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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,<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> or the “Soma People with the Skull.”<sup>3</sup> 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, Devasomā,<sup>4</sup> Somibhaṭṭāraka<sup>5</sup>). What was this Somasiddhānta, doctrine of Soma or teaching about (the) Soma? In what way

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\*The first version of this paper was delivered at the Symposium *Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions* held in honour of Prof. A.G.J.S. Sanderson at the University of Toronto, on the 26th of March, 2015. I am grateful to the organizers for inviting me to this memorable event, in particular to Srilata Raman and Shaman Hatley. I would like to thank all the participants for their questions, comments and criticism, in particular Prof. Sanderson and Prof. Bakker. I am also indebted to Csaba Kiss for comments on and corrections of the final draft. This paper reproduces some aspects of the oral presentation stylistically. Needless to say, it builds on Prof. Sanderson’s important discoveries about the Kāpālikas and is dedicated to him.

<sup>1</sup>For these distinctions within the Atimārga, the term Atimārga itself and the Kāpālikas as being an Atimārgic group, see SANDERSON 1988 and 2006.

<sup>2</sup>This term figures in the *Paṣṣkaravṛtti* of Jñānaprakāśācārya IFI transcript 110 p. 591. They are also called “Knowers of the Doctrine of Soma” (*somasiddhāntavedinaḥ* in *Sarvajñānottara* 14.4 ed. Goodall), which could be corrupt for *somasiddhāntavādinah*, “Those who Profess the Doctrine of Soma.”

<sup>3</sup>Or “Skull-Bearers Who are the Soma People,” *somajanakāpālī* in *Jayadrathayāmala* 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.

<sup>4</sup>The names of the two Kāpālikas in the *Mattavilāsaprahasana*.

<sup>5</sup>The name or title of a Kāpālika in the Kannada inscription of ancient Koḷlipāke, Andhra, in 1050 CE, cited by Lorenzen 1989: 233–4. This Kāpālika is said to be *mukha-kamala-vivirggata-Sōmasiddhāntābhīprāya-parāyaṇam* ‘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 Kṛṣṇamiśra (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.<sup>6</sup>

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 Devasomā), 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 together<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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, Bhīmasoma). It is in Somaśarman’s house that Lakuliśa, founder of the Pāśupata order, is said to have been born as an

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

<sup>7</sup>Two well-known literary examples are the Kāpālika man with his partner in the *Mat-tavilāsaprahasana* and the Kāpālika couple in the fifth act of Bhavabhūti’s *Mālatīmādhava*.

<sup>8</sup>LORENZEN (1989: 235) citing K.V. Ramesh *Inscriptions of the Western Gangas* 70–74, n.19, inscription from Bangalore distr., 6th cent.? (*sic!*).

<sup>9</sup>Since 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 *mahāvratā*, perhaps by Somaśarman himself.

[...] *adhunā kali-kālam āsādya śrīmal-Lakulīśa-nātho 'vatīrya Somaśarmākhyā-brāhmaṇa-kule jātaḥ mahāvrate (te?)na dīkṣīto jagad-indus tenāpi Musalīśas tataḥ Somādi-pāramparya-krameṇa sthānaguru-śrī-Rudrasoma-praśīṣya-śrī-Tejasoma-śīṣyebhyaḥ śrīmad-Bhīmasoma-pādebhyaḥ [...]*

(te) *suppl.* ISAACSON; Musalīśas *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, Musalīśa [was initiated], then, by the unbroken tradition starting with Soma, the local Master Rudrasoma, his disciple Tejasoma, whose pupil is the venerable Bhīmasoma [...]

Before examining the question of Soma and related questions, I would like to point out some details concerning the word *mahāvratā* or Great Observance. Lakulīśa and others were most probably initiated **into** the *mahāvratā* (*mahāvrate*) and not **with/by** the *mahāvratā* (*mahāvratena*), for this observance is not known to be used as a rite of initiation in any Śaiva system.<sup>10</sup>

By the beginning of the seventh century, this certainly meant the imitation of Śiva's expiation for cutting off Brahmā's fifth head. According to this well-known story, Śiva must wander with a skull he uses as an alms bowl, for he has committed the sin of killing a brahmin, i.e. Brahmā. Wandering with a skull for twelve years is in fact the expiatory observance for killing a brahmin as prescribed in the Dharmasūtras,<sup>11</sup> but there it is not yet called *mahāvratā*.

