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Why Are the Skull Bearers (Kāpālikas) Called Soma?

Judit Törzsök

1. The Question

The Kāpālikas or Skull Bearers, who formed the third group of the Atimārga next to the Pāśupatas and the Lākulas, were perhaps the most notorious Śaiva ascetics in classical India. They were known for their cremation ground rituals and for wandering around with a skull for an alms bowl. The skull (kapāla), their most conspicuous attribute, also provided their name. But the Kāpālikas are also mentioned as “Those of the Soma Doctrine” or Somasiddhāntins or the “Soma People with the Skull.” These appellations seem to have been of some importance because their initiation names also included or ended in -soma in most cases (e.g. Satyasoma, Devasonā, Somibhaṭṭaraka). What was this Somasiddhānta, doctrine of Soma or teaching about (the) Soma? In what way do the Kāpālikas as being an Atimārgic group, see Sanderson 1988 and 2006.

1 For these distinctions within the Atimārga, the term Atimārga itself and the Kāpālikas as being an Atimārgic group, see Sanderson 1988 and 2006.

2 This term figures in the Pauṣkaravṛtti of Jiñānaprakāśācārya IFI transcript 110 p. 591. They are also called “Knowers of the Doctrine of Soma” (somasiddhāntavedinah in Sarvajñānottara 14.4 ed. Goodall), which could be corrupt for somasiddhāntavādinah, “Those who Profess the Doctrine of Soma.”

3 Or “Skull-Bearers Who are the Soma People,” somajavānapāṭi in Jayadrāthayāmala 3.35.33c. There may be an attempt here to distinguish the skull-bearing Soma ascetics from other skull-bearers such as those who follow a Bhairava tantra or a Kaula tantra.

4 The names of the two Kāpālikas in the Mattavilāsapravasana.

5 The name or title of a Kāpālika in the Kannada inscription of ancient Kolīpāke, Andhra, in 1050 CE, cited by Lorenzen 1989: 233–4. This Kāpālika is said to be mukha-kamala-vinirṛgata-Somasiddhāntabhātiprāya-parāyanam ‘devoted to the meaning of Somasiddhānta issued from the lotus mouth [of Śiva]’ (Lorenzen’s translation). While this implies that the Somasiddhānta or Soma teaching was ultimately considered Śaiva revelation (if we accept Lorenzen’s suggestion of supplying Śiva), it does not tell us anything about its nature and content, nor about the meaning of the word soma itself. The wording suggests, nevertheless, that it is not Śiva who is called Soma.
was it typical of Kāpālikas? Why did -soma figure in their initiation names?

I am afraid I will not be able to answer most of these puzzling questions. However, I propose to look at a few passages about the Kāpālikas which may shed more light on what the word or name Soma possibly meant for them.

Now I am not the first to ask this question. An ingenious answer can already be found in commentaries on the Prabodhacandrodaya of Kṛṣṇamīśra (itself dating from 1041–73): commentators understand soma to mean sa-umā, i.e. “with/accompanied by Umā”, with reference to the fact that a male Kāpālika normally had a consort, just as Śiva is accompanied by Umā.6

This understanding seems rather forced. Female Kāpālikas or tantric consorts are not normally called Umā and this interpretation does not seem to figure at all in earlier sources. It also fails to explain how we are to understand the element -soma in female initiation names (such as Devasoma), in which it cannot mean ‘with Umā/with a female consort’. Nevertheless, the sa-umā explanation of soma highlights an important trait of the Kāpālikas, namely that they were exceptional in the Atimārga in that male and female initiates performed rituals together7 and they were obviously not required to maintain celibacy, unlike (most probably) the ascetics of the Pāśupata and Lākula groups.

David Lorenzen has proposed a different hypothesis.8 He identified a Kāpālika called Kāpāli-śarman in a (probably) sixth century inscription from Karnataka. This Kāpāliśarman is said to have performed vedic Soma sacrifices. Therefore, Lorenzen suggests that Kāpālikas were perhaps dedicated vedic Soma sacrificers.

