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Damien L. McDonald
University of North Florida

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Tantra: An Analysis

Damien L. McDonald
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Faculty Advisor: Dr. Julie Ingersoll,
Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

The tradition of Tantra, which is often without clear classification amongst scholars, does not have a single definition that thoroughly or accurately describes it. Because of the multifaceted nature of Tantric teachings, which include multiple goals and methods of practice, the task of defining Tantra is arduous at best. Without an agreed upon definition amongst scholars, Tantra can broadly be viewed as a connection to and simultaneous divergence from Vedic and Brahmanical teachings. This classification can be illustrated through an analysis of the Vedic and Tantric pantheon and rituals performed by each group's practitioners. Additionally, an analysis of accounts by Tantric scholars and an examination of the historical movements associated with Tantric schools of thought will further support the concept of intentional and direct conflict between Tantra and traditional schools of Vedic thought. Due to the esoteric nature of Tantric instruction, it is difficult to understand and properly define, in its entirety, the tradition and the influence it has had on Indian and subsequently Asian social and religious institutions. Although not complete, the study of Tantra becomes an essential piece of the historical picture explaining the trends and influences throughout Asia from as early as the 2nd century until the present day.

The Brahmanical teachings that Tantra transcends derive from texts that originated from a group of invading people in India known as the Aryans¹ sometime between the years of 1500-1300 BCE.² It is with this

¹ Basham, A.L., ed. *A Cultural History of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, Pg 20.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 20.

invasion that the first signs of Vedic³ beliefs arose in India. These beliefs were imbedded in the culture of the invading Aryans and laid the groundwork for the society that remains prevalent in India even to the present day. The Vedas, instructional texts believed to be given to men from the heavens roughly 5000 years ago, would become the backbone of all Indian religious thought, including Tantra. Today, Indian religious thought is often divided between Vedic and Tantric beliefs.⁴

Despite the aforesaid difficulties in defining Tantra, there is evidence suggesting that Tantra is an unorthodox form of Hinduism. This is manifest in the numerous practices and rituals originally engaged in by Hindus, stemming from Vedic and Brahmanical instruction, which would eventually be adopted by practitioners of Tantra. One of the main similarities between Tantra and Hinduism is the relationship with the Vedas as a commencement point for religious thought.⁵ Similarly there is a connection between the pantheons of both of these schools of thought. Vedic Gods exist, although occasionally in different forms, in Tantric traditions.⁶ An example of this correlation is evidenced in the God Siva⁷, who is central to numerous Tantric schools of thought and first appears, albeit briefly, in the Vedas in the form of the God Rudra. In addition to a common source for the development of beliefs and related Gods, there exist similarities in the beliefs relating to multiple births and deaths,⁸ the use of Mantras (although utilized in differing ways),

³ The term Vedic, when used in this argument, refers to a knowledge and wisdom disseminated through verbal and textual means. This knowledge is seen as the "words of truth" given to the Rishis from the heavens.

⁴ Gupta, Sanjukta, Dirk Jans Hoens, Teun Goudriaan. *Hindu Tantrism*. Boulder, Boulder University Press, 1979. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ Sanderson, Alexis., "Saivism and the Tantric Traditions." *World's Religions*. 6 (1998): 662.

⁷ Siva is widely known in the western world as "Shiva."

⁸ Feuerstein, George. *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1998, 55.

and the attempt to comprehend “hidden realms” in addition to the goal of liberation.⁹

Both Vedic/Brahmanical Hinduism and Tantra utilize an oral tradition in passing knowledge from one generation to another. The Vedic texts originated as an oral tradition and the knowledge and secrets within the Tantric institution continue this verbal trend as the Gurus confer knowledge to their initiates by means of the spoken word.¹⁰ Furthermore, both Tantra and orthodox forms of Hinduism follow a three fold ritual pattern containing “obligatory, occasional, and optional rites established in the Vedic tradition.”¹¹ In addition to the aforesaid similarities, the Vedic tradition provides the model that the previously mentioned Tantric rites and practices are founded on. This is evidenced by how these rites “imitate” Vedic models and assume familiarity with the orthodox Vedic traditions.¹²

Tantra, as previously mentioned, is also an upheaval of traditional Brahmanical teachings. This can be perceived through numerous aspects of Tantric culture. While the Vedas remain the sole source of knowledge from which to live your life for traditional Brahmanical schools of thought,¹³ the practitioners of Tantra seek knowledge from other sources. The Vedas however, still play an important role within Tantra,¹⁴ despite the emergence of other religious traditions. The similarities continue in numerous ways, despite Tantric practitioners having abandoned traditional Brahmanical teachings as their only source of knowledge in the quest to obtain their objectives within this life.

