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Mahakali

This article is about the Hindu goddess. For the western-most zone of Nepal, see [Mahakali Zone](#).

Mahakali (Sanskrit: **Mahākālī**, Devanagari: महाकाली), literally translated as *Great Kali*, is the Hindu Goddess of time and death, considered to be the consort of Shiva the God of consciousness, and the basis of Reality (see below) and existence. According to the Markendeya Purana she is an aspect of the goddess Durga. Mahakali in Sanskrit is etymologically the feminized variant of Mahakala or *Great Time* (which is interpreted also as *Death*), an epithet of the God Shiva in Hinduism. Mahakali is the form of the Goddess Durga beyond time, Kali, who is the force of the anger of Durga and is an aspect of Durga or *Adi parashakti*, and therefore her color is black. She is believed to be the greatest aspect of Kali whom many Hindus hold as a Divine Mother.

1 Meaning

Mahakali's history is contained in various Puranic and Tantric Hindu Scriptures (Shastra). In these She is variously portrayed as the *Adi-Shakti-Goddess Durga*, the Primeval Force of the Universe, identical with the Ultimate Reality or *Brahman*. She is also known as the (female) *Prakriti* or World as opposed to the (male) *Purusha* or Consciousness, or as one of three manifestations of *Mahadevi Durga* (The Great Goddess) that represent the three *Gunas* or attributes in *Samkhya* philosophy. In this interpretation Mahakali represents *Tamas* or the force of inertia. A common understanding of the *Devi Mahatmya* ("Greatness of the Goddess") text, a later interpolation into the Markandeya Purana, considered a core text of *Shaktism* (the branch of Hinduism which considers *Devi Durga* to be the highest aspect of Godhead), assigns a different form of the Goddess (*Mahasaraswati*, *Mahalakshmi*, and *Mahakali*) to each of the three episodes therein.

2 Iconography

Mahakali is most often depicted as blue in popular Indian art.

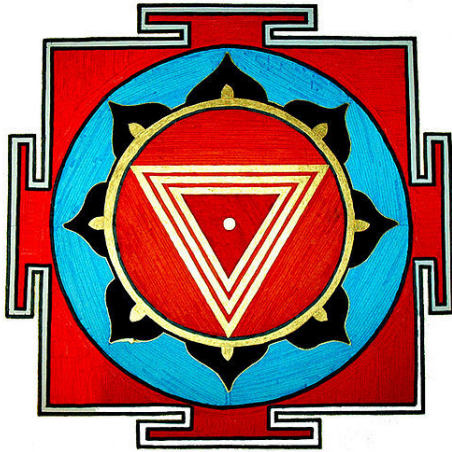
Her most common four armed iconographic image shows each hand carrying variously a sword, a trishul (trident),



The ten-headed Mahakali.

a severed head and a bowl or skull-cup (*kapala*) catching the blood of the severed head. Her eyes are described as red with intoxication and in absolute rage, Her hair is shown disheveled, small fangs sometimes protrude out of Her mouth and Her tongue is lolling. She has a garland consisting of the heads of demons she has slaughtered, variously enumerated at 108 (an auspicious number in Hinduism and the number of countable beads on a *Japa Mala* for repetition of *Mantras*) or 50, which represents the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, *Devanagari*, and wears a skirt made of demon arms.

Her ten headed (*dasamukhi*) image is known as *Dasa Mahavidya Mahakali*, and in this form She is said to represent the ten *Mahavidyas* or "Great Wisdom (Goddesses)". She is depicted in this form as having ten heads, ten arms, and ten legs but otherwise usually conforms to the four armed icon in other respects. Each of her ten hands is carrying an implement which varies in different accounts, but each of these represent the power of one of the *Devas* or Hindu Gods and are often the identifying weapon or ritual item of a given *Deva*. The implication is that Mahakali subsumes and is responsible for the powers that these deities possess and this is in line with the interpre-



Mahakali Yantra

tation that Mahakali is identical with Brahman. While not displaying ten heads, an “ekamukhi” or one headed image may be displayed with ten arms, signifying the same concept: the powers of the various Gods come only through Her grace.

In either one of these images she is shown standing on the prone, inert or dead body of Shiva. This is interpreted in various ways but the most common is that Mahakali represents Shakti, the power of pure creation in the universe, and Shiva represents pure Consciousness which is inert in and of itself. While this is an advanced concept in monistic Shaktism, it also agrees with the Nondual Trika philosophy of Kashmir, popularly known as Kashmir Shaivism and associated most famously with Abhinavagupta. There is a colloquial saying that “Shiva without Shakti is Shava” which means that without the power of action (Shakti) that is Mahakali (represented as the short “i” in Devanagari) Shiva (or consciousness itself) is inactive; Shava means corpse in Sanskrit and the play on words is that all Sanskrit consonants are assumed to be followed by a short letter “a” unless otherwise noted. The short letter “i” represents the female power or Shakti that activates Creation. This is often the explanation for why She is standing on Shiva, who is either Her husband and complement in Shaktism, the Supreme Godhead in Shaivism. Another understanding is that the wild destructive Mahakali can only stop her fury in the presence of Shiva the God of Consciousness, so that the balance of life is not completely overrun over by wild nature.

