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## Terrifying Beauty: Interplay of the Sanskritic and Vernacular Rituals of Siddhilakṣmī

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### Introduction

This essay explores the interplay of Sanskritic and vernacular traditions prevalent in the formation of a larger Hindu culture through a focus upon the Siddhilakṣmī<sup>1</sup> tradition of the Kathmandu Valley. This case study, with an emphasis upon the ritual dimension, demonstrates the fluidity of Tantric culture vibrating within the socio-political sphere, regenerating cultural components that bind distinct traditions within the periphery of an all-embracing central power. The exchange occurring between the vernacular and Sanskritic cultures, as demonstrated here, is not based on dominance and subjugation but is an organic process of cultural vitality. In this sense, “Sanskrit” here represents the unchanging cultural core which once was as fluid as its vernacular rituals that are now found in the periphery in uncanonized form. Furthermore, the dynamics of “center” and “periphery” are explored from a sociological perspective: a center is that which possesses the power to replicate itself

<sup>1</sup> Classical texts identify the deity as Siddhalakṣmī, as do the Kashmiri ritual texts. Priests in Nepal and the texts themselves call the deity Siddhilakṣmī. I prefer using “Siddhilakṣmī,” following Mark Dyczkowski’s preference to accept the vernacular usage. In addition to the texts cited in this paper, I have consulted the following works: *Dhyānamālā* (manuscript, author’s personal collection); *Jayadrathayāmala* (manuscript, Nepal Archives); *Kālasaṅkarsinīmata* (manuscript, Nepal Archives); *Pratiṣṭhālakṣaṇasārasamuccaya* (1966); *Śrīvidyārnnavatantra* (1986); Bhattacharyya (1994); Kreijger (1999); Pal (1997); Rana and Bhattarai (2000); Sanderson (1990); Sastri (1970); and Shastri (1950). I have also consulted the following individuals: Dhananjaya Rajopadhyaya, current chief priest of the temple; and the brothers Krsnabhadra Sarma and Gopal Sarma, whose grandfather was the chief priest.

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and which attains this replication through an ongoing, fluid negotiation with its own periphery. Finally, I demonstrate that the hierarchy of the *maṇḍala* deities is determined neither by ethical issues nor by the “dangerous” character of the central deity as portrayed by Robert Levy (1990),<sup>2</sup> but in accordance with respective degrees of compatibility that are determined by the rituals and visualizations of the central deity. This leads to the conclusion that “center” and “periphery” are co-existing and mutually defining each other, negotiating their ritual and image in constant dynamism.

The myth, image, and rituals of a deity regenerate in new structures that are negotiated within the cultural dynamic, as demonstrated in this study of the Lakṣmī tradition. Lakṣmī, the Hindu goddess of prosperity,<sup>3</sup> first appears in myths as the consort of Nārāyaṇa.<sup>4</sup> This particular identification of Lakṣmī soon transforms into a generic term, referring to a class of divinities possessing diverse myths, rituals, and visualizations.<sup>5</sup> The first variation appears in ritual, with a Tantric modification. At this level, the goddess is not distinct from her core Vaiṣṇava familial identity.<sup>6</sup> At the next level, the vernacular traditions impact the Sanskrit core and generate a negotiated image. The Lakṣmī found in Bengal riding an owl or in Nepal visualized riding a tortoise fall within this category (Slusser, 1982, p. 321). Explicitly, the folk traditions of visualization derive their core components from the central Purāṇic Lakṣmī; they nonetheless add multiple aspects meaningful to the folk culture. The popularity of the deity determines her next manifestation, that is, whether or not she can manifest in a different myth along with the deities of a different family. In another myth, Lakṣmī found within the *mahāvīdyā* family manifests as an aspect of Satī, the consort of Śiva.<sup>7</sup> The public domain of the goddess now introduces her new myth which articulates the centrality of another deity. This new manifestation further empowers the deity, allowing her to belong to different sects. This entry of the goddess into the periphery of another *maṇḍala* can result in this deity manifesting in that center, creating a myth that places her above other deities. The Mahālakṣmī identified in the *Prādhānikarahasya*, who generates the triad of Kālī, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī, exemplifies this. The deity consequently manifests in a distinct form

<sup>2</sup> I cite Levy for his structure of dangerous deities that protect the moral order (see Gellner, 2001, pp. 295–307; Parish [1994] highlights the view that the moral issue is what determines the power of the deity [Gellner, 2001, pp. 307–311]). In this paper I disagree with Levy (1990) when he categorizes the centrality of the deity as determined by their “dangerous nature”: “the central goddess Tripurasundarī is... the proper kind of dangerous goddess to be at the center of the *maṇḍala*” (p. 167); “Taleju is a central focus in the interrelated set of symbols and symbolic enactments associated with the dangerous deities of Bhaktapur” (p. 241); “Bhagavatī... is a female form with many arms, clearly a dangerous goddess” (p. 241); and “the city’s major male dangerous divinity... Bhairava” (p. 241).

<sup>3</sup> Lakṣmī, etymologically deriving from *lakṣman*, could refer to both auspicious and evil signs. However, from the time of Varāhamihira, Lakṣmī seems to denote only “auspicious” (see Coburn, 1985, p. 157).

<sup>4</sup> Coburn identifies some instances in which Lakṣmī, prior to the rise of sectarian Hinduism, is consort to male deities other than Viṣṇu. Significant are Agni, Puruṣa, and Dharma (Coburn, 1985, p. 159).

<sup>5</sup> Citations in *Devī Bhāgavata* 9.16, 9.40, and 10.12 each give a different genealogy of Lakṣmī. Linkage of Lakṣmī with Śiva occurs in the *Śiva Purāṇa*.

<sup>6</sup> The Lakṣmī under this category is the Vaiṣṇavite Tantric Lakṣmī whose ritual and visualization can be found in the *Lakṣmī Tantra*.

