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ART 2430: NON-WESTERN ART

## Shiva as Nataraja vs. Mahamaya and Buddha Dakini: A comparison Study

By Angelina McLaughlin

## Shiva as Nataraja vs. Mahamaya and Buddha Dakini: A Comparison Study

ANGELINA McLAUGHLIN

ART 2430: Non-Western Art, Fall 2015

Nominated by: Dr. Sally Struthers

Angelina McLaughlin is a junior in the Mechanical Engineering Bachelor's Program at Wright State University. While a student in a STEM program, she has a deep love for the arts and literature. She has a ten plus year background in the arts community, including playing trombone in the award winning Stivers School for the Arts Jazz Band. She was awarded a Scholastic Gold Key for sculpture and an Honorable Mention for printmaking in the Ohio Governor's Art Competition. Her experiences in the various fields of art and writing aid her in being able to approach engineering problems with creativity and open-mindedness.

### **Angelina notes:**

This non-western art class truly changed my outlook on the world. It made me realize that long ago, people had so many similarities, even though most cultures were completely isolated from each other. People revered the earth, understood the power it held over us, and respected that it controlled our existence, instead of the other way around. The parallels between continents were truly remarkable, and that is something I spoke to in this paper.

### **Dr. Struthers notes:**

The assignment was to visit the Dayton Art Institute, choose a work of non-Western art, describe it, research it, and compare it to a work of art in the textbook used in class, *Art Beyond the West*. Angelina followed all directions. She wrote excellent descriptions, and researched the pieces using her textbook, materials at the Dayton Art Institute, and scholarly sources. She pulled in several aspects of the works of art: their cultures, their media, their iconography. Her paper was clearly written and well-documented.

## Introduction

This paper will consider the sculpture *Mahamaya and Buddhadakini*. This bronze statue can be found in the Asian art gallery of the Dayton Art Institute, acquisition number 1980.12. This art piece will be compared with the bronze sculpture *Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance*. Similarities and differences will be discussed, as well as their respective religious and cultural meanings.

### *Mahamaya and Buddhadakini*

*Mahamaya and Buddhadakini* is a Tibeto-Chinese gilt bronze statue, 11 ¾ inches in height, made during the Qing dynasty, 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is currently located in the Asian art gallery of the Dayton Art Institute. Its acquisition number is 1980.12. Mahamaya is a Tantric Buddhist protector Deity. He is typically blue in color and has four arms and four heads, each head crowned with the crown of a Bodhisattva, a person who approached enlightenment and chose to stay on Earth to teach others. The form of Mahamaya shown in the sculpture is his ferocious Tantric

form. In this form, he is shown embracing his consort, Buddhadakini, and in his hands he holds a skull cup, a

ritual staff called a *khatvanga*, and a bow and arrow. Buddhadakini also has four heads and arms, and holds the same symbols in her hands (Getty 144). According to the Dayton Art Institute (DAI), Buddhadakini is considered to be Mahamaya's personified female energy force. In this ferocious Tantric form, their embrace symbolizes the spiritual union of wisdom and compassion.

The symbolism of the items helps hold significance to the meaning of the art piece. The skull cup, or *kapala*, is related to detachment and transformation of the observable world. The bow and arrow refer to pointed concentration in order to achieve liberation. The *khatvanga* is far more complex, as noted here:



Figure 1: *Mahamaya and Buddhadakini*, source: DAI

The shaft of the khatvanga has eight sides which represent the Noble Eightfold path (the fourth Noble Truth) and the eight classes of protectors. At the end of the shaft is a dorje representing totality and completion. Along the shaft of the khatvanga are crossed dorjes, a gTérbum and three heads. The crossed dorjes are symbolic of the indestructibility of beginningless wisdom mind. The gTérbum is symbolic of wealth and enrichment. The three heads – one freshly severed, one rotting and one a skull – are the symbols of the three spheres of being, chö-ku, long-ku and trül-ku [Nirmanakaya, the middle one represents the Sambhogakaya, and the top one is a skull, representing the Dharmakaya] which are unified by the shaft of the khatvanga demonstrating their inseparability. Streamers of the colours of the five elements hang from the khatvanga, as well as a bell and dorje which represent emptiness and form. At the top of the khatvanga are the three prongs which pierce the fabric of attraction, aversion and indifference. Hanging from the prongs are two pairs of rings. These signify the four philosophical extremes that are denied by Dharma: eternalism and nihilism, monism and dualism. Finally the khatvanga is surmounted by wisdom fire – the fire that burns self-protection, justification and referentiality. (viewonbuddhism.org)

When these ideas are brought together into a cohesive form, one can make the conclusion that was made by the DAI, and many more.

### *Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance*

This piece is a lost-wax processed bronze figure of the Hindu god Shiva performing the dance of destruction. It was created in the 11-12<sup>th</sup> century, during the Chola period in India and is 32 inches in height. This figure combines all of Shiva's roles-- creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe-- beautifully in a single image. Shiva is shown dancing his cosmic dance of destruction. This dance, in which

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Figure 2: Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance. Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

it is written he dances periodically, destroys the universe. A new universe is then created, reflecting the Indian ideas of reincarnation and the never ending cycle of time. Shiva's hair, normally held in a bun, is shown flying wildly free as he dances. He is shown dancing on a dwarf, the symbol of ignorance, and his lower right hand is raised in a gesture of reassurance (MMA, 46). The ring of fire surrounding Shiva represents the never-ending cycle of creation, destruction, and rebirth of the universe, and the fire shows that this moment is about destruction. In his left outer hand, Shiva holds a flame, symbolizing destruction, and the left holds a small drum, symbolic of life and rebirth. Shiva's dance also celebrates life as an eternal "becoming" in which nothing begins or ends, and where creative and destructive forces are unified and balanced (Art Beyond the West, 82).

### ***Comparison***

The Hindu religion and the Shiva figure both predate Buddhism and the Mahamaya figure. Buddhism had its start in India, so it is common to see Hindu influences in Buddhist art. However, Tantric Buddhism seems to have many more parallels to Hinduism than most other Buddhist sects. Mainstream Buddhism uses only Buddha and some Bodhisattvas as idols shown in Buddhist art. Tantric Buddhism appears to have its own pantheon of deities, many resembling Hindu gods. In these two bronzes, both deities have four arms and hold symbolic items in their hands. Mahayama, having four heads, is reminiscent of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation, whose four heads face the cardinal directions. In *The Gods of Northern Buddhism* it is explicitly stated that Mahayama is a form of Brahma (Getty, 144).

In a cultural context, these bronze figures would be utilized in a similar way. These are both household size deity figures meant to be displayed on an altar with sacrifices given to them. The DAI piece even is hollowed so that sacred Buddhist objects could be stored in the statue to assist with prayers to Mahamaya.

Mahayama and Buddhakini's embrace is reminiscent of Hindu traditions in art. Hindu art is very open when it comes to depicting intimate relations between people and deities. This is not as commonly seen in Buddhist art, yet it is very prominent in the gilded bronze piece at the DAI. Finally, in the Shiva piece, one

can see that he is standing on one leg, with arms outstretched. This is called the *Tribhanga*, or three bends pose. This pose has been used for centuries in Hindu and Indian art. One can see that both Mahamaya and Buddhadakini are holding the same pose, despite this piece being Buddhist and Chinese in origin.

## Conclusion

Despite being made 700 years apart and representing different religions, the Tibeto-Chinese *Mahamaya and Buddhakini* bronze statue shows heavy influence from Hindu Indian art, such as the Chola *Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance*. The parallels include the additional limbs and heads as well as the use of symbols in the form of objects held by the deity. It appears that Tantric Buddhism is a hybrid of Buddhist beliefs with Hindu-inspired idolatry.

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