<sup>10</sup>This supports the conjecture proposed by ISAACSON, although the reading of *mahāvratena* is of course grammatically acceptable. However, it is also possible that the instrumental *mahāvratena* was understood to stand for the locative, and that no additional instrumental *tena* was meant. In that case, it is not expressed that Somaśarman initiates Lakulīśa, although it may again be implied. BAKKER 2015: 143 opts for the instrumental, but assumes that it only implies the Pāsupata affiliation of Lakulīśa.

<sup>11</sup>See e.g. *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* 2.1.2–3: *bhrūṇahā dvādaśa samāḥ kapālī khaṭvāṅgī gardabhacarmavāsā arāṇyaniketanaḥśmaśāne dhvajam śavaśiraḥ kṛtvā kuṭīm kārayet / tām āvaset / saptāgārāṇi bhikṣaṃ caran svakarmācaksāṇas tena prāṇān dhārayet*. 'A man who has killed a learned Brahmin should do the following for twelve years. He should carry a skull and a post from a bed-frame; wear the skin of an ass; reside in the wilderness; and, using the head of a corpse as his flag, get a hut built in a cemetery and live in it. He should maintain himself by begging almsfood from seven houses while proclaiming his crime.' Translation by OLIVELLE 2000: 241. See *Gautamadharmasūtra* 22.4: *khaṭvāṅgakapālapānir vā dvādaśa saṃvatsarān brahmācārī bhikṣāya grāmaṃ praviśet / karmācaksāṇaḥ*. 'Or else, for twelve years he should live a chaste life and, carrying the post from a bed-frame and a skull, enter a village only to beg for food while proclaiming his crime.' Translation by OLIVELLE 2000: 175, who explains in the notes to this passage that *khaṭvāṅga* must mean skull-staff (a staff topped with a skull) rather than the post of a bed-frame. See also *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 3.243: *śiraḥkapālī dhvajavān bhikṣāśī karma vedayan / brahmahā dvādaśābdāni mitabhuk śuddhim āpnuyāt*.

Although most attestations of the mythological story come from late puranic sources, the myth<sup>12</sup> 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 *Mattavilāsaprahasana* (600–625 CE) mentions that it was thanks to the practice of the *mahāvratā* that his Lord bearing the crescent moon on his head was purified of his sin, which he had committed by cutting Brahmā’s head.<sup>13</sup> The verse clearly identifies Śiva’s *mahāvratā* as an expiation of the brahmin killer and it also shows that Kāpālikas were practising the *mahāvratā* 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-Nīllohita 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: Lakuliśa, 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. Lakuliśa, after his initiation in Somaśarman’s house, is called the Moon of the Word *ja-gadīndu* in the inscription. There are at least three interpretations of *ja-gadīndu*: 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 (*sitāṅga*) because of the ash-bath. BAKKER 2000 and 2015: 153. This understanding is backed up by the description of Lakuliśa in the *Skandapurāṇa* as being white-bodied when covered with ashes.<sup>14</sup>

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

<sup>13</sup>*āsthāya prayato mahāvratam idaṃ bālenducūḍāmaṇiḥ / svāmī no mumuce pitāmahaśiraśchedodbhavād enasaḥ* 17ab.

<sup>14</sup>It must also be noted that the *Skandapurāṇa* (180.10) calls the mere ash-bath a/the great observance (*mahāvratā*). It also says that Somaśarman with his family received Lakuliśa’s grace when he visited them in 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: 143–4 (note 442) also proposes that the Soma name suggests a parallel with the Soma-vaṃśa dynastic affiliation of Mahāśivagupta. 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 Kāpālika affiliation if we take it to be a syn. of \*Jagatsoma, suggestive of a Kāpālika 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 Kāpālika, may be more than a coincidence. It may well be understood as an attempt to present Lakulīśa as a true Kāpālika, perhaps via his association with another ‘Moon person,’ Somaśarman. Or, from another point of view, by presenting Lakulīśa as a Kāpālika initiate, the text may suggest the preeminence of the Kāpālikas over the other two Atimārga groups, the Pāśupatas and the Lākulas.

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 (*somamaṇḍala*) 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 (*divyaṃ vapuḥ*).

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.<sup>15</sup> In one passage of Bhavabhūti’s *Mālatīmādhava* (5.23) an invocation is addressed to the fierce goddess, Cāmuṇḍā, 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.<sup>16</sup>

Soma name figures elsewhere, in seventh century South India (in the names of Kāpālikas of the *Mattavilāsaprahasana*), where no such parallel can be assumed, therefore such implications seem unlikely.

<sup>15</sup>This idea perhaps also contributed to the spread of various visualization practices centered around the image of the moon.