3 See also

- Abhinavagupta
- Advaita
- Brahman
- Kashmir Shaivism

- Samkhya
- Shakti
- Pashupatinath

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Kali

For other uses, see [Kali \(disambiguation\)](#).
“The black one” redirects here. For the 2005 drone metal album, see [Black One](#). For the male choral group, see [The Black Ones](#).

Kālī (/ˈkɑːliː/; Sanskrit: काली, IPA: [kɑːliː]), also known as **Kālikā** (Sanskrit: कालिका), is the Hindu goddess associated with empowerment, *shakti*. She is the fierce aspect of the goddess *Durga* (*Parvati*).^[1] The name Kali comes from *kāla*, which means black, time, death, lord of death: *Shiva*. Since *Shiva* is called *Kāla*— the eternal time — the name of *Kālī*, his consort, also means “Time” or “Death” (as in “time has come”). Hence, *Kālī* is the Goddess of Time, Change, Power and Destruction. Although sometimes presented as dark and violent, her earliest incarnation as a figure of annihilation of evil forces still has some influence. Various *Shakta* Hindu cosmologies, as well as *Shākta* Tantric beliefs, worship her as the ultimate reality or *Brahman*. Comparatively recent devotional movements largely conceive *Kālī* as a benevolent mother goddess.^[2] *Kālī* is represented as the consort of Lord *Shiva*, on whose body she is often seen standing. *Shiva* lies in the path of *Kālī*, whose foot on *Shiva* subdues her anger.

1 Etymology

Kālī is the feminine form of *kālam* (“black, dark coloured”).^[3] *Kāla* primarily means “time” but also means “black” in honor of being the first creation before light itself. *Kālī* means “the black one” and refers to her being the entity of “time” or “beyond time.” *Kālī* is strongly associated with *Shiva*, and *Shaivas* derive the masculine *Kāla* (an epithet of *Shiva*) to come from her feminine name. A nineteenth-century Sanskrit dictionary, the *Shabdakalpadrum*, states: कालः शविः । तस्य पत्नीर्त्ति - काली । kālaḥ śivaḥ । tasya patnīti kālī - “*Shiva* is *Kāla*, thus, his consort is *Kālī*” referring to *Devi Parvathi* being a manifestation of *Devi MahaKali*.

Other names include *Kālarātri* (“black night”), as described above, and *Kālikā* (“relating to time”). *Coburn* notes that the name *Kālī* can be used as a proper name, or as a description of color.^[4]

Kālī’s association with darkness stands in contrast to her consort, *Shiva*, who manifested after her in creation, and who symbolises the rest of creation after Time is created. In his supreme awareness of *Maya*, his body is covered

by the white ashes of the cremation ground (Sanskrit: *śmaśāna*) where he meditates, and with which *Kālī* is also associated, as *śmaśāna-kālī*.

2 Origins

Hugh Urban notes that although the word *Kālī* appears as early as the *Atharva Veda*, the first use of it as a proper name is in the *Kathaka Grhya Sutra* (19.7).^[5] *Kālī* is the name of one of the seven tongues of *Agni*, the [Rigvedic] God of Fire, in the *Mundaka Upanishad* (2:4), but it is unlikely that this refers to the goddess. The first appearance of *Kālī* in her present form is in the *Sauptika Parvan* of the *Mahabharata* (10.8.64). She is called *Kālarātri* (literally, “black night”) and appears to the *Pandava* soldiers in dreams, until finally she appears amidst the fighting during an attack by *Drona*’s son *Ashwatthama*. She most famously appears in the sixth century *Devi Mahatmyam* as one of the *shaktis* of *Mahadevi*, and defeats the demon *Raktabija* (“Bloodseed”). The tenth-century *Kalika Purana* venerates *Kālī* as the ultimate reality.

According to *David Kinsley*, *Kālī* is first mentioned in Hinduism as a distinct goddess around 600 CE, and these texts “usually place her on the periphery of Hindu society or on the battlefield.”^[6] She is often regarded as the *Shakti* of *Shiva*, and is closely associated with him in various *Puranas*. The *Kalika Purana* depicts her as the “*Adi Shakti*” (Fundamental Power) and “*Para Prakriti*” or beyond nature.

3 Worship and mantra

Kali could be considered a general concept, like *Durga*, and is mostly worshiped in the *Kali Kula* sect of worship. The closest way of direct worship is *Maha Kali* or *Bhadra Kali* (*Bhadra* in Sanskrit means 'gentle'). *Kali* is worshiped as one of the 10 *Mahavidya* forms of *Adi Parashakti* (*Goddess Durga*) or *Bhagavathy* according to the region. The mantra for worship is ^[7] called *Devi Argala Stotram*.^[8]

Sanskrit: सर्वमङ्गलमाङ्गल्ये शिवे सर्वार्थसाधिके । शरण्ये
त्र्यम्बके गौरि नारायणि नमोऽस्तु ते ॥

ॐ जयंती मंगल काली भद्रकाली कपालिनी । दुर्गा क्षमा शिवा
धात्री स्वाहा स्वधा नमोऽस्तुते ॥

(Sarvamaṅgalamāṅgalyē śivē sarvārthasādhikē .
śaraṅyē tryambakē gauri nārāyaṅi namō'stu tē.