This is also rather unlikely, for at least two reasons. First, Kāpāliśarman may not have been a Kāpālika in the strict sense, for his name does not include Soma and does not appear to conform to other kinds of Kāpālika names either.9 Second, nowhere else is it said that Kāpālikas performed vedic Soma sacrifices. However, as we shall see they were particularly interested in other kinds of essences than the vedic Soma, and in a metaphorical sense they perhaps did perform their own kind of Soma ritual.

### 2. Somaśarman and the Moon Image

We reach firmer ground when we turn to the often-cited Malhar or Junwani copper plate inscription (647 CE, see Bakker 2000 and 2015; Sanderson 2012), which lists a lineage of Kāpālikas as identified by Prof. Sanderson. It mentions Somaśarman, and the ‘line of tradition starting with Soma’ (continuing later with Rudrasoma, Tejasoma, Bhūmasoma). It is in Somaśarman’s house that Lakulīśa, founder of the Pāśupata order, is said to have been born as an

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6For this and some other references to Kāpālikas associated with some Soma doctrine, see Lorenzen 1991: 83.

7Two well-known literary examples are the Kāpālika man with his partner in the Mat-tavilasaprahasana and the Kāpālika couple in the fifth act of Bhavabhūti’s Mālatimāḍhava.

8Lorenzen (1989: 235) citing K.V. Ramesh Inscriptions of the Western Ganges 70–74, n.19, inscription from Bangalore distr., 6th cent.? (sic!).

9Since Kapālin/Kāpālika can denote Śiva/Bhairava himself, the name could simply mean ‘Protected by Śiva/Bhairava’ without being markedly Kāpālika.
incarnation (avatāra) of Śiva. Lakulīśa was then initiated into or through the mahāvrata, perhaps by Somaśarman himself.

[...] adhunā kāli-kālam āśādya śrīma-Lakulīśa-nātho 'vatīrya Somaśarmabhāma-kule jātalā mahāvrate (te?) na diṅkito jagad-indus tenāpi Musaliśas tatāḥ Somādi-pāramārya-krameṇa sthānaguru-śrī-Rudrasoma-prāśiṣya-śrī-Tejasoma-śiṣyebhyaḥ śrīma-Bhāmasoma-padebhyaḥ [...] (te) suppl. ISAACSON; Musaliśas conj. SANDERSON : mugalīśas; sthānaguru conj. MAJUMDAR : sthāne guru

[...] reaching the present Kali age, the venerable Lord Lakulīśa took up an incarnation and was born in the family of a brahmin called Somaśarman. He was initiated into the Great Observance by him (?) [and became] the Moon of the World. Then by him, Musaliśa [was initiated], then, by the unbroken tradition starting with Soma, the local Master Rudrasoma, his disciple Tejasoma, whose pupil is the venerable Bhāmasoma [...]
Although most attestations of the mythological story come from late puranic sources, the myth already figures in the (original) Skandapurāṇa (chapters 5–7), dated around the end of the sixth and beginning of the seventh century.

Moreover, the Kāpālika Satyasoma in the Mattavilīṣaprahasana (600–625 CE) mentions that it was thanks to the practice of the mahāvrata that his Lord bearing the crescent moon on his head was purified of his sin, which he had committed by cutting Brahmā’s head. The verse clearly identifies Śiva’s mahāvrata as an expiation of the brahmin killer and it also shows that Kāpālikas were practising the mahāvrata in imitation of Śiva. In fact, the Skandapurāṇa (6.5–6) also seems to associate this observance with sanguinary practices such as those of the Kāpālikas. For, when Śiva-Nilalohita starts looking for suitable alms, Viṣṇu tries to fill his kapāla bowl with his own blood—a very odd, rather Kāpālika, notion of what alms should consist of.

