādhyāna*, after *māyādhyāna*). The result of the practice is accordingly twofold, female and male: one obtains success in magic using female mantras, and becomes comparable to Śiva.¹⁹

3.2 *Nayasūtra*: Mātrkā and the body

The *Nayasūtra* adds some more praises of Mātrkā to what the *Uttarasūtra* contains. But it also elaborates her worship with an additional practice. The *sādhaka* must imitate each letter with his own body, thus a new equivalence is created between the alphabet and the body. No similar equivalence is found in the *Uttarasūtra*, or at least not in such a detailed and elaborate way. Furthermore, both Mātrkā and each letter, in particular the letter A, is said to contain all the *tattvas*. He who recognises these equivalences between his body, the letters and the ontological levels of the universe is promised to be liberated.

He who knows this form of Mātrkā in his body and, in the same way, in the letter A, shall be released from this existence. This is the highest, supreme knowledge, the greatest of all secret teachings. Knowing the true nature of Mātrkā, the guru can destroy the bonds [that tie the soul to this world]. All the mantras shall be under his sway and obey his commands when instructed. For he shall be like Śiva on the surface of the earth: the guru is known as the

¹⁷4.49: *piṇḍākṣaraṣṭavargaṃ ca dvāv etau eka eva ca / sadāśivasya śakteś ca dvābhyāṃ paratarah śivaḥ*

¹⁸4.51cd-52ab: *nāsti dikṣāsamo mokṣo na vidyā mātrkāparā / prakriyā na param jñānaṃ nāsti yogam alakṣakaḥ //* (= unpolished *Svacchanda* 11.119 = *Tantrasadbhāva* 11.195 with the variant *mātrkā* for *mātrkā*) The KSTS edition of the *Svacchanda* reads *nāsti dikṣāsamo mokṣo na vidyā mātrkā parā / na prakriyāparam jñānaṃ nāsti yogastvalakṣakaḥ*.

¹⁹5.7cd-8ab: *ekaikākṣarayogena abhyasen mātrkāśivam // vidyāsiddhim avāpnoti śivatulyas ca jāyate/*

liberator.²⁰

3.3 Homologisations in the Guhyasūtra

Several additional identifications can be found in the *Guhyasūtra*, in which she is also called Vāgīśī, and is said to be divided into female powers starting with Vāmā.²¹

Moreover, it is in the *Guhyasūtra* that she is unambiguously treated as a goddess, for here Śiva speaks to Devī as Mātṛkā herself. He states that they are the ultimate source of the universe with the recurring line ‘everything is produced from my seeds and is born from your womb.’ Various kinds of verbal creation are listed here: the Vedas, systems of thought (*mata*) whether attributed to divine, semi-divine or worldly authors, and, last but not least, languages, Sanskrit, Prakrit, and even Apabhraṃśa.²²

In this series of homologisations, she also appears to be identical with Kuṇḍalinī or Kuṭilā in a passage reminiscent of the above mentioned verse in the *Uttarasūtra* (4.51).

12.41

*śivena vi – na vinā mokṣo na vidyā lokamātṛkā/
-2- khyate mātṛā kuṭilā ūrdhvagāminī //*

Although the passage is lacunose, a few important points can be clearly identified. Firstly, initiation is not mentioned here. It seems that Śiva is held responsible for liberation, and Mātṛkā for mantric knowledge. *Vidyā* in this context may possibly refer to the mastery of *siddhis* obtained with the help of mantras. The word *lokamātṛkā* may signal that she is also a goddess who creates or maintains the world. In any case, she appears to be equated with the upward going Kuṭilā, the most subtle form of sound.

