The Historical Context of the Yantra Rites in the Vajrayāna Literature

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1. Preface

Yantras and its rites have been well known throughout the ages in Indian subcontinent. A yantra is often found in a private house and in a shop, especially for the purpose of prosperity or pacification. It can also be purchased not only for its original role from a temple but also for a so-called spiritual fashion in the Internet. According to Bühnemann et al. 2007, yantras are classified into these three types: 1) yantras establishing a foundation (e.g., a deity statue, a rites vase, a temple), 2) yantras for worship, 3) yantras for desire-oriented rites performed on special occasions. They likely show more and more elaborate structures in order. All the yantras mentioned in the later Vajrayāna literatures are included in the third type.

The late Vajrayāna, so-called the Tāntric Buddhism, had been developed diversely from about the eighth century to the thirteenth century when Indian Buddhism vanished from the center stage of Indian religious history. During the over 500 years, a huge number of texts had been compiled and written. Among them, the so-called Yamāri literature, including the Kṛṣṇayamārītantra (hereafter KYT) and its related texts, appears to have placed high emphasis on the yantra rites and contain much more detail explanation of the yantras compared with any other Vajrayāna literatures. For instance, KYT devotes almost three chapters (4, 5, 6) out of eighteen chapters to the explanation of the yantra rites. Other than the Yamāri cycle, the Saṃvarodayatantra (hereafter SUT), one of the Saṃvara literature, which seems to be compiled later than KYT, has similar explanations of the yantra rites to KYT. By comparing these two, we can notice that both of them have a certain relationship in their contexts. The aim of this short paper is
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to examine the historical context of yantra rites by analyzing the texts of both Tantras.

2. On the Yantra Rites

All the yantra rites in the Vajrayāna sources are aimed at the fulfillment of a certain wish. KYT explains the following nine rites employing the yantras: pacification (śāntika), prosperity (pauṣṭika), subjugation (vaśya/vaśikāraṇa), attraction (ākarṣāṇa), immobilization (stambhana), rendering one mute (vākstambhana), liquidation (māraṇa), causing enmity (vidveṣaṇa), and expelling (uccātana). The first three are considered to be peaceful rites, and the rest six to be aggressive rites. And each of these rites has a different procedure how to draw the yantra and to perform the rite. But the basic frame of the yantra rites is as follows:

(1) The performer prepares a yantra.
(2) He places the yantra into a certain receptacle, e.g., two joint-vessels, a skull bowl.
(3) He ties the yantra with a colored string.
(4) While scattering a certain flowers on the yantra, he visualizes himself as Yamāri.
(5) He recites a certain mantra while visualizing a target.

Pigments for drawing a yantra, strings for tying it, flowers for offering, mantras for reciting, and the target situations for visualizing, are prescribed with the purpose of the rite. 3)

3. Historical Contexts of the Yantra Rites in KYT and SUT

3.1. KYT and SUT

KYT, one of the main tantras among the Yamāri literature, had most likely been compiled about the ninth century. 4) KYT seems to have been somewhat popular in a certain time in India since there are nearly two hundred texts related to Yamāri in the Tibetan canon. 5) Almost of them contain the description of yantras. Therefore, it could be said that the followers of Yamāri cycle had put importance to the yantra rites. As for SUT, it is still unsure when it had been compiled. But we can at least say that SUT was rather late compilation since it had started to be cited in texts written later than about the eleventh century.

3.2. A Comparison of the Yantra Description of the Two Tantras

As having mentioned above, KYT explains the procedures of nine yantra rites and the
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matters related to the yantras, e.g., how to draw a yantra, almost for three chapters; fourth, fifth and sixth. And SUT explains the procedures of twelve yantra rites the chapter ten entitled “Karmapasarodaya.” SUT explains three more yantra rites than KYT. According to the Padmini, one of the commentary of the Samvarodayatantra, the chapter ten contains the following yantra rites: pacification for obstacles, pacification for fever, prosperity for wealth, prosperity for health, subjugation, attraction, immobilization, rendering one mute, liquidation, causing enmity, expelling, and rendering one crazy. 6) Regarding the number of rites, it seems that SUT extended the yantra rites described in KYT by means of subdividing the pacification and prosperity, and of adding the last rite to make a target crazy.