Now turning back to the question of the Soma lineage: Lakulīśa, whether he was indeed initiated by Somaśarman or not, is said to have been born in Somaśarman’s house. According to the inscription, the Kāpālikas belong to the spiritual lineage starting with Soma, and their initiation names therefore seem to be derived from the founder’s name. The name Soma can naturally be understood as a short form of Somaśarman. Thus, Kāpālikas are the Soma people because they follow the tradition started by Somaśarman.

Our investigation could stop here. For the name Soma seems to be sufficiently explained in this way. However, several things remain unexplained. It is not clear whether Somaśarman was a historical person. If he did exist, it still remains uncertain whether he was indeed the founder of the Kāpālika movement or whether Kāpālikas claimed retrospectively that he was their founder. Thus, we cannot take it for granted that the Soma name indeed comes from him.

For this reason, I suggest we look at some other details more closely. Lakulīśa, after his initiation in Somaśarman’s house, is called the Moon of the Word jagadindu in the inscription. There are at least three interpretations of jagadindu:

1. A natural understanding of the moon as having cool rays. ‘Moon [whose cooling rays have calmed the fever] of the world’ (trsl. SANDERSON Śaivism and Brahmanism Handouts, 2012)

2. Moon on Earth, i.e. having a white body (sitānga) because of the ash-bath. BAKKER 2000 and 2015: 153. This understanding is backed up by the description of Lakulīśa in the Skandapurāṇa as being white-bodied when covered with ashes.14

12The version related replaces the figure of Śiva with one of his ectypes, Nilalohita. For this narrative device, which is used here to distance the supreme deity from such sanguinary practices, see GRANOFF 2006.

13 asthāya prayato mahāvrataṁ idam bālenducūddamānīḥ svāmī no mumuce pitāmahāśirosūchchedodbhavāṁ eṇasaḥ 17ab.

14It must also be noted that the Skandapurāṇa (180.10) calls the mere ash-bath a/the great observance (mahāvrata). It also says that Somaśarman with his family received Lakulīśa’s grace when he visited their house and that they were given yogasiddhi (167.125ff.). The Skandapurāṇa appears to represent an earlier(?)/pāśupata version of the story. (Cf. also BAKKER 2015: 143ff.) BAKKER 2015: 145–4 (note 442) also proposes that the Soma name suggests a parallel with the Soma-vanśa dynastic affiliation of Mahāśīvagupta. However, the
3. Without going against either of these interpretations, of which both could well be intended, I propose that, in addition, the expression *jagadindu* may also allude to an indirect Kāpālikā affiliation if we take it to be a syn. of *Jagatsoma*, suggestive of a Kāpālikā initiation name. This may imply two things. First, it is possible that the Kāpālikas derive their name Soma from Lakulīśa who is considered the Moon of the World. Second, the sequence of events as presented in the inscription may also suggest that Lakulīśa himself came to be called the Moon of the World (possibly representing an initiation name) because of Somaśarman. Whatever is the case, the moon image is emphatically present in the name or epithet of both founders as well as in the initiation name of Kāpālikas.

Now naming Lakulīśa the ‘Moon,’ in the manner of a Kāpālikā, may be more than a coincidence. It may well be understood as an attempt to present Lakulīśa as a true Kāpālikā, perhaps via his association with another ‘Moon person,’ Somaśarman. Or, from another point of view, by presenting Lakulīśa as a Kāpālikā initiate, the text may suggest the preeminence of the Kāpālikas over the other two Atimārga groups, the Pāśupatas and the Lākulās. But no matter how we understand the hidden agenda of the above inscription (if there is one), it is undeniable that the Kāpālikas’ initiation name ending in -*soma* is understood to recall both their founder(s)’ name and the image of the moon.