Although these identifications tend to strengthen the female aspect of the alphabet as

²⁰1.75cd-78ab: *mātṛkāvigrahaṃ hy etac charīre yas tu vindati // akāre ca tatbaiveha sa saṃsārād vimucyate / etaj jñānam param śreṣṭhaṃ sarvagubhyottamottamam // jñātvā mātṛkasadbhavaṃ gurur bhavati pāśahā /mantrās tasya vaśah sarve ājñāṃ kurvanti coditāḥ // śivavad bhūtale so hi mocakas tu guru smṛtaḥ /*

²¹7.251cd-252ab: *sā devī ca kalā eva [vāgī]śīti nigadyate // aṣṭabbedavibhinnā tu vidyā sā eva paṭhyate / vāmādyaiḥ śaktibhir bhinnā punaś ca pariṭhyate*. The first two lines are borrowed in *Svacchanda* 10.1143cd-44ab: *sā eva paramā devī vāgīśīti nigadyate / aṣṭavargavibhinnā ca vidyā sā mātṛkaiva tu*. In addition to the *Svacchanda* being more explicit, it is also notable that it does not call her *kalā*. The use of *kalā* in the sense of energy or power seems more frequent in earlier Tantras. Furthermore, the omission of the last line may also be deliberate, for the *Svacchanda* identifies the constituent powers of Mātṛkā with different goddesses.

²²8.128-133: *ahaṃ tvam ca viśālākṣi mūlaṃ sarvajagasya tu / mātṛkāśivarūpeṇa siddhisambhavapādapam // ābrahmastambaparyantaṃ jagat sarvaṃ carācaram / mama bijodbhavaṃ sarvaṃ tava yonivinirgatam // vedādyāḥ pañca ye proktā mahājñās tu bhūtale / -6- dbhavā hyete tava yonivinirgatāḥ // riṣidevamatāny eva martyabud-dhikṛtāni ca / mama bijodbhavā hy ete tava yonivinirgatāḥ // saṃskṛtaṃ prakṛtaṃ caiva apatram sānunāsikam / (= apabhraṃśānunāsikam ?) divyādīvyam tu yat kiñcid vānmayam samprasūyate // tvam sadā gurṇiṇī (= gurviṇī?) devī ahaṃ kāmaitā sadā / vikārās tava jāyante yat sarvaṃ sampratiṣṭhitam //*

Mātṛkā, the *Gubhasūtra* still refers to her as Mātṛkā-śiva occasionally: ‘What is the use of several other mantras if one knows Śiva in the form of Mātṛkā?’²³

4. The multiplication of Mothers in the recensions of the Svachanda

The *Svacchanda* is certainly not one of the earliest tantras and its dependence on the *Niśvāsa* has already been amply demonstrated.²⁴ Here I would only like to draw attention to two facts, for the *Svacchanda* is again closely related to what we find in the *Niśvāsa* about Mātṛkā. First, that Mātṛkā is divided into eight *vargas* or sections in the earlier and unpurified recension of this text, which thus continues the tradition of the *Niśvāsa*.

Second, while the *Gubhasūtra* of the *Niśvāsa* mentions Mātṛkā’s division into Śaktis starting with Vāmā, here she is divided into the eight mothers. However, as it has been pointed out,²⁵ the names of these mothers were added later, in what became the standard Kashmirian recension.²⁶ Since the longer recension is what was available to Kṣmarāja, he tries to defend the consistency of the text.²⁷ For, surprisingly, the additional passage mentions only seven mothers,²⁸ which contradicts the immediate context, as it lists eight of them,²⁹ as well as another passage in the *Svacchanda*.³⁰

Another inconsistency is that the original, again agreeing with the *Niśvāsa*, treats the vowels as male (Bhairava) and the consonants as female (Bhairavī).³¹ But the additional passage assigns the first mother, Mahālakṣmī, to the vowels instead of starting its list with the consonants.³²

Thus, the original, shorter *Svacchanda* already refers to the alphabet mothers (*mātṛ*), and its later recension enumerates their names. This fact is significant in the light of other bhairavatantric passages. As we shall see, the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* develops this system further and gives a different list of mothers.

²³9.15cd: *kim anyair babubbir mantrair viditvā mātṛkāśivam //*

²⁴See especially the edition of the *Niśvāsa* in progress, with remarks and parallels pointed out by D. Goodall. He also mentioned some parallels in a series of papers given in May 2009 at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris.

²⁵See TÖRZSÖK 1999 Appendix 5, HATLEY 2007:67 citing SANDERSON.