Due to limitations in space, I will discuss only the yantra rites of causing enmity (vidveṣaṇa) explained in KYT and SUT since their explanations of this rite seem to be able to clearly show their close relationship of employing yantra rites. The text of KYT shown here is re-edited without the apparatus because of space limitation. 7)

KYT Ch. 5, vv. 1-5:
tathā cakradvayaṁ likhya paṭkāreṇa vidarbhayet |
sādhyasya namam ādāya kapālasampuṭe nyaset ||
nilasūtreṇa veṣṭayitvā madhyāhnavelāyāṃ śmaśāneṣu nikhānayet ||
śrīyamārin samālambya sādhyāṃ vai purato nyaset |
āsvamahiśasamārūḍhau sādhyau śastrapāṇinau ||
nirmaitaiḥ krodhasaṃghātair dvapakṣaṁ vicintayet |
ubhau tu yudhyamānau tu krodhāviṣṭena cetasā ||
om hiḥ śtṛiḥ vikṛtānana hūm hūm pṛah pṛah vidveṣaṇa hūm pṛah svāhā ||

SUT Ch. 10, vv. 47-51 (SUT ed. 112):
tathāiva cakradvayaṁ likhet paṭkāreṇa vidarbhitam |
sādhyanāma samādāya likhed mantreṇa yojitam ||
āsvamahiśasamārūḍhau sādhyau dṛṣṭvā samālikhet |
kapālasampuṭe sthāpya nilasūtreṇa veṣṭayet ||
madhyāhne krūracrittena rātrau tasya viśeṣataḥ |
pracaṇḍe catuspathe śmaśāne ghoramadhyataḥ ||
nikhanya sthāpayed gopyam arcayed vidhipūrvakam |
āsvamahiśayor yuddhau vidveṣaṃ kuru tatkaṇe ||
krodhāt krodhobhayapakṣau yuddhau kṛtvā mahātmanā |
anyonyaṃ kalaḥam kṛtvā vidveṣaṃ bhavati nāyathā ||

Although it is not, of course, certain that these two Tantras directly connect each
other, they seem to be somewhat related at least the descriptions of the yantra rites since their verses shown here look quite similar. Moreover, SUT seems to add the verses and words shown as bold faces for further explanation. For example, “likhed mantaṇa yojitam” is not described in the text of KYT here but this procedure, enclosing the target name with the syllables like hūṃ, is necessary to do in this yantra rite. It is just merely speculation but the compiler[s] of SUT somehow consulted with KYT at least for describing the yantra rites.

Conclusion

The desire-oriented yantras seemed to be quite popular around the ninth century in Indian subcontinent. And in Buddhist society, the comprehensive system of yantras had been most likely introduced around the time compiling the Yamārī literature since no Buddhist Tantras describe the yantra rites in detail as the Yamārī literature does. As for my future research plan, we need to examine and compare with the yantra rites described in the other religious literatures such as Śaiva Tantras in order to find how extensive the yantra culture was in the time of KYT compiled.

Notes

1) See Bühnemann et al. 2007 (32–39) in detail.
2) For example, the śrīcakra is included in this type.
3) On the procedure of yantra rites, see Kuranishi 2013 in detail.
4) On the date and some features of KYT, see Kuranishi 2008.
6) Padmini Ch. 10 (CA17 17v7): athetyādi. tatra dvādaśakarmāṇi vighnādiśānti-jvarāśānti-
7) The apparatus of the text here could be seen at the critical edition of the text related to
   yantra rites of KYT I prepare to publish now.

Abbreviations

KYT  Krṣṇayamāritantram with Ratnāvalīpaṇjikā of Kumāracandra. Ed. Vrajvallbh Dwivedi and
   Samdhong Rinpoche. Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1992. (And
   several Sanskrit manuscripts of KYT are consulted in this article. See Kuranishi 2013 on
   the list of its Sanskrit manuscript in detail.)

Padmini  Padmini of Ratnarakṣita. As for its manuscripts and the research, see Tanemura, Kanō, and
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Bibliography


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