<sup>7</sup> In later Śakta Tantras, ten deities—Kālī, Tārā, Bhuvaneśvarī, Tripurasundarī, Bhairavī, Mātāṅgī, Dhūmāvatī, Chinnamastā, Vagālāmukhī or Pītāmbarā, and Kamalātmikā or Lakṣmī—are considered to be of unsurpassable wisdom. As the only exception, the *Kubjikopaniṣad* mentions Siddhikubjikā as a *mahāvīdyā* deity, a merging of Siddhilakṣmī and Kubjikā (see Dyczkowski, 2000, p. 19n44).

distanced from her original myth linking her with a specific family. The case of Siddhilakṣmī belonging to the Tantric Śaiva pantheon demonstrates this fluidity. These multiple modalities do not follow a sequence of time in order to manifest but rather can appear simultaneously. In other words, a meaningful cultural study can be done by placing these different components in different parts of the *maṇḍala*, emphasizing the circularity and interdependence of these cultural modalities.

Although a goddess of prosperity, Siddhilakṣmī is neither the smiling goddess sitting atop a lotus nor is she a *mahāvidyā* deity, as her *mantra*, *maṇḍala*, and visualizations differ dramatically. Commonly visualized as riding a Bhairava who himself rides a corpse or a Vetāla and possessed of multiple faces and arms, bearing a skull-cup, freshly chopped head, and weapons that include the sword, skull, staff, and trident, she displays attributes of the Kāpālika tradition. Nonetheless, the Siddhilakṣmī tradition is not entirely divorced from the other, more familiar Lakṣmī practices. Rather, it incorporates within itself a sophisticated structure to support a bewildering array of Lakṣmīs with rich traditions of practice.

The secretive nature of the Tantric tradition has kept the visualization, *mantra*, and *maṇḍala* of the deity out of the public domain. In the context of Siddhilakṣmī, she is publicly worshipped in a water-vase. The name of the deity is frequently changed, and the public name of the goddess can differ from her textual name. This posture of dissimulation creates the realm of myth, distancing the tradition from actual history. Iconographic evidence places the goddess in Kashmir, and the Kashmiri ritual manuals further strengthen this relationship. Ethnographic study has established that this same Siddhilakṣmī is one of the main deities of the Kathmandu Valley (Sanderson, 1990). The patron deity of several Malla kings, Siddhilakṣmī remains the clan deity<sup>8</sup> of many Nevār families, playing a vital role in Nepali kinship structure. These instances relate the Kashmiri and Nepalese Tantric traditions.

The argument that the folk practice consciously conceals the Sanskritic tradition can be supported by the names of the Siddhilakṣmī shrines. Mark Dyczkowski (2000, p. 11) identifies five Siddhilakṣmī temples in Patan and Bhaktapur. However, the temples are publicly known with other names, for instance, Pūrṇacaṇḍī or Nyātāpola. The Macalī temple in Teku, in addition to the shrines counted above, is also identified as a Siddhilakṣmī shrine,<sup>9</sup> as is the Sikālī shrine in Khokana. Remarkably, what these vernacular names are hiding is her Sanskritic identity. In these examples, the vernacular designation appears as a decorative garment.

Scholars examining Hindu rituals have often argued for a dichotomy between so-called folk practices and the rituals and practices rooted in Sanskrit texts. In this study, I examine the ritualistic dimensions of Siddhilakṣmī found both in texts and performed by the high-caste Rājopādhyāya Brāhmaṇas, along with the folk traditions, to reveal that a “ritual” in its complete form functions in a harmonious way that makes both the Sanskritic and vernacular elements resonate interdependently, like different cords making a single composition. The texts, which primarily systematize various practices with their numerous visualizations,<sup>10</sup> identify and

<sup>8</sup> I have used the term “clan deity” for the term “*kula-devatā*” in Sanskrit or “*digu-dya*” in Nevari.

<sup>9</sup> The Sanskrit variant of Macalī is Matsyeśvarī. There may be two reasons behind this name: (i) there were fish in the pond nearby, and this identified the goddess who has the company of fishes; and (ii) the deity is being linked with Matsyendranātha, who is worshipped by both the Hindu and the Buddhist communities.

<sup>10</sup> For visualizations of Siddhilakṣmī and her iconic relationship with other goddesses, see Timalšina (2007).

maintain distinct traditions. The rituals performed by the public, on the other hand, simplify the textual complexities. For the public sphere, the goddess of a shrine can be identified with all the variants of Siddhilakṣmī or even of other deities: she is all goddesses, all mothers, and nonetheless Siddhilakṣmī. The text-based rituals performed by the main priest systematize the various forms of rituals performed by the members of the community. In this process, the textual rituals do not subjugate those occurring in the public sphere, and the authority of the systematic ritual as performed by the main priest is not questioned by members of the community. The visualizations of the deity reveal that the goddess maintains her identity-in-difference as a single goddess with multiple visualizations. This example highlights the core identity found in different, and sometimes fluid, structures of rituals. This diversity can also be observed in regional variations: the Bengali portrayal of Lakṣmī depicts her as riding an owl, rather than atop a lotus. The folk tradition of worshipping Lakṣmī during the night describes her as night-roaming owl rider, while the Sanskrit texts detail worship to the deity atop a lotus which blooms during the day. This variation does not reduce Siddhilakṣmī but, in contrast, amplifies her complexity with diverse rituals and visualizations.

Ultimately, it is the role of the main temple priest to weave together the various forms of rituals and visualizations that the community members perform, thereby building a metasystem uniting the community in a spiritual harmony. This understanding can be synthesized through historical analysis, ethnographic research, and the use of textual resources. My argument is that any specific Tantric tradition, here that of Siddhilakṣmī, (a) reproduces its own vibrant cosmogony with multiple sets of private and public practices uniquely suited for various social strata; (b) manifests a complete *maṇḍala* with the possibility of infinite emanations; (c) establishes inter-relationships between the deities of various transmissions; and (d) relates the external, visual, or mundane to the divine through a complex process revealing the embodied world itself as the body of the maṇḍalic deity.