²⁶The additional lines are 1.34cd-36cd

²⁷See commenatry *ad Svachanda* 1.36. Kṣemarāja understands that the vowels represented by Mahālakṣmī must be omitted here, for at the level of Bhairava, there are only seven mothers.

²⁸1.36cd: *etāḥ sapta mahāmātṛḥ saptalokavyavasthitāḥ.*

²⁹1.34cd-36ab, with one mentioned in each *pāda*.

³⁰Namely 10.1144ab: *aṣṭavargavibinnā ca vidyā sā mātṛkaiva tu.*

³¹1.32-34ab: *ādīḥ ṣoḍaśabhedena sāksād vai bhairavaḥ smṛtaḥ / kavargaś caṭavargau ca tapayāḥ śas tathaiva ca // sambāreṇa samopetau yonir vai bhairavī smṛtā / mātṛkābbhairavaṃ devam avargeṇa prapūjayet // bhairavī kādinā pūjyā mātṛr vargaiḥ prapūjayet /*

³²1.34c: *avarge tu mahālakṣmīḥ*

5. Mātrkā, alphabets and goddesses in the *Brahmayāmala*

The earliest surviving text of the *yoginī* cult, the *Brahmayāmala*, appears to use the term *mātrkā* in various meanings, some of which are not entirely clear from the context. It is certain that it can refer to the full alphabet, either from A to HA³³ or to KṢA.³⁴ But it can also denote perhaps a single vowel, as in the recurring expression *lānta(ṃ) mātrkāyā saha*, ‘the letter VA with Mātrkā’;³⁵ or it may also be the name of a mantra in the masculine.³⁶

Whatever is the – apparently changing – meaning of Mātrkā, she is not treated as a goddess, not even as Śiva’s abstract power. She is not worshipped or lauded. The word *mātrkā* seems to be used as a technical term for a certain group of phonemes.

However, this does not mean that the *Brahmayāmala* does not include the alphabet in its various methods of goddess worship. A large number of *cakras* are prescribed for the worship of the alphabet in chapters 17, 24 and 29. In most cases, the letters are represented by or identified with goddesses or *yoginīs*, and thus the *cakras* bear names such as *kbecarī-cakra*. The letters are homologised with the levels of the universe (33 *tattvas*) in chapter 11, and they are placed on the body, in accordance with general tantric practice, in chapter 4.³⁷

Although the *Brahmayāmala* does not praise Mātrkā as a goddess, in one passage it appears to honour an alphabet goddess, who receives the epithet Mālinī. Mālinī is the alphabet goddess *par excellence* of the Trika, and she displays an irregular sequence of letters. This sequence does not seem to be mentioned in the *Brahmayāmala*, and therefore the goddess described there cannot be considered identical with the well-known alphabet goddess of the Trika, but she is certainly an alphabet goddess: she is treated as a goddess who pervades everything made of speech and is said to consist of a group of forty-nine, i.e. the forty-nine letters (excluding KṢA). The passage is found in the chapter entitled *prakriyāpāṭala* (31), and it describes the level of *māyā*. The text compares the alphabet goddess to a bee-hive or a honey comb with its cells; creation is effected by the shaking (*kṣobha*) of the bee-hive / *māyā* / alphabet goddess.³⁸

I shall now teach you another goddess, in the form of Māyā, who has a garland [in the form of letters?]. She has several cells,³⁹ and resembles a mass of diluted

³³14.220cd (in the context of *māraṇa*): *bakārādi akārāntā viparītan tu mātrkāṃ*; and in ch. 14: *akārādi-bakārāntā mātrkā yā na saṃśayaḥ*

³⁴29.155ab: *akārādikṣakārāntā mātrkāṃ vibhajya mantarvit* (hypermetrical).

³⁵See also the expression, ‘born from the letter Mātrkā’ *mātrkāksaraja* in 75.35d

³⁶A mantra called *mātrka* is spoken of in 63.39cd ff.

³⁷It is not possible to give a full account of all the ritual uses of Mātrkā here, in its various meanings, in the *Brahmayāmala*. Nevertheless, I have tried to point out some important rites involving this term.

³⁸This creative shaking is suggestive of a sexual act, especially in the *Brahmayāmala*, in which *kṣobha* and its derivatives often appear to mean ‘to cause to reach orgasm.’ See TAK forthcoming vol. III on *kṣobha*.

