

Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Context

By David Gordon White

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Reviewed by Glen Alexander Hayes, Bloomfield College

Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Context is a remarkable and truly impressive feat of scholarship. The author, David Gordon White, is one of the world's leading South Asianists and an historian of religions at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This work is of major relevance to any cross-cultural understanding of the roles of sexuality in religion, culture, and history. For readers of this Journal, it offers an historical critique of many modern, especially "New Age" interpretations of the ancient pan-Asian traditions of "Tantra," and in the process also challenges older Western scholarship on the topic. Since "Tantric Sex" has become a ubiquitous and clichéd trope in the area of sexuality studies, White's volume offers a novel and paradigm-shifting reappraisal about the origins of "Tantric Sex," what its South Asian history really was, and how it underwent many reinterpretations throughout history. This long process has led to Tantra becoming bowdlerized and commodified here in the West, and to its sanitization and general rejection in South Asia. *Kiss of the Yogini* is a rich and complex effort, as White calls upon not only numerous Sanskrit texts (which he translates himself), but also a wide range of ethnographic, artistic, architectural, and sociological materials. He does this in a witty and engaging style, which only enhances his scholarship. He also includes one hundred pages of notes, bibliographies and index.

To begin with, White argues that what is today typically regarded as "Tantric Sex" (e.g., extended sessions of blissful coitus) is not what the earliest (ca. 6th-8th century C.E) Tantric texts entailed. Rather, he convincingly shows, these earliest Kaula ("clan-based") Tantrics were more concerned with the propitiation of terrifying and powerful female deities known as Yoginis by the ritual *exchange* and *consumption* of sexual fluids. In other words, the original "Tantric Sex" was not really about enjoying blissful states of consciousness and coitus, but rather collecting, offering, and ingesting the male and female fluids as part of a sexualized *ritual*. This was very different from the "ritualized sex" that so many people mistake for "Tantric Sex." Further complicating the situation was a reinterpretation of these earlier "hard core" Kaula Tantric practices, especially by the great

Kashmiri Hindu theologian Abhinavagupta in the 11th century C.E.. In brief, this later movement created what White terms a “soft core” version of the fluid exchanges, interpreting it metaphorically and philosophically, transforming it from a very physical form of “doing” into a type of abstract, mystical kind of “knowing.”

This is a very complicated volume, and many of the extended analyses and textual explorations are really intended for South Asianists, Historians of Religions, and scholars of Tantric Studies. However, anyone who is interested in a sophisticated modern understanding of the myriad and often transgressive uses of human sexuality throughout history should read it. It is well worth the effort. White provides wonderful translations of previously-unstudied Sanskrit texts, many of which contain graphic passages concerning the ritual uses of sexual fluids in the propitiation of the goddesses and Yoginis. For example (there are many throughout the book) one vivid passage from a late Kaula composition states (74):

The Goddess is fond of the vulva and penis, fond of the nectar of vulva and penis. Therefore, one should fully worship the Goddess with the nectar of vulva and penis. A man---who worships the Goddess by the drinking of the virile fluid and by taking pleasure in the wife of another man, as well as with the nectar of the vulva and penis---knows no sorrow and becomes possessed of perfect mantras. But he who worships Candika without the clan-generated fluids (*kuladbhavairdravyair vina*) [will see] the good deeds of thousands of lifetimes destroyed.

As White’s meticulously detailed treatment shows, the goals of the earliest Tantrics were not the sexual bliss and expanded consciousness (*ananda*) of much later interpretations of Tantra, but rather the acquisition of mystical powers (*siddhi*) by the male practitioner, whom Kaula texts called a “Hero” (*vira*), and the pleasing of the female deities, who might even reward the Hero with the ability to fly. In fact, White documents the distinctive medieval Yogini temples, which are hypaethral in structure---open to the sky, and contained up to 64 powerful sculptures of the beautiful and terrifying goddesses. It was in these open-air temples where the male and female Tantrics would engage in the ritual collection of the sexual fluids, and where the fluids would be “offered” to the goddesses in lieu of the offering of one’s own flesh (although some early texts do indeed mention this offering as well!). The Yoginis had a range of characteristics, not least

of which being that (27) “their power was intimately connected to the flow of blood, both their own menstrual and sexual emissions, and the blood of their animal (and human?) victims.” Furthermore, the male practitioner is to “kiss” the Yogini by engaging in cunnilingus with his female partner, sucking out her fluids, as the vulva is regarded as the “lower” mouth of women. Quoting a medieval South Indian poem translated by Kamil Zvelebil, this practice is said to be (74):

Like a cow which licks tenderly its calf
spread out your tongue broad
and lick her yoni [vulva]
lapping up the juices oozing out
like a thirsty dog which laps cool water.

Related Kaula practices often involved the additional collection of semen, which would then be mixed with the female blood or sexual fluids, and would culminate in the ingestion of the fluids after ritual coitus. However, in the early Kaula texts, coitus is never the end of Tantric ritual, nor a means to attain bliss or heightened consciousness (76), “it is simply a means to generating the clan nectar (*kulamrta*), the various mixtures of sexual fluids whose “eucharistic” offering and consumption lay at the heart of Kaula practice.”

In the broad sweep of South Asian history, much of this “hard core” style of early Tantra gradually becomes marginalized by the high-caste interpretations of Abhinavagupta, which themselves become the more mainstream form of “soft core” Tantra that continues to this day. Possibly due to the invasions of Muslims, the fluid-based Kaula traditions went largely “underground” by the 12th-13th centuries, although White argues that even today there are subaltern groups of Kaulas who still practice the old fluid exchanges. In northeastern India, in greater Bengal, the Bauls, a tradition of itinerant bards and Tantrics, still practice their own rituals involving sexual fluids. Yet the great majority of Tantric traditions in India become highly philosophical and metaphorical and, in recent centuries, were condemned by Europeans as “decadent” and scandalous. White does a fine job of documenting these many changes to the Tantric tradition throughout recent centuries, and readers might also consult the excellent scholarship of Hugh B. Urban (*Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, 2003) on the shifting views of Tantra in South Asia and the West.

Kiss of the Yogini has illuminating discussions and corrective critiques of the modern views of the system of the “subtle body” and the *cakras* (especially Ch. 8). White also takes to task the puritanical inclinations of many modern-day Hindus who seek to “sanitize” Hinduism of the sexual aspects of Tantra, which he shows to have been---at least in its symbolic forms---central to much pre-modern Hinduism (rather than the *bhakti* devotionism favored by modern purists). He also critiques the modern mishmash of 21st-century Western appropriations of Tantra (xiii): “New Age Tantra is to medieval Tantra what finger painting is to fine art, a remarkably unimaginative ‘series of yogic exercises applied to the sexual act . . . a *coitus reservatus par excellance* . . . a sad attempt to mechanize the mysteries of sexual love’.”

In conclusion, this is a groundbreaking work of the highest caliber, which thoroughly challenges recent notions of “Tantric Sex.” Although many scholars of Hindu and Buddhist Tantra have accepted White’s arguments, not all have. His thesis that earliest Tantra was based on fluid exchange (amply supported by a variety of evidence) may be regarded as a bit reductive by some scholars. But few can argue with the splendid tome that White has produced, an admirable follow-up to his earlier work on Tantra and alchemy, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (1996). Because of the difficulty of the material and the intricate methodology, this book is probably beyond the level of most undergraduates, but graduate students and scholars interested in a truly original exploration of human sexuality should take the time to engage a remarkable work that takes us far, far beyond kissing and coitus.