### Siddhilakṣmī in oral tradition, inscriptions, and textual history

Siddhilakṣmī is considered as the primary deity of Matsyendra, who is traditionally identified as the founder of the Tantric Kaula system.<sup>11</sup> The Rājopādhyaya priests of Patan, one of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley, recount a legend in which Siddhilakṣmī is the mother of Manakāmanā,<sup>12</sup> whose temple is located in the hills of Gorkha. In the ritual based upon this myth, the priest from Manakāmanā travels once a year to pay homage to Siddhilakṣmī, conveying the message of good health and well being from Manakāmanā. This occurs when the *joṣīs* or “astrologers” find an auspicious moment (*sāit*) in one of the summer months<sup>13</sup> for the priest to travel to Patan. The priest, then, serves as the messenger (*dūta*) of the deity. Since the priests

<sup>11</sup> Khagendra, Kūrma, Meṣa, and Matsyendra are regarded as the four masters that manifest Tantra in the four ages: Satya, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali. Other than Matsyendra, these seem to be of purely mythological origin. The *bhujā* offering in Patan attributed to Matsyendranātha also relates him with Siddhilakṣmī.

<sup>12</sup> The correct Sanskrit term would be Manokāmanā (she who grants the wishes); however, this is not the conventional pronunciation.

<sup>13</sup> Sāun, Bhadau, and Asoj in the Nepali calendar.

of Manakāmanā are traditionally of the Magar caste<sup>14</sup> while the priests of Siddhilakṣmī are Brāhmaṇas of Rājopādhyāya family, this ritual of message-giving intertwines key representatives of distinct social classes whose ritual exchanges act to cohesively bind the society together. The priests return to Gorkha with the gifts sent by the mother to her daughter, Manakāmanā. No Purāṇic or Tantric textual source supports this mythology, so it appears to be of local origin.<sup>15</sup> An additional myth identifies Maitidevī, the goddess in Kathmandu worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists, as the sister of Manakāmanā. These local myths found in Kathmandu are not known to the public in Gorkha, and the people of Gorkha visit the shrine of the mother of Manakāmanā located a few miles' distance from her temple. This relationship of the deities of the valley is not necessarily reciprocal with rural deity. These myths arguably do not predate the Śāha dynasty which politically connected Gorkha with the Kathmandu Valley. Local myths relate Manakāmanā with the Śāha dynasty, as they do in the case of Siddhilakṣmī with the Malla dynasty. The annexation of the valley and Gorkha initiated the relationship between these two deities of two locales. Myth, in this case, serves as an identifying factor.

These vernacular myths are not found within the Sanskritic tradition. The Tantric tradition of Nepal found in Sanskrit literature relies upon the *āmnāya* system. The *āmnāya*, generally translated as “transmission,” is the directional source of the deities who manifest from the five different faces of Lord Śiva. When incorporating the lower face, this system is described as having six transmissions, and when the ordinal directions are included, its expanded form is called “ten transmissions” (Rana and Bhattarai, 2000, pp. 140–146). Following the Nepalese Tantric tradition, a practitioner is initiated with the *mantra* of various deities of all the transmissions in order to achieve authority in practicing and initiating in all transmissions. This process is called *kramadīkṣā*, initiation within a sequence. Following this, Siddhilakṣmī falls under the northern transmission (*Puraścaryārṇava*, 1968–1974, 1, p. 16).<sup>16</sup> There is yet another subdivision of the goddesses, according to which the

<sup>14</sup> Magars are not found in classical *jāti* system. However, in Nepal, the conventional stratification places them at the lower range of Kṣatriyas.

<sup>15</sup> The marital status of the goddess relates her to the legend of Pārvatī, the mountain-daughter married to Śiva. This is found also in the Nevār Buddhist tradition of Vajrajoginī (Sanskrit: Vajrayoginī). The most explicit and detailed rituals for bringing the goddess to her maternal house and to her marital house can be observed in the Tripurasundarī tradition of Dhading, Salyan. In this tradition, the goddess journeys from Salyānkoṭ to Salyāntār, from her mountainous birthplace to her marital house. This type of maternal and marital houses of the goddess is also found in Dacchinkālī (Sanskrit: Dakṣiṇakālī) in the southwest of Kathmandu. Besides this, there are also sisterly relationships of the goddesses. Example can be found on Maitidevī of Kathmandu and Manakāmanā. The sisterly relation of nine Bhavānis in the Karnali zone (far-west region of Nepal) envelops the entire Khas region guarded by the sister-goddesses. The aspect of the goddess with her marital house and maternal house and the pilgrimage to these places as a ritual is studied by Sax (1991, pp. 36–126), focusing on the tradition of the goddess Nandā in Gadhwāl.

<sup>16</sup> *Puraścaryārṇava* identifies Siddhilakṣmī, Guhyakālī, Mahābhīmasarasvatī, Dhūmrā, Kāmakalākālī, Mahākālī, Kapālīnī, Mahāśmaśānakālī, Kālasaṅkarṣiṇī, Pratyāṅgirā, Kālarātrī, Yogeśī, and Siddhibhairavī. *Puraścaryārṇava* quotes *Muṇḍamālātāntra* to further provide the detail of the deities of the northern transmission in which the goddesses Dakṣiṇā, Chinnamastā, Rājarājeśvarī, and Svarṇakoṭeśvarī are included along with the aforementioned deities. A ritual text, published as an appendix of *Yatidaṇḍaiśvaryaividhāna* (verse 593), explains that Mahākālī of ten faces is the united form of two Siddhilakṣmīs of the eastern and northern transmissions each having five faces.



goddess Siddhilakṣmī falls within the Siddhavidyā category (*Puraścaryārṇava*, 1968–1974, 1, p. 20).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, both the Sanskrit and vernacular traditions share the fact that the goddess lives with her family and has her mother and sister. Both Sanskrit and vernacular traditions remain silent about her paternal links.