The Tantras, which were a group of texts purportedly given to man from the god

Siva (who first becomes associated with the “ultimate power” in the Upanishads), are seen as a new code, containing “more specialized revelation(s)” for living in a deteriorating world.¹⁵ Because the world was in a stage of deterioration, known as the kali-yuga, and because the Vedas had not produced desired results amongst some followers, the Tantrics purportedly began to practice their rituals following an additional set of cosmic rules. This new set of practices was aimed at attaining liberation and power during this life and utilizing this world as opposed to concentrating primarily on following one’s dharma. While both traditions promise some form of immortality and prosperity,¹⁶ the Tantric practitioner utilizes this additional set of regulations and teachings in an effort to attain these objectives within this life. The deviation from the traditional role of the Vedas as the central authority in dictating behavior pertaining to religious activity is one of the many examples of the departure of Tantric thought from conventional Brahmanical teachings.

In addition to the aforesaid example, it is evident that Tantra revolted against traditional Brahmanical and Vedic thought through its rejection of the “patriarchal” nature of the Vedic tradition.¹⁷ Although Vedic thought mentions and even promotes the worship of female deities through hymns and stories,¹⁸ they are not central to the religion’s practices. In direct contrast to this was the development of Tantric thought, which concentrates on the female deities’ role as fundamental to the practice. This is evidenced through the importance and power

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ Brooks, Douglas Renfrew. Auspicious Wisdom: The Texts and Traditions of Srividya Sakta Tantrism in South India. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, 13.

¹¹ Brooks, Douglas Renfrew, Page 164.

¹² Brooks, Douglas Renfrew, Pages 175-176.

¹³ Sanderson, Alexis., “Purity and power among the Brahmins of Kashmir” The Category of the Person. ed. Carrithers, M., Collin, S., Lukes, S., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 4.

¹⁴ Fuerstein, George, Page 15.

¹⁵ Sanderson. Alexis, Page 660.

¹⁶ Brooks, Douglas Renfrew, Page 165.

¹⁷ Lorenzen, David N. “Early Evidence for Tantric Religion.” The Roots of Tantra. ed. Katherine Anne Harper & Robert L. Brown. New York: State University of New York Press, Pg 28.

¹⁸ The story of Durga and her transformation and creation into Kali, another goddess, fighting an unstoppable beast, is one example of female deities being recognized within stories and worship in traditional Brahmanical teachings.

given to the Matrikas and Yoginis¹⁹ in Tantric texts. Furthermore, the Yoginis perform a vital role in the act of Diksa,²⁰ which is the first, and perhaps the most important step in practicing Tantra. Abhinava-Gupta, a Tantric Guru, whom many believe represents the pinnacle of Tantric thought and practice, felt that this process was a ritual designed to sweep away the disciple's "ignorance" and instill in him the knowledge that will lead to liberation.²¹ With its role as the source of the dissemination of knowledge, the initiation and consequently the role of the Yogini in initiation, becomes indispensable. This role of the female deities is considered fundamental in aiding liberation during this life to the Tantric practitioner. This is a prime example of how Tantra, although utilizing Vedic tradition in various aspects of practice, abandons them for additional teachings at other times.