3. The Moon and the Nectar of Immortality (*amṛta*) in the Skull(s)

The moon also forms an important part of Pāśupata yogic practices. As we learn from the *Skandapurāṇa* (179.28ff. pointed out by Bakker 2015: 141), their ‘accomplishment in yoga’ (*yogasiddhi*) comes about through a withdrawal of the senses until the practitioner can see a moon disc (*somamanḍala*) in his heart. From the light inside his body, yogic powers, omniscience and the like are produced. They also include being safe from diseases (*vyādhayo nāviśanty enam*) and having a divine body (*divyam vapuh*).

Speaking of the moon and practices related to its visualization, the Kāpālikas appear to share the pan-Indian idea that it also contains the nectar of immortality. In one passage of Bhavabhūti’s *Māḷatīmaṇḍhava* (5.23) an invocation is addressed to the fierce goddess, Cāmuṇḍa, which describes her violent *tāṇḍava* dance. The verse is uttered by the two Kāpālikas in the cremation ground. During this dance, the goddess inadvertently slashes the moon, from which the *amṛta* flows down and fills her garland of skulls. The skulls are thus resurrected and start emitting a loud and harsh laughter.
This image is not particularly significant in itself. However, it seems that Kapālikas were particularly interested in a special sort of ambrosia. In their quest for the amṛta, they probably joined a large group of ascetics or yogins of the period who, in various ways and through different practices, were all searching for the same magic essence.\(^\text{17}\) So what was exactly the amṛta of the Kapālikas and how did they expect to find or to produce it?

4. What is the Kapālikas’ Nectar (amṛta/soma)?

We can turn again to the Kapālikas of the Mālatīmādhava. At one point in the story (5.2), the female practitioner mentions that she can extract the so-called ‘five nectars’ (paścāmṛta), which are five vital essences of the human body. They have a powerful, invigorating effect (as one would expect from such a nectar), so much so that the female Kapālika can fly a great distance in a few seconds.

The extraction of the five nectars (paścāmṛtākarsana), as well as other, Kapālika-type cremation ground practices, also figure in the Brahmayāmala, as Hatley 2007: 143ff points out. The five substances are not listed in a systematic way, but they usually seem to include these four: semen (śukra), blood (rakta), fat/marrow (medas) and sneha (see also Tāntrikabhīdhanakośa III).

Other sources also describe Kapālikas as making use of various parts of the human body. Kapālikas use human flesh (mahāmānsa), brain (mastiska), intestines (antra), fat (vasā) and blood (kilāla) in ritual, and drink alcohol (surā), according to Prabodhacandrodaya 3.13.

In addition to the extraction of the five nectars, the Brahmayāmala also includes rituals which make particular use of human body parts and are to be performed in the cremation ground. A notable series of chapters prescribing such rites forms a small cluster around chapter 46. Since the practices prescribed seem very close to what Kapālika rituals were supposed to be, these chapters could well be adaptations or assimilations of originally Kapālika rituals,\(^\text{18}\) although this remains a hypothesis in the absence of any surviving Kapālika scriptures. It is also notable that the Brahmayāmala describes possession (āvēśa) by Bhairava, stating that through possession one obtains Bhairavahood; and possession was, according to numerous Śaiva sources about the subject, the way in which Kapālikas claimed to attain final liberation.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{17}\) Obtaining the nectar of immortality and, thanks to it, an immortal physical body is the main goal of the hathayogic and Nath yogic traditions, see Mallinson 2007 and Ondráčka 2007, Mallinson 2015: 120 ff proposes that there may have been an early, nonsectarian tradition of ascetics, the precursor of which is later known as hathayoga, for which he finds traces already in the Pali Canon.

\(^{18}\) For more arguments, see Törzsökö 2011 and 2015.

\(^{19}\) On this, see e.g. Sanderson 2009:133 n. 311.
Now in chapter 46 of the *Brahmayāmala*, similarly to the Kāpālikas, the practitioner uses human flesh, hair (*keśa*), bones (*asthi*), body fluids (*picu*), particularly blood (*rakta*) and intestines (*antra*); moreover, he offers and drinks alcohol (*madirā*).