³⁹This word (*anekakandaropetā*) and the comparison to the red lotus (*raktotpaladalaprakhyā*) also figure in

yellow orpiment, has the form of a beehive / honeycomb, the female mantra of the most supreme form. She looks like petals of a red lotus †ornated with all the letters from A to KṢA?†... She pervades whatever is made of speech with her great strength. She is Aparā comprising [the letters] between A and KṢA,⁴⁰ oh goddess with a beautiful complexion. Conceived of in this way, she is the group of forty-nine [letters], which is born from the levels of the universe, no doubt. This whole world made of *māyā* is created through Śiva's will, in the abode, which is the beehive.⁴¹ The goddess is established there and is always shaken by the Lord, o great goddess. Thus is the triple world always created. In the place of innumerable cells, in thousands of ten millions of them, other forms are established with their own nature, o virtuous one. She has the form of fiery energy everywhere, she is like a fire-fly in trees.⁴²

6. Mātrkā, Mālinī and Śabdarāśi in the Siddhayogeśvarīmata

Both Mātrkā and Mālinī figure as alphabet goddesses in the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, whose short recension is perhaps the second earliest surviving tantra of the Yoginī cult. Mātrkā is praised in the usual way as the source of all tantras and as that which bestows success.

The Power of Rudra is known as Mātrkā, possessing all letters (from A to KṢA). These excellent tantras have come from her, [transmitted] orally by *yoginīs*.⁴³

As seen elsewhere, Mātrkā's letters are placed on the body of the practitioner before the placement of mantras,⁴⁴ and similarly to the *Svacchanda*, the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* under-

another passage (31.72-3), which describes Kuṭilā as a female power in the form of Māyā (*māyārūpā śakti*).

⁴⁰This meaning and the conjecture from *kakṣa-* to *akṣa-* have been proposed by SH. HATLEY. PROF. SANDERSON has suggested to keep the reading of the manuscripts in the sense 'in small compartments.'

⁴¹*Ex conj.*

⁴²31.59-65: *aparā tu pravakṣyāmi māyārūpā tu mālinīḥ / anekakandaropetāḥ haritālābhraṇkavat // madhukosamākārā vidyā paramarūpiṇī / raktotpaladalaprakhyam ṛsarvodikṣoṛpaśobhitam // yat kiñcid vāgmayaḥ sarvaḥ vyāpayaṇtī mahojasāḥ / akṣaput[a]k[a]nyāyena aparā varavarṇṇini (akṣaputaḥkanyāyena conj. HATLEY : kakṣaput-k-nyāyena MS) // evaṃvidbhīyamāyāñ caikūnapañcāsakaḥ gaṇam / (understand: vidbhīyamānām?) tatvānān tu samutpannam sakāśān nātra saṁśayaḥ // māyātma yaḥ jagat sarvaḥ śrjate tu śivecchayā / (perhaps understand māyātmāyam?) madhupālayasamsthāne samsthitā kṣobhyate sadā // (madhupālaya° conj. PROF. SANDERSON : madhupolaka° MS) īsvareṇa mahādevi trailokyam śrjate sadā / anekakandarasthāne koṭi koṭi sahasrake // samsthitāny anyarūpāni svabhāvenaiva suvrate / khadyotam iva vṛkṣeṣu tejorūpā samantataḥ //*

⁴³32.14cd-15ab: *rudraśaktiḥ samākhyatā mātrkā sakalākṣikā // asmāt tantravarā -m- etā nirgatā yoginīmukhāt*

⁴⁴See e.g. 23.5ab: *mātrkaḥ sakalam devī nyase' dehaparicchade*. O goddess, one should place the whole Mātrkā on the covering, which is the body.

stands Mātrkā to be made of the mothers of the *vargas*.⁴⁵

But Mātrkā is not the most important alphabet goddess in this system. The commonly used alphabet goddess, whether in the course of the placement of mantras⁴⁶ or for encoding them, is Mālinī. The letters equated with her body parts are listed in chapter 3, and this code is used throughout the text to cite mantras.