An additional example of how Tantra is an unorthodox form of Hinduism that revolts against traditional teachings is the introduction of non-Vedic tools for aiding the spiritual goals of the practitioner. As mentioned earlier, the Brahmanical teachings hold that the Vedas are the sole religious authority and that in order to continue following their dharma, the practitioners needed to live their life in accordance to their caste.²² The Tantric practitioner however, utilizes tools such as non-Vedic Mantras and Yantras to aid in their liberation and power attainment goals. Although traditional Brahmanical teachings utilize Mantras, they are recited as a prayer as opposed to a tool aimed at obtaining power. This use of non-Vedic tools helps the practitioner utilize this life, and this life only, in the pursuit of liberation. As Madeline Biaerdeau, a Tantric Scholar stated:

(Tantra is) "an attempt to place kama, desire, in every meaning of the word, in the service of liberation...not to sacrifice this world for liberation's sake, but to reinstate it, in varying ways within the perspective of salvation²³."

Biaerdeau's definition illustrates the importance of identifying Tantra as an instrument to be used during this life. The progress away from the traditional beliefs connected to dharma, a concept central to Vedic/Brahmanical teachings, illustrates how Tantra, although still attempting reunification with the ultimate reality, is clearly deviating from traditional thoughts regarding the means by which to obtain liberation. The connection to and divergence from Brahmanical teachings is clearly illustrated through this recognition of the importance of this life and this life only in practice.

Perhaps the most striking rejection of Brahmanical and Vedic thought comes in the form of the dismissal of notions of purity. Tantrics discard the notion of purity, instead feeling that there is otherworldly power to be obtained and harnessed through the use of "impure" items.²⁴ This notion of harnessing the power within impure items by the Tantric practitioner is regarded, by traditional Brahman schools of thought, as an act of impurity and therefore a restrictive action to obtaining one goals.²⁵ So while both orthodox and Tantric goals seek to gain liberation, each group believes that it is to be attained in a different manner. Some of the items that are traditionally considered "impure" by Vedic/Brahmanical teachings are central to Tantric practices. Menstrual blood, partially due to its connection to fertility and partly because of its role as a means by which to

¹⁹ A Yogini is a "female adept" according to George Fuerstein and can also be known as a female deity or prostitute.

²⁰ Diksa is a form of initiation through which an initiate is introduced to the inner circle of Tantric knowledge.

²¹ Fuerstein, George, Page 100.

²² Sanderson, Alexis., "Purity and power among the Brahmins of Kashmir" Page 4.

²⁴ Brooks, Douglas Renfrew, Page 151.

²⁵ Sanderson, Alexis., "Purity and power among the Brahmins of Kashmir" Page 3.

harness power,²⁶ represents one such substance. Other examples include meat, particularly beef, and physical contact with corpses. In traditional schools of Hindu thought exposure to these items is regarded as not only impure, but furthermore as a hindrance to the goals of liberation. In Tantra, however, the otherworldly power within these objects could be used as an effective tool in the attainment of powers and liberation. Tantra's goal of utilizing this world and attaining liberation while still in this life helps to illustrate why the Tantric practitioner would transcend the Brahmanical concepts of purity in order to obtain the power in "impure" items that could be utilized during this existence.

Further rejection of orthodox systems by Tantra can be seen in the denunciation of the Varnashramadharum system, which sought to divide people in the Indian society into castes. This system illustrates the divergence from traditional thought in an attempt to gain power and liberation within this life by again transcending marked lines of purity. In traditional Hindu society, this system was considered to be a part of an individual's dharma, and acceptance of their position was therefore necessary in order to adhere to Vedic law. Tantra, however, rejects this concept and transcends caste boundaries, particularly through sexual rituals.²⁷ Furthermore, Vedic beliefs place restrictions upon the worshipper dictating that the practitioner must be male and born within a particular caste. Tantra, however, allows for male and female participants to practice, regardless of the caste in which the practitioner resides.²⁸ It should be noted that the rejection of caste boundaries by Tantra is not a societal movement for gender and social equality, but rather an attempt to "reverse the perceived inadequacy of Vedic ritualism."²⁹ Again, the transcendence of these boundaries

seeks to harness the power within the "impure" to be utilized by the Tantric to obtain liberation.