Oṅ jayantī mangala kālī bhadrakālī kapālinī . durgā
kṅamā śivā dhātrī svāhā svadhā namō'stutē.)^[9]

4 Yantra



Kali Yantra

Goddesses play an important role in the study and practice of Tantra Yoga, and are affirmed to be as central to discerning the nature of reality as are the male deities. Although Parvati is often said to be the recipient and student of Shiva's wisdom in the form of *Tantras*, it is Kālī who seems to dominate much of the Tantric iconography, texts, and rituals.^[10] In many sources Kālī is praised as the highest reality or greatest of all deities. The *Nirvanatantra* says the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva all arise from her like bubbles in the sea, ceaselessly arising and passing away, leaving their original source unchanged. The *Niruttara-tantra* and the *Picchila-tantra* declare all of Kālī's mantras to be the greatest and the *Yogini-tantra*, *Kamakhya-tantra* and the *Niruttara-tantra* all proclaim Kālī *vidyas* (manifestations of *Mahadevi*, or "divinity itself"). They declare her to be an essence of her own form (*svarupa*) of the *Mahadevi*.^[11]

In the *Mahanirvana-tantra*, Kālī is one of the epithets for the primordial *sakti*, and in one passage Shiva praises her:

*At the dissolution of things, it is Kāla [Time]
Who will devour all, and by reason of this He
is called Mahākāla [an epithet of Lord Shiva],
and since Thou devourest Mahākāla Himself,
it is Thou who art the Supreme Primordial Kā-
lika. Because Thou devourest Kāla, Thou art
Kālī, the original form of all things, and because
Thou art the Origin of and devourest all things*

*Thou art called the Adya [the Primordial One].
Re-assuming after Dissolution Thine own form,
dark and formless, Thou alone remainest as
One ineffable and inconceivable. Though hav-
ing a form, yet art Thou formless; though Thy-
self without beginning, multiform by the power
of Maya, Thou art the Beginning of all, Cre-
atrix, Protectress, and Destructress that Thou
art.*^[10]

The figure of Kālī conveys death, destruction, and the consuming aspects of reality. As such, she is also a "forbidden thing", or even death itself. In the *Pancatattva* ritual, the *sadhaka* boldly seeks to confront Kali, and thereby assimilates and transforms her into a vehicle of salvation.^[12] This is clear in the work of the *Karpuradi-stotra*,^[13] a short praise of Kālī describing the *Pancatattva* ritual unto her, performed on cremation grounds. (*Samahana-sadhana*)

*He, O Mahākālī who in the cremation-ground,
naked, and with dishevelled hair, intently med-
itates upon Thee and recites Thy mantra, and
with each recitation makes offering to Thee of
a thousand Akanda flowers with seed, becomes
without any effort a Lord of the earth. Oh
Kālī, whoever on Tuesday at midnight, hav-
ing uttered Thy mantra, makes offering even
but once with devotion to Thee of a hair of
his Shakti [his energy/female companion] in the
cremation-ground, becomes a great poet, a Lord
of the earth, and ever goes mounted upon an
elephant.*^[12]

The *Karpuradi-stotra* clearly indicates that Kālī is more than a terrible, vicious, slayer of demons who serves Durga or Shiva. Here, she is identified as the supreme mistress of the universe, associated with the five elements. In union with Lord Shiva, she creates and destroys worlds. Her appearance also takes a different turn, befitting her role as ruler of the world and object of meditation.^[14] In contrast to her terrible aspects, she takes on hints of a more benign dimension. She is described as young and beautiful, has a gentle smile, and makes gestures with her two right hands to dispel any fear and offer boons. The more positive features exposed offer the distillation of divine wrath into a goddess of salvation, who rides the *sadhaka* of fear. Here, Kali appears as a symbol of triumph over death.^[15]

5 Bengali tradition

Kali is also a central figure in late medieval Bengali devotional literature, with such devotees as Ramprasad Sen (1718–75). With the exception of being associated with Parvati as Shiva's consort, Kālī is rarely pictured in



Kali Puja festival in Kolkata.

Hindu legends and iconography as a motherly figure until Bengali devotions beginning in the early eighteenth century. Even in Bengali tradition her appearance and habits change little, if at all.^[16]

The Tantric approach to Kālī is to display courage by confronting her on cremation grounds in the dead of night, despite her terrible appearance. In contrast, the Bengali devotee appropriates Kālī's teachings adopting the attitude of a child, coming to love her unreservedly. In both cases, the goal of the devotee is to become reconciled with death and to learn acceptance of the way that things are. These themes are well addressed in Rāmprasād's work.^[17] Rāmprasād comments in many of his other songs that Kālī is indifferent to his wellbeing, causes him to suffer, brings his worldly desires to nothing and his worldly goods to ruin. He also states that she does not behave like a mother should and that she ignores his pleas:

Can mercy be found in the heart of her who was born of the stone? [a reference to Kali as the daughter of Himalaya]

Were she not merciless, would she kick the breast of her lord?