The tradition of Siddhilakṣmī contains certain elements that predate the rise of the sectarian Hindu pantheon. Whether Siddhilakṣmī properly falls within the Śaivite or Vaiṣṇavite tradition highlights the rich paradoxes of this deity. She contains within herself the Purāṇic Lakṣmī—a gentle, loving figure linked with the beneficent Nārāyaṇa—while also embodying a Tantric nature that demands the consumption of wine, blood offerings, and other left-handed elements clearly linking her with Śaiva Tantra and specifically the Kāpālika tradition. Some of the iconic forms of Siddhilakṣmī practice, particularly that of Viśvalakṣmī and Pratyāṅgirā, represent the most horrific forms of the deities visualized. Placement of Siddhilakṣmī within the deities of the northern transmission further suggests that Siddhilakṣmī, like other deities in the Śaiva family, emanates from Lord Śiva and specifically falls within the family of Kālī. The difference between the Purāṇic and Tantric texts that deal with deities of the same name lies in the way the respective ritual visualizations are executed. Thus, the names of the deities are subordinate to the practice-based contextualization of each deity.

The manual of Siddhilakṣmī worship (*Siddhilakṣmīpūjāvidhi*) further identifies the goddess with Kālī in gesture and aspect. She is invoked as Mahācaṇḍayogeśvarī, visualized with an enflaming tongue, and prayed to as the one who devours time and dwells in the cremation ground. She is envisioned as the one consuming blood, fat, and flesh. Her 24-syllable *mantra* invokes her as Kālikā and Saṅkarṣiṇī, further affiliating her with Kālī.<sup>18</sup> She is envisioned as both formless and in form. As the *liṅgam* is commonly worshipped in both abstract and figurative forms, so also is Siddhilakṣmī worshipped in stones without form and in images. The manuals of Siddhilakṣmī preserve certain elements of the Krama tradition. For instance, the deities are grouped into the sections of Vyomavāmeśvarī, Khecari, Gocari, Dikari, and Bhūcari. The texts also ritualize complex structures of visualization, adding further categories to those found in the Krama tradition.<sup>19</sup>

In the Hindu tradition a single deity is invoked with multiple names and forms, and Siddhilakṣmī is no exception. Her Sanskrit names primarily identify her attributes and connect the deity with her myths. She is, however, known to the public in Patan by the name Pūrṇacaṇḍī.<sup>20</sup> Her original name, Siddhilakṣmī, at this point

<sup>17</sup> There are nine different orders in which a disciple is initiated in this *kramadīkṣā*. The Vidyākrama includes Siddhilakṣmī as a necessary step in order to accomplish the order. This order includes Siddhilakṣmī, Mahāsiddhikarālikā, and Kāmakalākālī as the deities in the sequence to be initiated in the northern transmission (for details, see Rana and Bhattarai, 2000, pp. 338–345).

<sup>18</sup> Her *mantra* runs as: “*oṃ siddhilakṣmī [sic] vidmahe kālikāyai dhīmahi tan no saṅkarṣiṇī pracodayāt.*”

<sup>19</sup> The *nyāsa* practice in *ṣoḍaśānta* (at the end of the sixteenth digit) is an extension of the practice common to the Krama texts that prescribe *dvādaśānta* (the end of the twelfth digit).

<sup>20</sup> The oral history suggests that Pūrṇānanda Brāhmaṇa brought the Siddhilakṣmī tradition to Patan. The terrifying deity (Caṇḍī) worshipped by Pūrṇānanda, therefore, is called Pūrṇacaṇḍī. This is according to Dhananjaya Rajopadhyaya, Krsnabhadra Sarma, and Gopal Sarma.

becomes “secret,” and the public is aware only of her new name. However, what is hidden here is the Sanskrit name that reveals the family or transmission of the deity. Although her public name is still in Sanskrit,<sup>21</sup> this name reveals only an external detail, that her shrine was founded by a priest named Pūrṇa. The case with most other Tantric deities in Kathmandu is that their Sanskrit names are completely unknown to the public. With vernacular rituals, myths, and identities concealing the core Sanskritic tradition known only to initiates, the public correlates with the function of the body in relation to the heart.

Siddhilakṣmī is worshipped in a stone by the members of the clan. When the members disperse, they bring with them their own sacred stone as the clan deity. The temple ritual represents the worship of their own clan deity worshipped in a stone, and for those families who do not have their clan-stone, the goddess in the temple functions as the clan deity (Dyczkowski, 2000, pp. 10–15). Here the goddess worshipped in aniconic stone represents the vernacular, while the canonic texts give numerous visualizations. What is hidden from the public, once again, is the image of the goddess that is found in Sanskrit. The difference in this case is that the public image of the goddess is “no-image,” with formless stone worshipped as the goddess.

The Sanskrit tradition of Siddhilakṣmī preserves the most esoteric aspects of the goddess cult, as the nuances found in her ritual and visualization connect her with the Tantric Mata and Krama systems. This is to argue that her origin can be found in both the western and northern transmissions, linking her with Kubjikā and Kālī. Siddhikubjikā, worshipped by the Rājopādhyāyas, the priests of both the Siddhilakṣmī and Taleju temples, incorporates both these transmissions in a single deity.<sup>22</sup> This tallies with the assumption that the image of a deity is in negotiation with images of other deities in the surrounding areas. As families establish new relationships, so does the tradition of the goddess, constituting new myths that harness different deities within a single familial circle. The vitality of this regeneration depends upon the fluid negotiation between canonical and vernacular, Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic, iconic and aniconic aspects of the divinity.

The above analysis depicts the interplay of center and periphery in non-violent ways. This, however, is not to argue that violence does not occur in a dynamic power-reconfiguration. Nonetheless, the violence cannot be singled out as originating either from the center or the periphery. The geographic center, the valley, is dominated by the periphery, with the Śāhas from the periphery actually ruling the country. This periphery has also applied violent means, as can be exemplified from the capture of the land that sustained the temple rituals by Raṇabahādura Śāha<sup>23</sup> and by the eradication of the system of temple land with privatization by Birendra Shah. These violent means bring the central deity to the periphery, drawing the periphery to the center.

<sup>21</sup> Her name as Pūrṇacaṇḍī is identified by the bell-inscription in Patan Siddhilakṣmī temple: “*īam sarveṣṭavidhāyinīm bhagavatīm śrīpūrṇacaṇḍīm namaḥ*.” The name Pūrṇacaṇḍīprasāda occurs in a list of those who contributed to the renovation of the temple.