It is also in this chapter that the *amṛta* is in the focus of the ritual again. For the main subject here is *amṛtamanthāna*, the churning and drinking of the *amṛta*. Pots are made of clay obtained in the cremation ground, the sacrificial pavilion is constructed of bones, a corpse is placed underneath a cauldron. The Śādhu is required to churn a mixture including *mahāpicu* (sexual fluids? or various human fluids?) with a piece of bone as churning stick, with a rope made of human hair, intestines and skin(?). The cauldron is identified with Aghori and the churning stick with Bhairava. The cosmic churning of the gods is enacted by the Śādhu, and the same miraculous objects appear (the Kaustubha gem etc) as during the mythological churning. Then the terrifying goddess, Caṇḍikā, is honoured. She appears in the form of Aghori, offering the Śādhu a boon. The practitioner chooses to drink Aghori’s milk from her breasts. The chapter ends by saying that having produced the *amṛta* and having drunk left and right (probably meaning having drunk Aghori’s milk from both breasts), one becomes omniscient, Bhairava himself. Although Aghori’s milk and the *amṛta* that the Śādhu prespares are not identified, they could well be the same thing.20

What transpires from this chapter is that the preparation of the nectar of

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20 The following working edition is based on Shamin Hatley’s transcription. Only the relevant verses are given here.

*mahāpicususampūrṇam kuryāt sthāim śavopari /44/
āgatasya tu na inicio mahā-ṃ-asthi śavopari /
ēsa manthānako devi asmin tante prāṣyate /45/
keśeṇu netraṃ kuryād antraḥ kartṛ-vimśirātaḥ / (kṛttṛ in the sense of kartṛ?)
navianamaticā cāraśā manthānako vidyāmālāniyojitam /46/
sviśuddhamahābhāgaṇī rajassampātaśobhītam /
mahāsthālī tu pāśīve tu evam kṛtvā mahātape /47/
Aghoryā sthāirūpāṃ tu dhīyey mantri saśobhanām /
śaktīthām śaktirūpāṃ ca dhīyey somātīna kṣītām /48/
Manthānābhārravaṇam devaṃ sudhāśphatikanirvīranam /
sahasrabhujaparyantam cinten manthānārūpyām /49/

... 
*mahāmanthānā kuryāta yaṃ sthītvā tu Śivo bhavet /61/
... 
namaskṛtāśvarīṇi divyaṃ tataḥ sādhanam arābhet /62/
... 
evam mālais tu tām diptāṃ dhīyātvā manthānānardirāṃ /
etraṃ ca tathāveca cintaya Vāsakirūpyāṃ /66/
kṣīrodayaṃ sthāpaṇāt sthāi ātmā bhairavarūpyām /
pājabṛtā tu manthānāṃ prakṣipet sthāimadhyatāh /67/
... 
ksaṇamātraṃ mathed yāvāc chaśāikottisthithe priye /92/
Kauṁstubham ca tato tiṣṭhe vimānāṃ Puṣpakaṃ tathā /
evam ādyāni siddhim pūrvāśṭreṇa bhāṣātmā /93/
uttisthitati mahābhāge śataś iṭha sahasrāśah / (mahābhāgo MS) /

... 
ksaṇamātraṃ mathed yāva namaskṛtya tu Caṇḍikāṃ /
tattvottisthitati vai devi Aghori siddhidāyikā /107/
...
immortality was also an important way in which one could obtain Bhairavahood. Moreover, it involved worship of a fearsome goddess, Candikā or Aghorī, which again recalls the Kāpālīkas in the Mālatīmādhava, who worship Cāmuṇḍā.

But was the bodily amṛta the only nectar the Kāpālīkas collected and consumed?