Men call you merciful, but there is no trace of mercy in you, Mother.

You have cut off the heads of the children of others, and these you wear as a garland around your neck.

It matters not how much I call you "Mother, Mother." You hear me, but you will not listen.^[18]

To be a child of Kālī, Rāmprasād asserts, is to be denied of earthly delights and pleasures. Kālī is said to refrain

from giving that which is expected. To the devotee, it is perhaps her very refusal to do so that enables her devotees to reflect on dimensions of themselves and of reality that go beyond the material world.^{[18][19]}

A significant portion of Bengali devotional music features Kālī as its central theme and is known as Shyama Sangeet ("Music of the Night"). Mostly sung by male vocalists, today even women have taken to this form of music. One of the finest singers of Shyāma Sāngeet is Pannalal Bhat-tacharya.

In Bengal, Kālī is venerated in the festival Kali Puja, the new moon day of Ashwin month which coincides with Diwali festival.

In a unique form of Kālī worship, Shantipur worships Kālī in the form of a hand painted image of the deity known as **Poteshwari** (meaning the deity drawn on a piece of cloth).

6 Legends

6.1 Slayer of Raktabija



The Goddess Ambika Leading the Eight Matrikas in Battle Against the Demon Raktabija, Folio from a Devi Mahatmya - (top row, from the left) the Matrikas - Narasimhi, Vaishnavi, Kumari, Maheshvari, Brahmi. (bottom row, from left) Varahi, Aindri, Chamunda or Kali (drinking the demon's blood), Ambika. on the right, demons arising from Raktabija's blood

In Kālī's most famous legend, Devi Durga (Adi Parashakti) and her assistants, the Matrikas, wound the demon Raktabija, in various ways and with a variety of weapons in an attempt to destroy him. They soon find that they have worsened the situation for with every drop of blood that is dripped from Raktabija he reproduces a clone of himself. The battlefield becomes increasingly filled with his duplicates.^[20] Durga, in need of help, summons Kālī to combat the demons. It is said, in some versions, that Goddess Durga actually assumes the form of Goddess Kālī at this time. The *Devi Mahatmyam* describes:

Out of the surface of her (Durga's) forehead, fierce with frown, issued suddenly Kali of terrible countenance, armed with a sword and noose. Bearing the strange

khatvanga (skull-topped staff), decorated with a garland of skulls, clad in a tiger's skin, very appalling owing to her emaciated flesh, with gaping mouth, fearful with her tongue lolling out, having deep reddish eyes, filling the regions of the sky with her roars, falling upon impetuously and slaughtering the great *asuras* in that army, she devoured those hordes of the foes of the *devas*.^[21]

Kali destroys Raktabija by sucking the blood from his body and putting the many Raktabija duplicates in her gaping mouth. Pleased with her victory, Kali then dances on the field of battle, stepping on the corpses of the slain.^[22] In the *Devi Mahatmya* version of this story, Kali is also described as a *Matrika* and as a *Shakti* or power of *Devi*. She is given the epithet *Cāmuṇḍā* (*Chamunda*), i.e. the slayer of the demons Chanda and Munda.^[23] *Chamunda* is very often identified with Kali and is very much like her in appearance and habit.^[24]

6.2 Dakshina Kali



Bhadrakali (a gentle form of Kali), circa 1675. A painting made in India, Himachal Pradesh, Basohli, now placed in LACMA.

In her most famous pose as *Daksinakali*, popular legends say that Kali, becoming drunk on the blood of her victims on the battlefield, dances with destructive frenzy. She is about to destroy the whole universe when, urged by all the gods, Shiva lies in her way to stop her. In her fury, she fails to see the body of Shiva lying amongst the corpses on the battlefield and steps upon his chest.^[25] Realizing Shiva lies beneath her feet, her anger is pacified and she calms her fury. Though not included in any of the puranas, popular legends state that Kali was ashamed at the prospect of keeping her husband beneath her feet and thus stuck her tongue out in shame. The *Devi-Bhagavata Purana*, which goes into great depths about the goddess Kali, reveals the tongue's actual symbolism.

The characteristic icons that depict Kali are the following; unbridled matted hair, open blood shot eyes, open mouth and a drooping tongue; in her hands, she holds a *Khadga* (bent sword or scimitar) and a human head; she

has a girdle of human hands across her waist and an enchanted Shiva lies beneath her feet. Each of these icons represent a deep philosophical epithet.^[26] The drooping out-stuck tongue represents her blood-thirst. Lord Shiva beneath her feet represents matter, as Kali is undoubtedly the primeval energy. The depiction of Kali on Shiva shows that without energy, matter lies "dead".^[27] This concept has been simplified to a folk-tale depicting a wife placing her foot on her husband and sticking her tongue out in shame. In tantric contexts, the tongue is seen to denote the element (*guna*) of *rajas* (energy and action) controlled by *sattva*.