<sup>22</sup> Nepalese manuals identify Siddhilakṣmī with Kālī and Kubjikā: “*yathā kālī thatā kubjā siddhilakṣmīs thatā priye | pratyāṅgirā abhedena pūjayet kulabhairavi ||*” (*Hāhārāvantra*, Folio 49, Microfilm no. A204/4).

<sup>23</sup> Traditionally, Siddhilakṣmī rituals were maintained by the *guṭhī* land. This land was captured by Raṇabahādura Śāha (1774–1799), in the episode remembered in the history of Nepal as the “sixty-two loots” (*bāsaṭṭhī haraṇ*). Subsequently, a chieftain of the Rājopādhyāya clan from Gavahal, Patan pleased the ruler, and the property of the temple was returned at the request of this chieftain.



As the stone worshipped by a clan ties all the clan-members together, so does the single letter or seed *mantra* of the goddess, which is otherwise visualized in various forms and practiced with different *mantras*. This can also be seen in textual practice. A seed *mantra* of a specific transmission (*āmnāya*) does not identify a particular deity and is shared by the deities of that particular transmission in general.<sup>24</sup> As long as the sound-form remains intact, the deity remains substantially unchanged when an alteration of appearance occurs. Each visualization of Siddhilakṣmī demonstrates that the gestures and weapons she bears identify her modes of action. Ritual manuals allow the practitioner flexibility in visualization of Siddhilakṣmī, so that the deity may grant whatever effect the supplicant desires, confirming the notion that the manifestation of the deity in any particular form is arbitrary, depending on the act the deity is supposed to perform.

The worship of Siddhilakṣmī in the temple contains complex features. The priests of the temple are high-caste Nevār Brāhmaṇas. Nevertheless, the ritual worship is performed with the offering of wine and meat. Here, the rituals of the temple are not controlled by the rules commonly accepted by the Brāhmaṇas but are instead negotiated with the public. In another example, the priest sanctifies the harvest with the offerings, mainly of the *bhujā* or rice-cake, and controls the public sphere with his authority on the *mantras*, while the public reciprocally sustains the tradition with offerings and financial support. Different components of the ritual resonate with different social strata; the social functions are rituals in their abstract form.

In Nepalese kingship, Siddhilakṣmī plays an analogous role in the former royal capitals of Bhaktapur and Patan. The Siddhilakṣmī temple in Bhaktapur, located within the periphery of the royal palace, indicates the close relationship of this deity to the Malla kings. Bhūpatīndra Malla ordered the construction of the Nyātapola temple in 1702 CE. The temple is a five-story construction in the Pagoda style, with the temple banner bearing a painting of the goddess Siddhilakṣmī astride Bhairava and Vetāla (see Becker-Ritterspach, 1998, p. 70). On one *torāṇa*, the image of the deity with sixteen arms, depicted slaying a buffalo, can be seen, while the rest of the *torāṇas* display the buffalo-slaying Durgā with eighteen arms. Since the central image is very old and decayed, it is probable that two hands have been lost from the original eighteen-handed image of Durgā. According to the Nepalese royal chronicles known as the *vaṃśāvalīs*, the reason behind the construction of this five-story temple was to domesticate Bhairava, already residing in his adjacent three-story temple.

The Malla kings of Nepal worshipped Taleju as their main clan-divinity. The tradition of Taleju and Siddhilakṣmī share much in common. Strikingly, in the Bhaktapur Taleju temple, the *torāṇa* image exactly follows the description of Siddhilakṣmī, with five faces and ten arms (*Puraścaryārṇava*, 1968–1974, 3, p. 53). A slight variant is that, in this particular image, the deity appears riding a lion, resembling the buffalo-slaying Durgā image. The principal image of the Taleju deity does not remain in the central shrine for the entire year but rather only for the ninth day of the Durgā festival. On this day, the image is placed in a different room, on a different floor of the same temple. The iconic form of the deity, with a single face

<sup>24</sup> The early Tantric texts of the Kālī tradition such as *Jayadrathayāmala* and the later texts such as *Mahākālasaṃhitā* or *Hāhārāvatāntra* both preserve the core elements of the Kālī tradition that is visible in the Guhyakālī tradition in Nepal. The *mantra* and visualization of Siddhilakṣmī contains the characters of the Kubjikā tradition as well as that of the Kālī tradition.

and ten arms, is then visible through a screen in the main shrine: on all other days, only a small wall painting is on view. The room is dark, obscuring a view of the deity's weapons, but most of these correspond to Siddhilakṣmī's attributes, suggesting further links between Siddhilakṣmī and Taleju.

As the vernacular name Taleju conceals the goddesses' real identity from the public, certain deities, despite their independent identity, also appear generic and can refer to different divinities. Besides Lakṣmī addressed above, Durgā appears as another goddess whose apparent identity conceals several other Tantric divinities.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, a single shrine functions time and again as the temple of distinct goddesses. These strategies, nevertheless, do not distance the public from the deity, but rather the public's reverence transcends distinctive names and forms. That the public worships formless stones while the priests worship iconic form supports the same argument that for a priest, the "deity beyond name and form" is a doctrine, while for the public, it is their experience.

I have argued that the centrality of a deity resides in her compatibility with other deities. This is apparent in the context of Siddhilakṣmī, who is clearly a combined form of the deities of Siddhi (Siddhayogeśvarī) and Lakṣmī. During the Durgā ritual, the visualization of Siddhilakṣmī incorporates aspects of all three divinities worshipped. Her white body represents the aspect of Sarasvatī, her red garment and other weapons suggest that she is Mahālakṣmī, and her weapons, such as a freshly chopped head and skull-staff, represent aspects of Kālī. This resemblance solidifies the goddess as the central deity of the popular Śākta tradition. Furthermore, the deity, with her five faces, represents the five transmissions (*āmnāya*), making possible the visualization of all different deities within the body of a single goddess. This "economy of visualization," in which multiple goddesses are imbedded within a singular image, is one of the core components that defines the centrality of the goddess.