<sup>16</sup>*pracalita-kari-kṛtti-paryanta-cañcan-nakha-āghāta-bhinnendu-niḥsyandamānāmṛta-ścyota-jīvat-kapālāvalī-mukta-caṇḍāṭṭahāsa-trasad-bhūri-*

This image is not particularly significant in itself. However, it seems that Kāpālikas 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.<sup>17</sup> So what was exactly the *amṛta* of the Kāpālikas and how did they expect to find or to produce it?

#### 4. What is the Kāpālikas' Nectar (*amṛta/soma*)?

We can turn again to the Kāpālikas of the *Mālatīmādhava*. At one point in the story (5.2), the female practitioner mentions that she can extract the so-called 'five nectars' (*pañcāmṛta*), 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 Kāpālika can fly a great distance in a few seconds.

The extraction of the five nectars (*pañcāmṛtākaraṣaṇa*), as well as other, Kāpālika-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 *Tāntrikābhīdhānakośa III*).

Other sources also describe Kāpālikas as making use of various parts of the human body. Kāpālikas use human flesh (*mahāmāṃsa*), brain (*mastiṣka*), intestines (*antra*), fat (*vasā*) and blood (*kīlāla*) 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 Kāpālika rituals were supposed to be, these chapters could well be adaptations or assimilations of originally Kāpālika rituals,<sup>18</sup> although this remains a hypothesis in the absence of any surviving Kāpālika scriptures. It is also notable that the *Brahmayāmala* describes possession (*āveśa*) by Bhairava, stating that through possession one obtains Bhairavahood; and possession was, according to numerous Śaiva sources about the subject, the way in which Kāpālikas claimed to attain final liberation.<sup>19</sup>

*bhūta-pravṛtta-stuti śvasad-asita-bhujamga-bhogāṅgāda-granthi-niṣpīdana-sphāra-phullat-phaṇā-pīṭha-niryad-viṣa-jyotir-ujjīmbhaṇoḍḍāmara-vyasta-vistāri-doh-khaṇḍa-paryāśita-kṣmādharam / jvalad-anala-pīśaṅga-netra-cchaṭācchanna-bhīmottamāṅga-bhrami prastutālāta-cakra-kriyā-syūta-dig-bhāgam uttuṅga-khaṭvāṅga-koṭi-dhvajoddhūti-vikṣipta-tārāgaṇam pramudita-kaṭapūtanottāla-vetāla-tāla-sphuṭat-karṇa-saṃbhrānta-Gaurī-ghanāśleṣa-hṛṣyan-manaḥ-Tryambakānandī vaḥ tāṇḍavam devī bhūyāt abhūṣṭyai ca hrṣṭyai ca naḥ.*

<sup>17</sup>Obtaining the nectar of immortality and, thanks to it, an immortal physical body is the main goal of the haṭhayogic and Nath yogic traditions, see Mallinson 2007 and Ondračka 2007. Mallinson 2015: 120 ff proposes that there may have been an early, nonsectarian tradition of ascetics, the precursor of what is later known as *haṭhayoga*, for which he finds traces already in the Pali Canon.

<sup>18</sup>For more arguments, see Törzsök 2011 and 2015.

<sup>19</sup>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 Sādhaka 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 Aghorī and the churning stick with Bhairava. The cosmic churning of the gods is enacted by the Sādhaka, 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 Aghorī, offering the Sādhaka a boon. The practitioner chooses to drink Aghorī'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 Aghorī's milk from both breasts), one becomes omniscient, Bhairava himself. Although Aghorī's milk and the *amṛta* that the Sādhaka prepares are not identified, they could well be the same thing.<sup>20</sup>

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

<sup>20</sup>The following working edition is based on Shaman Hatley's transcription. Only the relevant verses are given here.