If Kali steps on Shiva with her right foot and holds the sword in her left hand, she is considered to be *Dakshina Kali*.^{[28][29]} The Dakshina Kali Temple has important religious associations with the Jagannath Temple and it is believed that *Daksinakali* is the guardian of the kitchen of the Lord Jagannath Temple. Puranic tradition says that in Puri, Lord Jagannath is regarded as *Daksinakalika*. Goddess *Dakshinakali* plays an important role in the 'Niti' of *Saptapuri Amavasya*.^[30]

One South Indian tradition tells of a dance contest between Shiva and Kali. After defeating the two demons *Sumbha* and *Nisumbha*, Kali takes up residence in the forest of *Thiruvallankadu* or *Thiruvallangadu*. She terrorizes the surrounding area with her fierce, disruptive nature. One of Shiva's devotees becomes distracted while performing austerities, and asks Shiva to rid the forest of the destructive goddess. When Shiva arrives, Kali threatens him, claiming the territory as her own. Shiva challenges Kali to a dance contest; both of them dance and Kali matches Shiva in every step that he takes until Shiva takes the "Urdhvatandava" step, by vertically raising his right leg.^[31] Kali refuses to perform this step, which would not befit her as a woman, and became pacified.

6.3 Smashan Kali

If the Kali steps out with the left foot and holds the sword in her right hand, she is the terrible form of Mother, the *Smashan Kali* of the cremation ground.^{[28][29]} She is worshiped by tantrics, the followers of *Tantra*, who believe that one's spiritual discipline practiced in a *smashan* (cremation ground) brings success quickly. *Sarda Devi*, the consort of *Ramakrishna Paramhansa*, worshipped *Smashan Kali* at *Dakshineshwar*.^[32]

6.4 Maternal Kali

Another legend depicts the infant Shiva calming Kali. In this similar story, Kali has defeated her enemies on the battlefield and begun to dance out of control, drunk on the blood of the slain. To calm her down and to protect the stability of the world, Shiva is sent to the battlefield, as an infant, crying aloud. Seeing the child's distress, Kali

ceases dancing to care for the helpless infant. She picks him up, kisses his head, and proceeds to breast feed the infant Shiva.^[33] This legend is notable because it shows Kali in her benevolent, maternal aspect, with which she is not usually identified.

6.5 Mahakali

Main article: Mahakali

Mahakali (Sanskrit: Mahākālī, Devanagari: महाकाली),



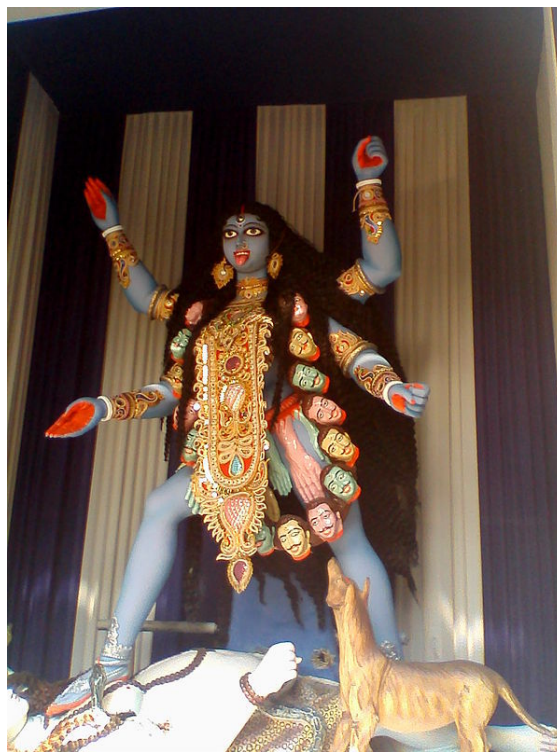
Ekamukhi or "One-Faced" Murti of Mahakali displaying ten hands holding the signifiers of various Devas

literally translated as *Great Kali*, is sometimes considered as a greater form of Kali, identified with the Ultimate reality of Brahman. It can also be used as an honorific of the Goddess Kali,^[34] signifying her greatness by the prefix "Mahā-". Mahakali, in Sanskrit, is etymologically the feminized variant of Mahakala or *Great Time* (which is interpreted also as *Death*), an epithet of the God Shiva in Hinduism. Mahakali is the presiding Goddess of the first episode of the *Devi Mahatmya*. Here she is depicted as Devi in her universal form as Shakti. Here Devi serves as the agent who allows the cosmic order to be restored.

Kali is depicted in the Mahakali form as having ten heads, ten arms, and ten legs. Each of her ten hands is carrying a various implement which vary in different accounts, but each of these represent the power of one of the Devas or Hindu Gods and are often the identifying weapon or ritual item of a given Deva. The implication is that Mahakali subsumes and is responsible for the powers that these deities possess and this is in line with the interpretation that Mahakali is identical with Brahman. While not displaying ten heads, an "ekamukhi" or one headed image may be displayed with ten arms, signifying the same concept: the powers of the various Gods come only through Her grace.

