CHAPTER 5

The Medium is the Message: Chirographic Figures in Two Traditions

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A Note on Context

In this paper I take as basic the notions of power and agency that are attributed to the characters of the Balinese script in the episteme variously described under the terms ‘alphabet mysticism’ (Rubinstein: 2000) and ‘orthographic mysticism’ (Hunter 2007). Given the centrality of the sonorous aspect of speech in South Asian ritual and tantric practice, the shift to a system that puts equal – if not greater – weight on the chirographic representation of speech is a move of no little significance, and cries out for scholarly attention. We should like to know if there were historical pressures that supported the valorization of writing in the archipelago, then whether these pressures originated in South Asia, or in the interface between Indic and Austronesian modes of thought and textual practice.

I begin this study by looking at resonances between the treatment of the inherent a-vowel (a-kāra) of Indic writing systems in the Mahāvairocanasūtra and works of Kūkai (Kobo Daishi) that are foundational to the Shingon school of Japanese esoteric Buddhism. I first introduced this theme into my work in a paper of 2007, where I noted that in several related religious traditions there has been a historical shift in attention from the analysis of speech sounds as phonological units to a perspective that is inseparably tied to the materiality of writing. In this paper I continue this discussion by demonstrating that certain core statements of the Shingon and Balinese theological systems are informed by chirographic similes and comparisons.

Having considered the remarkable parallels between these two thought-worlds I look at the history of words having to do with enunciated or written syllables in the Indian tradition, concluding that we can detect a ‘chirographic drift’ in the understanding of the basic sound units of language. I then look at the brief appearance of citra-kāvyā, poetry whose effects depend on the quasi-pictorial rendering of graphic sequences, in the Śivagrha inscription commissioned by the central Javanese monarch Rakai Pu Kayuwangi Dyah Lokapala in 856 CE. I suggest that these ‘chirographic figures’ are among the
complex figures of speech and ‘secret languages’ (sandhi-bhāṣā) that are used in the inscription to heighten the power and status of the inscription and to mark its agency in an important ritual event. Having argued for the importance of chirographic representations in the historical development of the theological traditions of Bali and pre-modern Java I suggest that the picture is not complete without considering the role that ‘figures of writing’ play in ritual and healing practices of the ‘little’ traditions of Bali, where orality has been a major factor in the reproduction of ritual and metaphysical knowledge.

**Introduction: The Curious Case of the A-kāra**

I begin this paper by returning to some brief comments I made in a book chapter (Hunter 2007) on the special treatment of the a-vowel (a-kāra) in the Balinese text Swarawyaṅjana (ST), or ‘Manifestation of Sound-Letters’. This will lead into a reconsideration of a ‘shift towards the chirographic’, which I identified there as peculiar to the Balinese case. In this paper I will claim that this shift was partly the result of pragmatic pressures on Balinese practices around writing and partly to a more general metaphysics of writing first developed in texts and practices of the South Asian Mantrayāna and Śaivāgama. I will also claim that we should take into account developments in the inscriptive practices of the ancient Malay-Indonesian archipelago that accentuated the properties of script as a privileged materiality with a special role to play in public discourse.

In my book chapter on ‘the poetics of grammar in the Javano-Balinese tradition’ I noted that the Balinese treatment of the a-kāra in the Swarawyaṅjana, a text on phonetics and orthography, brought to mind a passage from the Mahāvairocanaśūtra that gives a special status to the a-kāra among other sounds (or characters) of the Sanskrit syllabary. I will summarize my arguments here as a way of laying the basis for the further exploration of chirographic elements in the formation of certain Balinese and Japanese metaphysical theories, a process that I see as marked by an element of ‘pervasion’ common to Shingon and Balinese understanding of the special nature of the a-kāra of Sanskrit-derived syllabaries:

- As Rubinstein (2000: 211) tells us, the ‘fate’ of the vowel a differs from that of the other vowels. In her translation of the Swarawyaṅjana (ST) she describes a as ‘ruling over consonants’ (wyapakeng sastreka), while the other vowels are described as ‘overpowered’ (kawaśa) when they come into contact with consonants.