In spite of her importance, the name Mālinī is rarely mentioned in the text. In most cases, she is simply called the goddess (*devī*), the power of Rudra (*rudraśakti*), who is made of all letters (*sarvākṣaramayī*).⁴⁷

Somewhat surprisingly, these two alphabet goddesses do not seem to suffice in this system. For in chapter 16, the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* suddenly introduces yet another alphabet deity, a Bhairava called Śabdarāśi. He is a male version of Mātrkā, for he contains the alphabet in the usual order. But the context and the way in which he is introduced is particular. For chapter 16 starts with a summary of the previous chapters given by the goddess, after which she asks Bhairava about Śabdarāśi and various types of *sādhanas* in the Uttarantra. Bhairava refers once more to this Uttarantra when he replies:

Just as the wish-fulfilling gem bestows everything one thinks of, so too Mātrkā in this world makes one obtain one's desires. She was previously taught as a female power (*śakti*), o goddess with beautiful hips. Now in the Uttarantra she is taught as a Bhairava.⁴⁸

It seems possible that this so-called Uttarantra, or a substantial part of it, is a relatively later addition to the first half. The first 15 chapters include the description of all the mantras, initiation, *pūrvasevā* and *sādhanas* related to the core pantheon. Chapter 16 is a double of chapter 3 in a sense, for Mālinī is defined in chapter 3, while Śabdarāśi figures in chapter 16. From chapter 17 the text contains prescriptions to worship various *cakras*, in order to obtain various supernatural effects. The last chapters are, however, different, in that they include a list of scriptures, a section on how to recognise human Yoginīs and a short chapter on the transmission of the text. Both the *Niśvāsa* and the *Brahmayāmala* have sections called Uttarantra, which are relatively later additions (although in the *Brahmayāmala*, the division of what is earlier and later does not seem to correspond to this textual

⁴⁵See e.g. 25.18ab: *kāryaṃ sarvārthadaṃ devī mātṛkaṃ mātṛsambhavam* O goddess, one should perform the Mātrkā, who is born from Mothers and bestows everything).

⁴⁶See 7.31d: *mālinīpūrvakaṃ*.

⁴⁷See e.g. 3.6d-7ab: *rudraśaktiṃ samālikhet / sarvākṣaramayīṃ devīṃ sarvavarṇopāśobhitām*. One should write down the power of Rudra, the goddess made of all the letters and ornated with all the sounds. See also 3.19: *evaṃ samyagvidbānena rudraśaktiṃ samālikhet / sarvākṣaramayīṃ devīṃ tato mantraṃ samuddharet //* In this way, following the right method, one should write down the power of Rudra, the goddess made of all the letters. Then one can extract the mantras.

⁴⁸16.9-10: *cintāmaṇir yathā loke cintitārthapradāyikā / tathāiva mātṛkā loke vāñchitārthaprasādhikā // yathā śakti varārohe sā tathā kathitā purā / idānīm uttare tantrē khyāpyate bhairavaṃ yathā //*

division).

Thus, there are more than one reason to think that the Uttarantra of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* is a full or partial addition.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, one must also bear in mind that what we have today is the short recension of this text. A much longer recension was available to Kashmirian exegetes, which may or may not have had the same division into two.

In any case, Śabdarāśi is not very well integrated in the ritual system of this text. Apart from his description in chapter 16, he is mentioned only once, in chapter 25. His presence is far less notable than that of Mātrkā or Mālinī. Moreover, his alphabet code given in chapter 16 is not commonly used, mantras are mainly given in the Mālinī code throughout the text.

This suggests that Śabdarāśi as a male double of Mātrkā is something of an alien here. A possible source from which the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* adopted him, whether directly or indirectly, is the *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṃgraha*. As pointed out by PROF. SANDERSON,⁵⁰ there are several common features of the *Svāyambhuva* and the Trika.⁵¹ The *Svāyambhuva*, which knows the alphabet as a *śakti*, names nevertheless Śabdarāśi as the source of verbal creation. He is a kind of demiurge, identified with the Lord's power.