Tantra, although closely connected to Brahmanical and Vedic teachings, does not include all aspects of Hindu thought that are not, at their core, solely orthodox in nature. Tantric beliefs derive from the aforementioned texts known as Tantras, and include "a highly ritualistic, pragmatic, and transcendent life practice" that is utilized in an effort to attain liberation. These customs further identify Tantra as unique from other forms of traditional Hindu practice.

Tantric Scholar David White identifies Tantra as "highly ritualistic" in nature. This classification is illustrated clearly through observing Tantra's defined set of rituals associated with its practice. At the forefront of this set of rituals is the necessary act of Guru initiation. This process, the first step in Tantric practice, begins with the Guru preparing the initiate for practice.³⁰ This often includes a description of the history of the lineage in which the initiate will be a participant,³¹ as well as specific practices for the initiate to engage in. Initiation allows the practitioner to "gain(s) access to highest levels of power (sakti) both in terms of action in the world and in relationship with divinity."³²

In addition to the initiation rituals, early forms of Tantric practice, such as those engaged in by the Pasupata, had a specifically designed life separated into numerous stages. During each stage of life, the Pasupata engaged in specific activities that needed to be employed up to and including their own death. These ranged from removal from society to practices that sought to steal the good Karma of others. Complex rituals can be associated with modern day Tantric practitioners in the form of Mantra recitation as well as Demonology, or the tradition of

²⁶ White, David Gordon. Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 69.

²⁷ Brooks, Douglas Renfrew, Page 20.

²⁸ Ibid., 165.

²⁹ Ibid., 177.

³⁰ White, David Gordon, "Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition" Tantra in Practice. ed. David Gordon White. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidaa Publishers Private Limited, Page 13.

³¹ Ibid., Pg 12

³² Brooks, Douglas Renfrew, Page 151.

controlling spirits. In addition to the aforementioned rituals, it is common for the Guru to give their initiate an *ista-devata* or, in other words, the God to be at the center of the initiate's worship³³. Each of these customs illustrates how Tantra, both in the past and the present, is highly ritualistic in nature.

In addition to being a highly ritualistic practice, Tantra has both pragmatic and transcendent goals. It is important to reiterate that Tantrics seek to utilize "this life, and this life only" in their service towards liberation. During this journey, Tantric practices serve both "practical and transcendent" means. Asian religion scholar David White defines Tantra as:

“...that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains the universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy within the human microcosm in creative and emancipatory (sic) ways³⁴.”

As White mentions, the Tantric practitioner seeks to "channel energy" in "creative and emancipatory ways." This represents, in its bluntest nature, both the desire for the practitioner to obtain pragmatic goals, such as revenge and power over others, and transcendent goals, such as liberation.

Pragmatic goals associated with Tantra can include protection from evil spirits, possession of demons for personal use, and supernatural abilities such as flying. Because the practitioner is focused on this life, Tantra is sometimes used for pleasure including having sexual control over the opposite sex or as an elixir for good health. Transcendently speaking, Tantra is a means by which the practitioner obtains the necessary knowledge to achieve liberation

and eternal bliss during this life. Practices such as Yantra meditation and attempts at raising the Kundalini are focused on realizing the unity of the universe.³⁵ These practices, if successful in their goals, unite the practitioner with the ultimate reality of the universe, resulting in eternal bliss.³⁶ Since both pragmatic and transcendent uses are valuable to the practitioner in this world, it stands to reason that both are the focus of the Tantric practitioner.

Tantra is truly an unorthodox form of traditional Vedic and Brahmanical teachings. By illustrating the connections between these schools of thought and then the deviation from those shared core tenets, the connection and division between them becomes clearer. Evidence of each school's practice and its goals allow the individual to see the utilization of this life in the service of liberation. The practice, as shown through numerous examples, is highly ritualistic and seeks both worldly and otherworldly goals. Furthermore, this classification applies equally to both present and past forms of Tantra. Although Tantra has transformed numerous times throughout history, its objectives and identification within society endure. Tantra continues to be an esoteric practice that has shaped and continues to influence Indian society as well as extending its influence to affect individuals throughout the world.

³³ White, David Gordon Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts. Page 6.

³⁴ White, David Gordon Tantra in Practice.

³⁵ Fuerstein, George, Pages 165-183.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg 178.

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