### The vase-ritual of Siddhilakṣmī

In all Tantric rituals, a condensed form of ritual is performed before worshipping the goddess with all offerings. In general, this condensed ritual occurs either as mental worship or as a simple offering in the shrine. When worshipping the goddesses of the Kathmandu Valley, this subtle ritual is offered to a small water vase (*kalaśa*). The main goddess is invoked within this *kalaśa* along with all other deities that reside in the area surrounding the central goddess. This is the case in the worship of Siddhilakṣmī, Guhyakālī, Taleju, the nine Durgās, as well as several other Śākta

<sup>25</sup> A story in the tenth chapter of *Devīmāhātmya* suggests that all the goddesses are the manifestation of Ambikā, generally identified as Durgā in common practice. In this story, Śumbha, a demon, charges that Ambikā is fighting in alliance with other goddesses, and she replies that she is the only one in the world, that there exists nothing other than herself (*ekaivāhaṃ jagaty atra dviṭyā kā mamāparā*; *Devīmāhātmya* 10.4). With this, she merges all the goddesses into her breast. This foundational Śākta text with its monistic currents is recited daily in several temples and especially practiced during the Durgā rituals. Since Nepalese Śākta tradition primarily relies on *Devīmāhātmya*, Durgā is considered as the heart of all the Śākta goddesses. *Devīmāhātmya* addresses Lakṣmī in two different instances: (i) the second section (*Devīmāhātmya* chapters 2–4) is considered to be the glory of Mahālakṣmī, and (ii) the *Aṅga* (a small text considered to be a limb of *Devīmāhātmya*) *Prādhānikarahasya* elevates Mahālakṣmī to the highest position, with two strata of Lakṣmī, one the Lakṣmī who is the source of all divinities and the other, the Lakṣmī who is the consort of Nārāyaṇa. *Prādhānikarahasya* 2–6 describes the primordial Mahālakṣmī, and the nineteenth verse explains the genesis of the second-level Lakṣmī.

deities. In general, a water vase is installed in all Hindu rituals; however, the central deity is not worshipped within it. A vase is placed in other Tantric rituals for offerings; however, this again does not represent the central divinity. When the vase represents the central divinity, it is placed at the center of the altar.

All variants of Siddhilakṣmī necessarily require a vase to constitute the deity as an icon. The main Siddhilakṣmī ritual is performed by placing a vase on top of a *maṇḍala* drawn both in front of the temple and inside by the main priest in the monthly “root ritual” (*mūla pūjā*). In Nepal, the members of a particular *guḥī* (a Nevār synonym for *kula*) can participate in this, with the most secret aspect being this worship of the vase (*kalaśa pūjā*). Worshipping the goddess in the vase simplifies an otherwise complex ritual. The vase itself represents all other divinities, primarily Kubjikā, Guhyakālī, and Durgā. On one hand, these divinities are visualized within the vase, while, on the other hand, the vase itself contains some substance in fluid form, whether water, one of five pure substances,<sup>26</sup> or wine. In this way, the divinity within the vase is “fluid” in nature. Nonetheless, no matter the substance within the vase, a purificatory rite is conducted that turns the substance into “ambrosia” and indicates the presence of a divinity in the different types of fluids that are offered. What separates this ritual from mainstream Hindu rituals is the wine-offering, commonly considered to be impure. This wine-offering is explicit in the Guhyakālī temple where a ritual-vase is placed atop a pond filled with wine offered by devotees. The popularity of the wine offering suggests the strong influence of Kaula tradition in Nevār Tantricism.<sup>27</sup>

### The outer sphere of the offering

The rituals performed outside of the temple envelop all the members of the community within the sacred sphere of the *maṇḍala*. The inside and outside domains of ritual also constitute a hierarchy in which the society envisions power in its esoteric form. This ritual structure characterizes the structure of “power” that manifest in public and in person. The power of the deity that is recognized through “inner” rituals privately performed by the priest and the power that is realized in the external domain through public worship is considered to be simultaneously manifesting, when the rituals parallel inside and outside. The interplay of the “inside” and “outside” worlds manifests in festivals (*jātrā*), musical performance, temple circumambulation, public offering, external ritual *maṇḍala*, *kalaśa* rituals, worship inside the temple, and visualizations. Through this interplay, the outer sphere, the first extension of the circle comprised of the associate deities to whom the offering

<sup>26</sup> Cow milk, curd, purified butter, honey, and raw sugar are considered to be the five pure substances. These five *amṛtas* (nectar) substitute for the five *makāras* (substances that start with “m” letter in Sanskrit word, such as *madya* or wine, *māṃsa* or meat, *matsya* or fish, *mudrā* or cereals, and *maithuna* or sexual intercourse) of the left-hand practice.

<sup>27</sup> Nevār Śākta tradition focuses primarily on the Kaula system of Tantric practice. The texts such as *Kulārnavatantra*, *Śaktisaṅgatantra*, *Sarvollāsatāntra*, and *Guptasādhanatantra* reveal this propensity. Varieties of Kaula rituals depend upon the form of substances offered. Texts of the Kālī tradition, such as *Jayadrathayāmala*, elaborate Kaula practice. *Mahākālasaṃhitā* gives a systematic picture of the Kaula practice, common to the Nepalese Tantric practitioner. While several Kaula texts explicitly mention of the offering of *kuṇḍagolaka* or sexual fluids, practitioners have replaced these substances with the nectar of *hayārī* and *karavīra* flowers. Two substances generally offered representing the male and female principles are red and white sandalwood.

from the Siddhilakṣmī temple is made, is empowered through ritual-offering. The priest, while worshipping the main deity within the temple, maintains the *maṇḍala* constituted in the geographic plane alongside the associating deities.

The dynamics of purity and power constitute the core of this visibly structured ritual. As purity and power are constructed categories, so is secrecy. A Tantric practitioner endeavors to attain a state which is rooted in but transcends “purity.” Tantric ritual is the tool to achieve a power that allows the practitioner to transcend the domain of duality, thereby leaving the domain of purity and impurity far behind. Secrecy, as can be seen in Tantric rituals and practices, adopts a similar model in which the categories of purity and power are constituted. In this way, the public realm of the divinity functions through rituals that utilize and sustain these three categories of purity, power, and secrecy.