In the beginning, sound was produced from the Lord, who is the cause; therefore it is the imperishable letter (*akṣara*). The knowers of sacred words know this cause, the Lord, as the sacred word that bestows liberation. Thus, the god, who bestows everything, is also known as the Heap of Sounds, who has nine parts and fifty members, the supreme one made of seeds and matrices. The seed consists of the sixteen letters from A to the Visarga. The remaining thirty four [the consonants, including KṢA] are the unchangeable matrix, which is imperishable. This is the Power of the God of Gods, this world is permeated by Her. The supreme and subtle *śaiva* knowledge is what ultimately takes one to the other side [of this existence]: it is divided into vedic and other knowledges and into branches of śaivism. It is like a wish-fulfilling gem and is established as the cause of everything.⁵²

In addition to Śabdarāśi's appearance in this passage, it may also be significant that he or his power is compared to the wish-fulfilling gem, just as in the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*.

⁴⁹I shall present some more arguments in the forthcoming edition of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*.

⁵⁰See TÖRZSÖK 1999: vii, note 26.

⁵¹See also VASUDEVA 2004:381 on the closeness of *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṃgraha* 20 and *Mālinīvijayottara* 17.

⁵²*Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṃgraha* 5.1-5 (electronic edition by D. GOODALL): *athādāv abhavac chabdāḥ kāraṇād akṣaram tataḥ / kāraṇam mokṣadam brahman brahma brahmavido viduḥ // tasmāt sarvaprado devaḥ śabdarāśir iti śrutāḥ / navaparvaśatārdhātma yonibijātmakaḥ paraḥ // akārādivisargāntam bijam tat ṣoḍaśākṣaram / śeṣā yonī catustrimśat avyayā hy akṣarātmikā // sā śaktir devadevasya tayā vyāptam idaṃ jagat / jñānam śaivam param sūkṣmam yat tat tārakam uttamam // vedādijñānabhedena śivajñānavibhedataḥ / cintāmaṇir ivātrāsau sthitaḥ sarvasya kāraṇam //*

Although such a comparison is not unique, it is not commonly used by other texts in the context of an alphabet deity. The simile is also taken over by a later Trika text, the *Tantrasadbhāva*.⁵³

Just as in the case of Mālinī, Śabdarāśī's body parts consist of letters in the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*. But in the case of Śabdarāśī, parts of his face are made of the vowels, while his body, somewhat surprisingly, consists of eight mothers (*mātr*), who stand for eight sections of the alphabet. This is a new element compared to the *Svacchanda*. For according to the *Svacchanda*, Mātrkā's body is made of eight Mātr̥s altogether, including the vowels: the vowels, the five consonant groups, the semi-vowels and the sibilants. The *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* does not identify the vowels with a Mātr̥, but then adds the letter KṢA as the last consonant, identified with the last Mātr̥ on its list, Aghoreśī. Perhaps the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* attempts to create a system which is consistent with the idea that vowels are male and consonants are female and that is why it identifies Mothers only with consonants. But since it needs to fit in eight mothers, it adds the letter KṢA as a last, separate element.⁵⁴

This extension and analysis of the alphabet deities confirm that the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* builds partly on what is found already in the *Svacchanda*. The *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* itself seems to admit its textual dependence: in the chapter concerning its transmission (32), it presents itself as a later version of the *Svacchanda*.⁵⁵

7. Exegetical solutions

Kashmirian exegetes accommodate all these alphabet deities. When Śabdarāśī 'shakes or stirs up' the goddess called Mātrkā, she becomes Mālinī. The idea of *kṣobha* is already present in the *Parākhyā*, in which Śabdarāśī is born from the shaking of Bindu, and is then identified with Mātrkā.⁵⁶

The relation of Śabdarāśī, Mātrkā and Mālinī is explained in the *Tantrāloka* (3.198-9ab), in

⁵³4.60cd

⁵⁴Perhaps the *Svāyam̐bhuvāsūtrasaṃgraha* has the same distribution in mind when it speaks of nine parts: the vowels and the eight consonant groups.

