

On Shakti and Shaktas

Basile P. Catoméris

In the past as well as today, in our so-called civilized world, women have always been given traditionally well-defined societal roles in daily life. The potential genitor of mankind is generally expected to behave as mother, spouse, friend or pleasurable source of sexual gratification.

Acknowledging merely the value of these stereotyped roles may entail a frustrating limitation of woman's potential, a social stand that may explain the rise of modern feminism.

Necessary as they are *in human life*, women's given roles are but a minor part of a their latent powers. Too often the utilitarian aspect of their role in family and society creates an artificial man-made barrier to a legitimate need for free expression and choice of life style.

It is well known that religions have provided adequate symbols and support to believers' faith, such as the representation of saints, various artifacts from nature or fanciful abstractions. It is yet less known that women played an important symbolic role in ancient religions, and not infrequently in sacred intercourses (hierogamy). In modern India, it is still possible to find traces of women's sacred role in seekers of Truth who like to see God in the feminine gender, called Shakti, the female principle of divine energy, especially when personified as the supreme deity.

The very ancient cult of Shakti has its origin in the Rig Veda; it developed to embrace four main powerful embodiments:

- Maheshwari (wisdom, knowledge, compassion)
- Mahâlakshmi (the heart of harmony and beauty, the hidden charm of attraction)
- Mahâsarawati (perfection, kindness and help)
- Mahâkâli (the fierce force that is hostile to intolerance and ignorance).

These four feminine symbols stand for the latent and manifest powers of the immanent Supreme Mother goddess or Mahâ Shakti. The Supreme Mother is celebrated every year in India in well-attended Durga Puja festivals.

Amidst famous devotees of the Tantric Shakti cult, we should mention the *rishi* and commentator of sacred texts, Shankaracharya, known for the loftiest hymns he wrote with intense devotion to the Supreme Mother, and his disciples and other followers of the Advaita doctrine who, having reached *nirvikalpa samâdhi*, still pray to the Supreme in her Rajarajeshvari form.

In modern times, we find the great Sri Ramakrishna who reportedly went through sixty-four tantric disciplines, Sri Aurobindo, Ma Ananda Moyi and many others rishis and yogis who adopted the sacred tantric path.

In the Tantra tradition, book-knowledge is of no or little avail. As advocated by the sage Plato in Ancient Greece, orally transmitted knowledge is a superior means of transmitting empirical knowledge and the most natural and reliable means to keep up a sacred tradition.

Tantric practices lead to nowhere or in the best case or to serious health disorders at worst, if one has no access to an authentic and competent teacher - a rarity in the West - and only rely on the hazardous guidance of books or self-proclaimed teachers, or chartering self-experiments with libertine intent.

Identified as *shaktas*, the devotees of Shakti, whether male or female, like to place themselves under Supreme Mother's protection. *Shaktas* are often emancipated persons, moving around freely in their social surrounding, unaffected by the usual man-woman relationship dilemma, free from Freudian analysis or other mental deconstruction theories. As faith and devotion progress, the *shakta* becomes engrossed with his favorite feminine deity (*devi*), which eventually elicits a quite different perception of woman.

When seeing an exceptional female beauty, the *shakta* may feel the spontaneous need to bow to her feet and confess: " Please accept my *pranams* and allow my head to touch your sacred feet" because, as I intuit it, your beauty is genuine and pure in reflecting the Divine".

Shakta's predominantly feminine nature often creates a strong attraction toward female soul mates and vice versa. In *shaktas'* purified perception women's so called traditional roles are always overshadowed by the divine aspect. Indeed, to such *shaktas* women are more divine than men.