The main ritual performed outside the Pūrṇacaṇḍī shrine of the Patan temple involves the offering of rice-cakes. Since this ritual ties different families together through the preparation of ritual objects and the performance of the ritual itself, it is necessary to deconstruct and understand this ritual within the context of Tantric society. The positioning of the twelve rice-cakes, to be explained shortly, can be visualized as a *maṇḍala*, and the ritual offering of these rice-cakes demonstrates how a cosmology functions. This *maṇḍala* represents the deities in the surrounding area, including the central goddess, Siddhilakṣmī. These surrounding deities differ from the deities invoked in the ritual worship described in manuals. The distinctive rice-offering in Patan invokes the symbolic presence of all deities in the maṇḍalic form. The ritual *maṇḍala* remains independent of the textual *maṇḍala*, since the *maṇḍala* of the ritual includes the specific deities of the surrounding geographic area, whereas the textual *maṇḍala* remains the pure, metaphysical emanation of a particular deity. The ritual of offering rice-cakes occurs in the final day of Indra Jātrā, the primary day for worship of Siddhilakṣmī.<sup>28</sup>

After the worship of Siddhilakṣmī inside the temple, the main priest, a Rājopādhyāya, summons the deity into the vase and brings her outside to participate in the ritual of offering the rice-cakes. There, the Siddhilakṣmī *maṇḍala* is drawn with red powder, and the vase is placed upon the *maṇḍala*. At this time, the *bhujā* is brought and presented in a very specific order. Deities of the surrounding locality are invoked along with Siddhilakṣmī. Thereafter, the rituals transforming the rice into divine food continue. In order to perform this, the priest correlates the rice circle to the surrounding deities invoked in the form of a *maṇḍala*. Children of the locality have a significant role in the ritual phase when *bhujā* is moved from its position in front of the shrine of Siddhilakṣmī, with a portion going to the deity being worshipped. This offering is considered to be the main offering (*mahāprasāda*). From the portion that the children collect, some devotees construct a magical box (*jantar*) to hang on the devotee’s chest or arms, as a shield against witchcraft and for healing influenza.

The *bhujā* offerings total twelve in number, and these are divided into rows. The ordering of rows rotates every year, with the first row one year moving to the third row in the next year and the second row moving to the first row. Maintaining the sequential ordering of each row determines which deity will first receive their portion of rice each year. As the deities in the surrounding area are of equal status, the sequential change of row-order indicates respect for this equality. The first row was called *valānihma kaval*

<sup>28</sup> This day generally falls during the August and September months. The last day of the ritual occurs on Anantacaturdaśī, the fourteenth day of the bright half of the lunar calendar.

in 2001; the second, *maṇḍichen kaval*; and the third, *vakanihma kaval*. Next year, *maṇḍichen* will be the first *kaval* and *valānihma* will return to the last in sequence. However, these three rows are identical with the three Rājopādhyāya clans, and the hierarchical offering that rotates every year maintains equality in family status.

Siddhilakṣmī, being the central deity, is worshipped with the first *kaval*; Bhairava with the second *kaval*; and Mahādeva with the third *kaval*. This basic structure recognizes Mahādeva and Bhairava as separate deities, while suggesting the intimacy of Bhairava with the deity, and also their relationship to the Śaiva elements in the entire ceremony of worship. The order in which the deities are worshipped requires further examination. This structure demonstrates how the hierarchy of power, both in the family of deities and in the family of worshippers, is maintained as a constantly evolving process.

The ritual of Siddhilakṣmī in Patan exemplifies how a vernacular tradition constitutes its own *maṇḍala* separate from the canonical practice. Her vernacular ritual embraces the deities in the actual locale and not those prescribed in the text. The precision of the offering, supervised by the Rājopādhyāya priests, creates yet another dimension of ritual, where the vernacular ritual is in the process of formalization. The vernacular *maṇḍala* represents the families of the priests living within this periphery. The following sequence of the offering of rice-cake (*bhujā*), twelve in total, demonstrates this process of formalization:

- |   |   |   |   |                                      |
|---|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| a | b | c | d | <i>valānihma kaval</i>               |
| e | f | g | h | <i>maṇḍichen kaval</i>               |
| i | j | k | l | <i>vakanihma kaval</i> <sup>29</sup> |

The offering starts from the last *kavala* of the row having i-j-k-l numbers. The deities to whom these are distributed are:

- d. *ṭhagu agniśālā Gaṇeśa*
- c. Macchendranātha of Devaṅgā
- b. *mūla bhujā* for Siddhilakṣmī
- a. *jenavā Gaṇeśa*
- h. *mahāpa* of Maṅgalbajār
- g. *nāsadyo nṛtyeśvara* of *nāsala devatā*
- f. *mūla bhujā* for Bhairava. The following year, this will go to the central deity.
- e. *kalaṅkadeva* close to the pond in the east side of the temple
- l. *vahālukhā bhairavī*, in the pond
- k. *ikhālukhu bhairava*
- j. *mūla bhujā* that goes to Mahādeva. Another year, this will shift to Bhairava.
- i. for Kaumārī close to Agnimaṭha

Apparently, these twelve local deities that constitute the *maṇḍala* of Siddhilakṣmī differ from those in the ritual *maṇḍala* that the Rājopādhyāya priest constitutes and to which he performs offering inside the temple. This offering does not rely upon Sanskritic texts; however, it does not contradict them either. While maintaining the Sanskritic rituals based on texts, the priest also performs external rites that sustain the public ritual. In this interplay of the vernacular with the textual, both constitute and sustain each other: the textual rituals empower and maintain its esoteric aspect,

<sup>29</sup> According to a *vaṃśāvalī*, the Rājopādhyāyas of Patan are also the priests of the Tulajā shrine established by Siddhinarasimha Malla (see *Himavatkhanda*, Appendix, p. 150).



while the autochthonous divinities allow the central divinity to function in the physical realm. What is noteworthy is that the first group centers on Matsyendra and Siddhilakṣmī, the second on Nṛtyeśvara,<sup>30</sup> and the third on Bhairava.