⁵⁵The fact that the *Svacchanda* is mentioned as a precursor of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* does not necessarily mean that the text the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* speaks of is the same that we know today as the *Svacchanda* (and if yes, it is still a question which recension is meant). Moreover, such presentation of the transmission may be purely fictitious. Nevertheless, it seems that 1. similar references usually indicate textual dependence, 2. coupled with other elements, this fact can support the hypothesis that some form of the *Svacchanda* is earlier than at least the second half of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*.

⁵⁶6.2-4: *sr̥ṣṭikāle sa sarvajñāḥ puruṣārthaprayojanām / vyaktim̐ nayati bījārṇam̐ bindoḥ sa parameśvaraḥ // binduḥ kṣubdhas tadicchātaḥ śabdarāśir̥ abbūt tadā / khaṇḍadvayena sañjātaḥ svarādyāḥ khaṇḍabhedataḥ // svaraiḥ ṣoḍaśabhiḥ śeṣais trayastriṃśadbhir̥ akṣaraiḥ / mātr̥keyam̐ matā loka varṇocārasya mātr̥kā //* The wording of the *Parākhyā* also suggests that the name Śabdarāśī is less commonly used than Mātrkā; Mātrkā is said to be Śabdarāśī's layname so to speak.

which Abhinavagupta uses the word *saṃghaṭṭa*, ‘rubbing, friction,’ to describe Śabdarāśi’s and Mātrkā’s union. He then employs a *double entendre* to explain how Mātrkā, the ordered Sanskrit alphabet, in whom vowels and consonants (viewed as seeds and female organs) are separated, becomes Mālinī, the alphabet goddess in whom consonants and vowels are mixed : Mātrkā becomes *bhinnayoni*, which means ‘having the female organ split’ as well as ‘having the consonants split / mixed up.’

Bhairava is Śabdarāśi when his nature is nondual reflection, and through his link with the form of the object of reflection, he is identical with the Power Mātrkā. When Mātrkā is united with (lit. ‘rubbed violently by’) Śabdarāśi, her female organ is split / her consonants are out of sequence and she is Mālinī.⁵⁷

The commentator, Jayaratha, after explaining the procedure as described by Abhinavagupta, adds a few relevant semantic analyses of the word Mālinī.

She is Mātrkā, and through her union with Śabdarāśi, which is characterised by the oneness of Śakti and the Possessor of Śakti, just as salt and sour gruel [become mixed], because of their mutual union, her female organs, i.e. the consonants, are broken, i.e. split, by the seeds [of Śabdarāśi, identified with the vowels]. When she is in this state, she is Mālinī, ALINĪ meaning she has the consciousness,⁵⁸ of MĀ, meaning ‘opposition.’⁵⁹ The name Mālinī can [also] be derived from the verb *malate*, meaning that she holds the world in her own form,⁶⁰ from the verb *mālayati*, meaning she interiorizes the whole universe.⁶¹ She starts with NA and ends with PHA because her seeds and female organs [i.e. vowels and consonants] are mixed up, due to the splitting of her female organ(s).⁶²

In another passage of the *Tantrāloka* (15.130-1), Abhinavagupta also clarifies how he analyses the name Mātrkā. He derives it from the verbal root *mā-*, ‘to measure, to experience.’ He interprets the agent noun suffix (-tr) as being used to form the periphrastic future and the suffix -ka as indicating comparison, likeness. Thus, Mātrkā is defined as ‘she who is like the one who will be the subject of experience,’ for she is still within Śabdarāśi without

⁵⁷ *ekāmarśasvabhāvavve śabdarāśiḥ sa bhairavaḥ / āmrśyacchāyayā yogāt saiva śaktiś ca mātrkā // sā śabdarāśisaṅghaṭṭād bhinnayonis tu mālinī*

⁵⁸ This derivation seems to involve the invented verbal root *al-*, perhaps in the sense ‘to be able to.’

⁵⁹ The prohibitive particle *mā* is understood in this sense, as PROF. SANDERSON has kindly pointed out.

⁶⁰ The verb *malate* is given in the sense ‘to hold, to possess’ in *Dhātupāṭha* I.522-3: *mal-a mall-a dhāraṇe*. Abhinavagupta also emphasizes that she has the form of the universe and identifies her with the supreme goddess of the Trika, Parā in *Tantrāloka* 3.233cd: *mālinī hi parā śaktir nirṇītā viśvarūpiṇī*.