7 Iconography

Kali is portrayed mostly in two forms: the popular four-armed form and the ten-armed Mahakali form. In both



Kali idol in Howrah

of her forms, she is described as being black in color but is most often depicted as blue in popular Indian art. Her eyes are described as red with intoxication, and in absolute rage, her hair is shown disheveled, small fangs sometimes protrude out of her mouth, and her tongue is lolling. She is often shown naked or just wearing a skirt made of human arms and a garland of human heads. She is also accompanied by serpents and a jackal while standing on a seemingly dead Shiva, usually right foot forward to symbolize the more popular Dakshinamarga or right-handed path, as opposed to the more infamous and transgressive Vamamarga or left-handed path.^[35]

In the ten-armed form of Mahakali she is depicted as shining like a blue stone. She has ten faces and ten feet and three eyes. She has ornaments decked on all her limbs. There is no association with Shiva.^[36]

The *Kalika Purana* describes Kali as possessing a soothing dark complexion, as perfectly beautiful, riding a lion, four-armed, holding a sword and blue lotuses, her hair unrestrained, body firm and youthful.^[37]

In spite of her seemingly terrible form, Kali Ma is often considered the kindest and most loving of all the Hindu goddesses, as she is regarded by her devotees as the Mother of the whole Universe. And because of her terrible form, she is also often seen as a great protector. When the Bengali saint Ramakrishna once asked a devotee why one would prefer to worship Mother over him, this devotee rhetorically replied, "Maharaj, when they are in trouble your devotees come running to you. But, where do you run when you are in trouble?"^[38]

According to Ramakrishna, darkness is the Ultimate Mother, or Kali:

My Mother is the principle of consciousness. She is Akhanda Satchidananda; indivisible Reality, Awareness, and Bliss. The night sky between the stars is perfectly black. The waters of the ocean depths are the same; The infinite is always mysteriously dark. This inebriating darkness is my beloved Kali.

-Sri Ramakrishna

This is clear in the works of such contemporary artists as Charles Wish, and Tyeb Mehta, who sometimes take great liberties with the traditional, accepted symbolism, but still demonstrate a true reverence for the Shakta sect.

7.1 Popular form



A Tamil depiction of Kali

Classic depictions of Kali share several features, as follows:

Kali's most common four armed iconographic image

shows each hand carrying variously a sword, a trishul (trident), a severed head and a bowl or skull-cup (kapala) catching the blood of the severed head.

Two of these hands (usually the left) are holding a sword and a severed head. The Sword signifies Divine Knowledge and the Human Head signifies human Ego which must be slain by Divine Knowledge in order to attain Moksha. The other two hands (usually the right) are in the *abhaya* (fearlessness) and *varada* (blessing) mudras, which means her initiated devotees (or anyone worshipping her with a true heart) will be saved as she will guide them here and in the hereafter.^[39]

She has a garland consisting of human heads, variously enumerated at 108 (an auspicious number in Hinduism and the number of countable beads on a Japa Mala or rosary for repetition of Mantras) or 51, which represents Varnamala or the Garland of letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, Devanagari. Hindus believe Sanskrit is a language of dynamism, and each of these letters represents a form of energy, or a form of Kali. Therefore she is generally seen as the mother of language, and all mantras.^[40]

She is often depicted naked which symbolizes her being beyond the covering of Maya since she is pure (nirguna) being-consciousness-bliss and far above prakriti. She is shown as very dark as she is brahman in its supreme un-manifest state. She has no permanent qualities—she will continue to exist even when the universe ends. It is therefore believed that the concepts of color, light, good, bad do not apply to her—she is the pure, un-manifested energy, the *Adi-shakti*.^[41]

7.2 Shiva in Kali iconography

In both these images she is shown standing on the prone, inert or dead body of Shiva. There is a legend for the reason behind her standing on what appears to be Shiva's corpse, which translates as follows:

Once Kali had destroyed all the demons in battle, she began a terrific dance out of the sheer joy of victory. All the worlds or lokas began to tremble and sway under the impact of her dance. So, at the request of all the Gods, Shiva himself asked her to desist from this behavior. However, she was too intoxicated to listen. Hence, Shiva lay like a corpse among the slain demons in order to absorb the shock of the dance into himself. When Kali eventually stepped upon Shiva, she realized she was trampling and hurting her husband and bit her tongue in shame.^[42]

The story described here is a popular folk tale and not described or hinted in any of the puranas. The puranic interpretation is as follows:

Once, Parvati asks Shiva to choose the one form among her 10 forms which he likes most. To her surprise, Shiva reveals that he is most comfortable with her Kali form, in which she is bereft of her jewellery, her human-form, her clothes, her emotions and where she is only raw, chaotic energy, where she is as terrible as time itself and even greater than time.^[43] As Parvati takes the form of Kali, Shiva lies at her feet and requests her to place her foot on his chest, upon his heart.^[44] Once in this form, Shiva requests her to have this place, below her feet in her iconic image which would be worshipped throughout.^[45]

This idea has been explored in the *Devi-Bhagavata Purana* ^[26] and is most popular in the *Shyama Sangeet*, devotional songs to Kali from the 12th to 15th centuries.