The priests take great care to ensure that when the rice-cakes are presented, each specific *bhujā* does not go to any deity other than the one invoked in the *maṇḍala* worship. The priests who officiate in this temple recall an occasion on which such confusion occurred. The story concerning the Kaumārī *bhujā*, for example, as reported by one of the priests, is that when the grandfather of Gopal Sarma (still living) made the mistake of offering the Kaumārī *bhujā* to another deity, those who had come to offer started vomiting blood. These mistakes in offering caused the loss of the position of the main priesthood. After this incident, the main priesthood shifted from one family of Rājopādhyāya to another family. What is noteworthy here is that the main priest, the center in the sphere of ritualistic authority, maintains his centrality with the “system,” and it is the “system” that sustains his centrality. If the “system” is broken, the centrality crumbles. However, this does not lead to dismantling the *maṇḍala*, as the *maṇḍala* recreates itself, with peripheral power shifting to the center.

The offerings made to the twelve deities in total represent the complete form of the Siddhilakṣmī universe, the cosmos delineated by a specific area within the town of Patan. This is the locality of the Rājopādhyāya families. The universe that is constituted through the ritual envelops the families of this clan, with the goddess established as the heart. The deities that receive offerings of rice-cake are located in the surrounding area. This *maṇḍala* is not the ritual *maṇḍala* of the Siddhilakṣmī found in texts, since that would merely be the association of goddesses; but it is more the *maṇḍala* of the deities that surround a particular Siddhilakṣmī temple. However, this local *maṇḍala* cannot be universalized, unlike the *maṇḍala* described in manuals. Local *maṇḍalas* are always determined by factors that surround the specific locale. Therefore, the deities worshipped in the public sphere can differ in every temple, while the ritual text may remain the same.

The “ritual” of the goddess is the fusion of the priestly and the public rituals. As a priest performs rituals in a shrine or *maṇḍala*, so does the public participate, but in different ways. For instance, public offering, circumambulation, or witnessing the rituals performed by others merge in such a way that all these, in a higher level, construct a single ritual performed collectively. The deity and the *maṇḍala* do not differ from the temple of the goddess in which she resides. The priestly ritual of worshipping the deity who is the core of the shrine and the public ritual of circumambulation around the temple which is the visible or the external form of the deity incorporate a ritual that envelops both aspects. The maṇḍalic structure of the floor plan that underlies the Nyātapola temple supports its five upper floors and depicts the five faces of the deity. During the ritual, the *maṇḍala* is visualized with five enclosures, a symbolic representation of the goddess with her five faces. The temple, in this case, is yet another physical manifestation of Siddhilakṣmī herself, and the goddess and the temple are identical. In this way, the goddess not only

<sup>30</sup> Nṛtyeśvara plays a significant role in the Nevār community of Kathmandu Valley. Generally identified with the Nāsadyo, an autochthonous divinity, Nṛtyeśvara is the deity of both dance and harvest. Images of the deities of the northern transmission, for example, Guhyakālī or Kāmakalākālī are found in dancing pose, indicating an interrelationship with Nṛtyeśvara.

dwells within the temple but also is herself the temple. The public, even though not allowed to enter into the shrine of the goddess, is already within the shrine of the goddess, the goddess manifests in the form of the temple.<sup>31</sup>

The discussion of rituals performed in different forms reveals that the divinity manifests in different structures: the temple in which the public offering occurs; the image of the goddess, which is worshipped, and in most cases only visualized; and the water-vase in which the goddess dwells in her unmanifest form. Some of the vase-forms worshipped in Guhyeśvarī shrines<sup>32</sup> are not hollow inside but rather solid rock or crystal. This unmanifest form of the goddess resonates of the clan stones worshipped as Siddhilakṣmī.

## Conclusion

The myths of the goddess link Siddhilakṣmī with kingship and power, while Siddhilakṣmī further functions as the clan-deity of the Rājopādhyāya families. Therefore, the rituals and visualizations need to be viewed within these contexts. Siddhilakṣmī, with her five faces and ten arms in various gestures, represents multiple deities, and this is what positions her at the center. In this way, the center is the essential core of the periphery, and the existence of the center underlies the existence of the diversity that constitutes the periphery. An example can be given of Siddhikubjikā, where two deities, Siddhilakṣmī and Kubjikā, merge and make an identity of a singular divinity.

The rituals of the goddess reveal how a constantly pure space, that is, the abode of the goddess, extends through external rituals and envelops the locale in which the families reside. The shared responsibility among different families that constitutes a single ritual weaves together all the strata of the society through ritualization. Shifting the lines in the rice-cake offering also explains that the intimacy of the goddess is orderly, with all families being at equal distance from the goddess. The condensed and external rituals, and the worship in the central shrine or in the temple, explain the same reality: that what is sacred, subtle, and apparently attainable by the few, possesses visible, physical form, empowering and sustaining all. The centrality of the deity, Siddhilakṣmī in this case, does not depend upon her “dangerous” nature, as Levy suggests. Ferocious to those harmful to her devotees, she is portrayed in popular imagination as the motherly and gentle Lakṣmī.

Vernacular and Sanskrit practices embrace each other inseparably, constructing a unified tradition. This interplay constitutes a hybrid culture that melds different aspects of practices within the single stream of the goddess’ power. This fluidity both sustains and regenerates the ritual practices fused within the sociopolitical dimension of the community. The shared social power can be compared with the *śakti* of the goddess, vibrant in the continuous rearticulation of Her *maṇḍala*.

<sup>31</sup> These notions can be found in elaborated form in Kaula Tantra texts. For instance, the Śrī Cakra, generally worshipped as the *yantra* in which the goddess Tripurasundarī resides, is also equated with the goddess herself. On one hand, this *yantra* is the locale where the goddess resides; on the other hand, this is the body of the goddess, the center being her heart and the external layers being her external forms and also her emanations. The notions that the self is both transcendent to the world and immanent are separately analyzed by Kṣemarāja ascribing to the Kula and Tantra thoughts (see *Pratyabhijñāhṛdaya*, 1991, p. 8).

<sup>32</sup> For detail about vase-worship and the tradition of Guhyeśvarī, see Michaels (1996, pp. 328–333).

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