5. Alcohol as the Nectar of Immortality

The Kāpālīkas were also known for their use of alcohol in ritual. The Prabodha-candra-daya (3.20 and prose) presents a Kāpālīka rite of initiation, in the course of which the Kāpālīka offers alcohol to the initiands and calls it amṛta, for, once again, it releases someone from the bondages of this word and of the state of being a bound soul. In this sense, amṛta is not just used as a simple metaphor to denote a precious or delicious liquid. It is a real nectar of immortality, for it actually makes one immortal by bestowing final release, mokṣa.21

6. The Drinking of Alcohol Compared to the Soma Sacrifice

In a more satirical way, the Kāpālīkas’ alcohol is also treated as their equivalent of the vedic Soma. The Kāpālīka in the Mattavilāśahasanā cries out as follows, when he sees a pub:

My darling, look. This pub resembles the vedic sacrificial ground. For its sign post could be the sacrificial pillar, then alcohol is the Soma, drunkards are the sacrificial priests, the wine glasses are the special cups for drinking Soma, the roasted meat and other appetizers are the fire oblations, the drunken babblings are the sacrificial formulae, the songs are the Śāman hymns, the pitchers are the sacrificial ladles, thirst is the fire and the owner of the pub is the commander of the sacrifice.22
Nobody would assume from this passage that the Kāpālikas were Soma sacrificers—the comic effect intended is quite evident. It is nevertheless interesting that once again, the Kāpālikas are presented as having a special nectar of their own, whether it is called amrta or Soma, and that the ritual significance of this nectar may be, it seems, comparable to that of Soma in vedic ritual.

7. Inventors of a New Nectar (soma/amrta)? Or Simply the Best?

From the passages looked at here, no firm conclusion can be drawn as to why the Kāpālikas included the word Soma in their initiation names and what exactly they meant by the teaching of or about Soma. The most evident reason is found in the Junwani copper plate inscription, which associates the Soma name with the name of their alleged founder, Somaśārman. It is, nevertheless, possible that Kāpālikas identified Somaśārman as their founder only retrospectively and that this derivation of Soma from Somaśārman is secondary.

Conveniently, Soma as a proper name is also one of Śiva’s names, although it does not necessary imply that he is accompanied by Umā (sa-umā). Soma is probably used metaphorically for Śiva, just as it is used for other gods such as Viṣṇu. In any case, somasiddhānta then could also simply mean ‘Śiva’s doctrine’. However, as a rather generic appellation of the god’s teaching, it seems unlikely to designate the Kāpālika doctrine in particular.

Soma, meaning moon and more particularly, the nectar of immortality the moon is supposed to contain, is another possible explanation. Various kinds of nectar (amrta/Soma), whether it is alcohol or the essences of the human body, appear to be in the focus of attention in Kāpālika rituals. In particular the vital essences were considered to have an invigorating effect that provided the Kāpālikas with magic power they were apparently famous for. Concoctions of the vital essences were probably thought to bestow omniscience and Bhairavahood. Whether it was really this nectar or these nectars that were at the origin of the name Soma is impossible to tell; but whatever is the case, the bodily nectar of the vital essences was most probably a crucial element of Kāpālika doctrine and practice.\textsuperscript{23}

Given this rather wide range of possibilities, the Kāpālikas themselves may have intended to use the natural polysemy of the word Soma, although it is less likely that such polysemny was intended from the very beginning.

Finally, to add one more possible interpretation: Soma at the end of a compound can also mean ‘the chief, the best’. In this sense, one could understand the Kāpālika names to imply that they considered themselves simply the best Śaivas around.

\textsuperscript{23}This may not be sufficient to explain what was meant by their ‘doctrine of/about Soma,’ but such ‘doctrine’ was not necessarily some abstract theory. The word siddhānta may be used in the sense of ‘teaching’ rather than ‘philosophy’ or ‘philosophical conclusion’.
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Baudhāyanadharmaśūtra See Olivelle 2000.

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Studies