The Tantric interpretation of Kali standing on top of her husband is as follows:

The Shiv tattava (Divine Consciousness as Shiva) is inactive, while the Shakti tattava (Divine Energy as Kali) is active. Shiva and Kali represent Brahman, the Absolute pure consciousness which is beyond all names, forms and activities. Kali, on the other hand, represents the potential (and manifested) energy responsible for all names, forms and activities. She is his Shakti, or creative power, and is seen as the substance behind the entire content of all consciousness. She can never exist apart from Shiva or act independently of him, just as Shiva remains a mere corpse without Kali i.e., Shakti, all the matter/energy of the universe, is not distinct from Shiva, or Brahman, but is rather the dynamic power of Brahman.^[46] Hence, Kali is Para Brahman in the feminine and dynamic aspect while Shiva is the male aspect and static. She stands as the absolute basis for all life, energy and beneath her feet lies, Shiva, a metaphor for mass, which cannot retain its form without energy.

While this is an advanced concept in monistic Shaktism, it also agrees with the Nondual Trika philosophy of Kashmir, popularly known as Kashmir Shaivism and associated most famously with Abhinavagupta. There is a colloquial saying that “Shiva without Shakti is Shava” which means that without the power of action (Shakti) that is Mahakali (represented as the short “i” in Devanagari) Shiva (or consciousness itself) is inactive; Shava means corpse in Sanskrit and the play on words is that all Sanskrit consonants are assumed to be followed by a short letter “a” unless otherwise noted. The short letter “i” represents the female power or Shakti that activates Creation. This is often the explanation for why She is stand-

ing on Shiva, who is either Her husband and complement in Shaktism or the Supreme Godhead in Shaivism.

To properly understand this complex Tantric symbolism it is important to remember that the meaning behind Shiva and Kali does not stray from the non-dualistic parlance of Shankara or the Upanisads. According to both the Mahanirvana and Kularnava Tantras, there are two distinct ways of perceiving the same absolute reality. The first is a transcendental plane which is often described as static, yet infinite. It is here that there is no matter, there is no universe and only consciousness exists. This form of reality is known as Shiva, the absolute Sat-Chit-Ananda—existence, knowledge and bliss. The second is an active plane, an immanent plane, the plane of matter, of Maya, i.e., where the illusion of space-time and the appearance of an actual universe does exist. This form of reality is known as Kali or Shakti, and (in its entirety) is still specified as the same Absolute Sat-Chit-Ananda. It is here in this second plane that the universe (as we commonly know it) is experienced and is described by the Tantric seer as the play of Shakti, or God as Mother Kali.^[47]



Kali and Bhairava (the terrible form of Shiva) in Union, 18th century, Nepal

From a Tantric perspective, when one meditates on reality at rest, as absolute pure consciousness (without the activities of creation, preservation or dissolution) one refers

to this as Shiva or Brahman. When one meditates on reality as dynamic and creative, as the Absolute content of pure consciousness (with all the activities of creation, preservation or dissolution) one refers to it as Kali or Shakti. However, in either case the yogini or yogi is interested in one and the same reality—the only difference being in name and fluctuating aspects of appearance. It is this which is generally accepted as the meaning of Kali standing on the chest of Shiva.^[46]

Although there is often controversy surrounding the images of divine copulation, the general consensus is benign and free from any carnal impurities in its substance. In Tantra the human body is a symbol for the microcosm of the universe; therefore sexual process is responsible for the creation of the world. Although theoretically Shiva and Kali (or Shakti) are inseparable, like fire and its power to burn, in the case of creation they are often seen as having separate roles. With Shiva as male and Kali as female it is only by their union that creation may transpire. This reminds us of the *prakṛti* and *purusa* doctrine of *Samkhya* wherein *prakāśa-vimarśa* has no practical value, just as without *prakṛti*, *purusa* is quite inactive. This (once again) stresses the interdependencies of Shiva and Shakti and the vitality of their union.^[48]

Gopi Krishna proposed that Kali standing on the dead Shiva or Shava (Sanskrit for dead body) symbolised the helplessness of a person undergoing the changing process (psychologically and physiologically) in the body conducted by the *Kundalini Shakti*.^[49]

8 Development

In the later traditions, Kali has become inextricably linked with Shiva. The unleashed form of Kali often becomes wild and uncontrollable, and only Shiva is able to tame her just as only Kali can tame Shiva. This is both because she is often a transformed version of one of his consorts and because he is able to match her wildness.

The ancient text of *Kali Kautavam* describes her competition with Shiva in dance, from which the sacred 108 *Karanas* appeared. Shiva won the competition by acting the *urva tandava*, one of the *Karanas*, by raising his feet to his head. Other texts describe Shiva appearing as a crying infant and appealing to her maternal instincts. While Shiva is said to be able to tame her, the iconography often presents her dancing on his fallen body, and there are accounts of the two of them dancing together, and driving each other to such wildness that the world comes close to unravelling.