⁶¹ The denominative *mālayati* is referred to here, probably in the sense ‘to encircle, to envelope, to enclose.’

⁶² *saiva mātrkā śabdarāśisaṅghaṭṭāc chaktiśaktimadaikyātmyalakṣaṇāt lavaṇāranālavat parasparamelanāt, bhinnā bijair bheditā yonayaḥ vyañjanāni yasyaḥ sā tathāvidhā satī, ”mā” iti-vācyasya pratiyogyabhāvasya, alinī vimarśikā / malate viśvaṃ svarūpe dhatte, mālayati antaḥkaroti kṛtsnamiti ca mālinīti vyapadīśyate / bhinnayonitvād eva ca asyā bijayoninām viśvaṃstbulatvāt nādiphāntatvam /*

being manifest as a separate entity. Only when she becomes manifest will she be Mālinī, responsible for the obtainment of supernatural effects as well as liberation.

She is known to be endowed with differentiations as the main goddess starting with NA ending with PHA called Mālinī. She is inside Śabdarāśi Bhairava without being a swelling in him. Since she is like (KĀ) a measurer / subject of experience (MĀ), because she measures / becomes a subject of experience in the future (TR), she is called the Measurer-Like. She is Mālinī [when] surrounded / crowned by Rudras,⁶³ she possesses success in magic and liberation.⁶⁴

It is difficult to conclude anything certain in a situation in which only a small fraction of the texts has survived, and even that in secondary recensions in some cases. Moreover, I have certainly not been able to collect all the passages on Mātṛkā even from the available sources. Therefore, the above way of seeing how Mātṛkā's cult evolved may be very distorting. I shall nevertheless attempt to draw a provisional sketch of the ways in which the figure and the cult of this goddess and related deities evolved in early śaiva scriptures, based on the material presented here.

The development of śaiva doctrine and ritual concerning the alphabet goddesses and gods confirms the relative chronology of the texts as it can be deduced from other aspects of the cult. It seems that the power of letters and words, whenever the question was treated at all, was attributed to Śiva himself in the first place (as seen in the *Vīṇāśikhā* for instance). This power came to be increasingly personified and the cult of Mātṛkā evolved. It seems that the post-*Mūlasūtra* layers of the early *Nīsvāsa* corpus placed particular emphasis on Mātṛkā. She continued to be an important manifestation of Śiva's power, but other deities also appeared in this function. It was perhaps a *siddhāntika* scripture, the *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṃgraha* or a related text, that introduced a male double of Śiva responsible for verbal creation: Śabdarāśi. At the same time, another alphabet goddess, Mālinī, also developed into an important figure. First, her name was perhaps just one of Mātṛkā's epithets (as in the *Brahmayāmala*); but she became a particular mantra code and an independent alphabet goddess in the Trika. At the same time, Mātṛkā or Śabdarāśi became sources for increasingly elaborate homologisations involving Mother goddesses, who were assigned various *vargas* or sections of the alphabet (for which we saw the example of the *Svacchanda* and then the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*). The idea that vowels are masculine and consonants are feminine is

⁶³The expression may also suggest that she is made into a garland or rosary (*mālā*) of *rudrākṣa* beads, i.e. she represents the alphabet in the form of a rosary used for mantra recitation.

⁶⁴*bbedair gītā hi mukhyeyam nādiphānteti mālinī / śabdarāśer bhairavasya yānucchūnatayāntarī // sā māteva bhaviṣyattvāt tenāsau mātṛkoditā / mālinī mālītā rudrair dbārikā siddhimokṣayoh*

present throughout the corpus; but no attempt seems to have been made to harmonize this doctrine with the conception of the alphabet deity until the *Siddhayogēśvarīmata*.

Finally, this multiplication of alphabet deities gave rise to an ingenious explanation in the exegetical literature, which, nevertheless, respects the chronology of the appearance of these deities in the scriptures: when Mātrkā is 'shaken' – with all the tantric connotations this word can entail – by Śabdarāśi, she becomes Mālinī.