*mahāpicususaṃpūrṇaṃ kuryāt sthālīm śavopari /44/  
āyatasya tu nalakaṃ mahā-m-asthi śavopari /  
eṣa manthānako devi asmin tanre praśasyate /45/  
keśesu netraṃ kuryād antraih kartṭr-vimiśritaih / (kartṭr in the sense of kṛtti?)  
navahastaṃ susaṃpūrṇaṃ vidyāmālāniyojitam /46/  
suviśuddhamahābhāgaṃ rajasamṛpāśobhitam /  
mahāsthālī tu pārśve tu evaṃ kṛtvā mahātape /47/  
Aghoryā sthālirūpāṃ tu dhyāyen mantrī suśobhanām /  
śaktisthām śaktirūpāṃ ca dhyāye somātmake sthitām /48/  
Manthānabhairavaṃ devaṃ śuddhasphaṭikanirmalam /  
sahasrabhujaparyantaṃ cinten manthānarūpiṇam /49/  
...  
mahāmanthāna kurvīta yaṃ sthitvā tu Śivo bhavet /61/  
...  
namaskṛtvāsuriṇ divyāṃ tataḥ sādhanam ārabhet /62/  
...  
evaṃ mālais tu tāṃ dīptāṃ dhyātvā manthānamandiram /  
netraṃ ca tathāiveha cintayed Vāsukirūpiṇam /66/  
kṣīrodaṃ sthāpayet sthālī ātmā bhairavarūpiṇam /  
pūjayitvā tu manthānaṃ prakṣipet sthālīmadhyataḥ /67/  
...  
kṣaṇamātraṃ mathed yāvac chaśāṅkottīṣṭhate priye /92/  
Kaustubhaṃ ca tato tiṣṭhe vimānaṃ Puṣpakaṃ tathā /  
evaṃ ādyāni siddhīni pūrvaśāstreṇa bhāṣitām /93/  
uttīṣṭhātī mahābhāge śataśo [']tha sahaśraśaḥ / (mahābhāgo MS)  
...  
kṣaṇamātraṃ mathed yāva namaskṛtvā tu Caṇḍikāṃ /  
tatrottiṣṭhātī vai devi Aghorī siddhidāyikā /107/  
...*



immortality was also an important way in which one could obtain Bhairavahood. Moreover, it involved worship of a fearsome goddess, Caṇḍikā or Aghorī, which again recalls the Kāpālikas in the *Mālatīmādhava*, who worship Cāmuṇḍā.

But was the bodily *amṛta* the only nectar the Kāpālikas collected and consumed?

## 5. Alcohol as the Nectar of Immortality

The Kāpālikas were also known for their use of alcohol in ritual. The *Prabodhacandrodaya* (3.20 and prose) presents a Kāpālika rite of initiation, in the course of which the Kāpālika 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*.<sup>21</sup>

## 6. The Drinking of Alcohol Compared to the Soma Sacrifice

In a more satirical way, the Kāpālikas' alcohol is also treated as their equivalent of the vedic Soma. The Kāpālika in the *Mattavilāśahasana* 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 Sāman hymns, the pitchers are the sacrificial ladles, thirst is the fire and the owner of the pub is the commander of the sacrifice.<sup>22</sup>

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*sādhakovāca //*  
*yadi tuṣṭāsi mām devi stanam me dada Ambike /114/*  
*śrutvā vākyam tato devyām sādhakasya suśobhanam /*  
*ehi ehi mahāsattva stana me piba putraka{h} /115/*  
*tvam muktvā tu mahāsattva{h} ko nyo putratvam arhati /*  
*pariśvajya tato vīram stanam dadāmi sādhaka{h} /116/*

...  
*evam kṛtvāpi vai devi -m- amṛtam sādhakottamaḥ /*  
*savyāsavyam tato pītvā sarvaṅṅo bhavate kṣaṇāt /120/ (kṣaṇām MS)*  
*bhairavo [']tha svayam sāksā guhyakānām prabhu[r] bhavet / (prabhu MS unmetr.)*  
 (Superfluous Visargas are printed in between curly braces. Square brackets indicate editorial additions. Comments, variants are given in parentheses. A hiatus-filling *m* is printed as *-m-*.)

<sup>21</sup> *Śraddhā: bhaavaṃ, sulāe pūlitam bhānam [= bhagavan, surayā pūritam bhājanam]*  
*Kāpālikaḥ (pītvā, śeṣam bhikṣukṣapaṇakayor arpayati):*

*idaṃ pavitram amṛtam pīyatām bhavabheṣajam /*  
**paśupāśasamucchedakāraṇam Bhairavoditam // 20 //**

<sup>22</sup> *Kapāli: priye! paśya paśya / eṣa surāpaṇo yajñavātavibhūtim anukaroti / atra hi dhva-jastambho yūpaḥ, surā somaḥ, śauṇḍā ṛtvijaḥ, caṣakāś camasāḥ, śūlyamāmsaprabhṛtaya upadaṃśā havirvīśeṣāḥ, mattavacanāni yajūṃṣi, gītāni sāmāni, udānkāḥ sruvāḥ, tarṣo 'gniḥ, surāpaṇādhipatir yajamānaḥ /*

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 *amṛta* 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/amṛta*)? 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, Somaśarman. It is, nevertheless, possible that Kāpālikas identified Somaśarman as their founder only retrospectively and that this derivation of Soma from Somaśarman 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 (*amṛta*/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 Bhairava-hood. 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.<sup>23</sup>

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 polysemy 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.

<sup>23</sup>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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