Shiva's involvement with *Tantra* and Kali's dark nature have led to her becoming an important Tantric figure. To the Tantric worshippers, it was essential to face her Curse, the terror of death, as willingly as they accepted Blessings from her beautiful, nurturing, maternal aspect. For them, wisdom meant learning that no coin has only one side: as

death cannot exist without life, so life cannot exist without death. Kali's role sometimes grew beyond that of a chaos—which could be confronted—to that of one who could bring wisdom, and she is given great metaphysical significance by some Tantric texts. The *Nirvāna-tantra* clearly presents her uncontrolled nature as the Ultimate Reality, claiming that the *trimurti* of Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra arise and disappear from her like bubbles from the sea. Although this is an extreme case, the *Yogini-tantra*, *Kamakhya-tantra* and the *Niruttara-tantra* declare her the *svarupa* (own-being) of the Mahadevi (the great Goddess, who is in this case seen as the combination of all deities).

The final stage of development is the worshipping of Kali as the *Great Mother*, devoid of her usual violence. This practice is a break from the more traditional depictions. The pioneers of this tradition are the 18th century Shakta poets such as *Ramprasad Sen*, who show an awareness of Kali's ambivalent nature. *Ramakrishna*, the 19th century Bengali saint, was also a great devotee of Kali; the western popularity of whom may have contributed to the more modern, equivocal interpretations of this Goddess. Rachel McDermott's work, however, suggests that for the common, modern worshipper, Kali is not seen as fearful, and only those educated in old traditions see her as having a wrathful component. Some credit to the development of *Devi* must also be given to *Samkhya*. Commonly referred to as the *Devi* of delusion, *Mahamaya* or *Durga*, acting in the confines of (but not being bound by) the nature of the three *gunas*, takes three forms: *Maha-Kali*, *Maha-Lakshmi* and *Maha-Saraswati*, being her *tamasika*, *rajas-ika* and *sattva-ika* forms. In this sense, Kali is simply part of a larger whole.

Like Sir John Woodroffe and Georg Feuerstein, many Tantric scholars (as well as sincere practitioners) agree that, no matter how propitious or appalling you describe them, Shiva and *Devi* are simply recognizable symbols for everyday, abstract (yet tangible) concepts such as perception, knowledge, space-time, causation and the process of liberating oneself from the confines of such things. Shiva, symbolizing pure, absolute consciousness, and *Devi*, symbolizing the entire content of that consciousness, are ultimately one and the same—totality incarnate, a micro-macro-cosmic amalgamation of all subjects, all objects and all phenomenal relations between the “two.” Like man and woman who both share many common, human traits yet at the same time they are still different and, therefore, may also be seen as complementary.^[50]

Worshippers prescribe various benign and horrific qualities to *Devi* simply out of practicality. They do this so they may have a variety of symbols to choose from, symbols which they can identify and relate with from the perspective of their own, ever-changing time, place and personal level of unfolding. Just like modern chemists or physicists use a variety of molecular and atomic models to describe what is unperceivable through rudimentary, sensory input, the scientists of *ontology* and *epistemology* must do the same. One of the underlying distinctions of

Tantra, in comparison to other religions, is that it allows the devotee the liberty to choose from a vast array of complementary symbols and rhetoric which suit one's evolving needs and tastes. From an aesthetic standpoint, nothing is *interdict* and nothing is *orthodox*. In this sense, the projection of some of Devi's more gentle qualities onto Kali is not sacrilege and the development of Kali really lies in the practitioner, not the *murthi*.

A *TIME* magazine article of October 27, 1947, used Kali as a symbol and metaphor for the human suffering in British India during its partition that year.^[51] In 1971, *Ms. Magazine* used an image of Kali, her multiple arms juggling modern tasks, as a symbol of modern womanhood on its inaugural issue.

Swami Vivekananda wrote his favorite poem *Kali the Mother* in 1898.

9 In New Age and neopaganism

An academic study of Western Kali enthusiasts noted that, "as shown in the histories of all cross-cultural religious transplants, Kali devotionism in the West must take on its own indigenous forms if it is to adapt to its new environment."^[52] The adoption of Kali by the West has raised accusations of cultural appropriation:

A variety of writers and thinkers have found Kali an exciting figure for reflection and exploration, notably *feminists* and participants in *New Age* spirituality who are attracted to goddess worship. [For them], Kali is a symbol of wholeness and healing, associated especially with repressed female power and sexuality. [However, such interpretations often exhibit] confusion and misrepresentation, stemming from a lack of knowledge of Hindu history among these authors, [who only rarely] draw upon materials written by scholars of the Hindu religious tradition. The majority instead rely chiefly on other popular feminist sources, almost none of which base their interpretations on a close reading of Kali's Indian background. The most important issue arising from this discussion—even more important than the question of 'correct' interpretation—concerns the adoption of other people's religious symbols. It is hard to import the worship of a goddess from another culture: religious associations and connotations have to be learned, imagined or intuited when the deep symbolic meanings embedded in the native culture are not available.^[53]

10 Notes

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12 Further reading

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- Rachel Fell McDermott, *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West* (ISBN 0-520-23240-2)
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- Elizabeth U. Harding (1993) *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* ISBN 0-89254-025-7

13 External links

- Kali at DMOZ

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