

The Sakti of Islam

The term *Sakti* (or *shakti*) means fundamentally the efficient energy of the Supreme Principle envisaged in itself or at a given ontological degree. For the Principle, the metacosmic Order, comprises degrees and modes in virtue of Universal Relativity, *mâyâ*, in which it reverberates.

In the domain of the spiritual life, the same term *Sakti* signifies the celestial energy that allows one to enter into contact with the Divinity, by means of the appropriate rites and on the basis of a traditional system. Essentially, this divine Sakti aids and attracts: She aids as "Mother," and attracts as "Virgin"; Her aid descends upon us from Heaven, whereas Her attraction raises us toward Heaven. Thus the Sakti on the one hand confers a second birth, and on the other offers liberating graces.

In the Absolute, the Sakti is the aspect of Infinitude that coincides with the All-Possibility and gives rise to *mâyâ*, the universal and efficient Sakti. Infinitude is 'Beatitude' or 'Bliss', *ânanda*, which combines in *âtma* with *sat*, 'Being', and with *cit*, 'Consciousness' or 'Knowledge'. We could also say that the pole *ânanda* results from the poles *sat* and *cit*, just as union or experience results from the poles object and subject; it is from this resultant that arises universal Unfolding—the creative *mâyâ* with its innumerable possibilities rendered effective.

As immanent and latent liberating power—or as potentiality of liberation—Sakti is called *kuNDalini*, 'Coiled up', because it is compared to a sleeping serpent; its awakening in the human microcosm is effected thanks to the yogic practices of tantrism. This means, from the standpoint of the nature of things or of universal spirituality, that the cosmic energy which liberates us is part of our very being, notwithstanding the graces that Sakti confers upon us, through mercy, "from without" and but for which there can be no Path. In any case, just as *mahâSakti* or *paraSakti*—the 'supreme productive Energy'—equals the feminine aspect of *brahman* or *âtma*, so the *kuNDalini* gives rise to a divinification that makes it the equal of the creative *mâyâ*.

According to the Qur'ân, the names *Allâh* and *Rahmân* are quasi-equivalent: "Call Him *Allâh* or call Him *Rahmân*, to Him belong the most beautiful names"; which indicates the as it were Saktic character of the name *Rahmân*. The name *Rahîm*, 'Merciful', in a way prolongs the name *Rahmân*, 'Gracious'; it prolongs it in view of the creatures, and in this sense it is taught that Allah, who is *Rahmân* in His Substance, is *Rahîm* in relation to creation. The great Sakti in Islam is the *rahmah*: it is the Goodness, Beauty, and Beatitude of Allah. (Note that in Arabic the word *rahmah* is derived from the root *rahim*, a word signifying 'womb', and this corroborates the interpretation of the *rahmah* as Divine Femininity, thus as *mahâSakti*.)

There are moreover some more specific forms of the Sakti, such as the *sakînah*, the 'appeasement' or the 'sweetness', and the *barakah*, the 'blessing' or the 'irradiation of sanctity', or again the 'protective energy'; all of which constitute so many images of the celestial Femininity, of the beneficent and saving Sakti.

From quite another point of view, it could be said that the Saktic perspective is manifested in Islam by the sacral promotion of sexuality (this is indicated, paradoxically, by the veiling of women, which suggests mystery and sacralization). This character puts Islam consciously and abruptly in opposition to

the exclusively sacrificial and ascetic perspective of Christianity, but brings it nearer to Saktism and Tantrism. (Christianity, through contact with Sufism, also has a quasi-Tantric dimension, namely chivalry or courtly love, characterized by the cult of the "Lady" and by a no less particular devotion for the Virgin.) According to a hadith, "marriage is half the religion"; that is to say—by analogy—that the Sakti is the "prolongation" of the Divine Principle; *mâyâ* "prolongs" *âtma*. To know woman—insists Ibn al-‘Arabî—is to know oneself, and "Whoso knoweth his self, knoweth his Lord." Certainly, the human soul is one, but the sexual polarity splits it, to a certain extent; now knowledge of the Absolute requires the primordial totality of the soul, for which sexual union is in principle the natural and immediate support, although obviously this totality can be realized outside the erotic perspective, as each of the sexes comprises the potentiality of the other; the human soul being one, precisely.

According to Ibn al-‘Arabî, *hiya*, 'She', is a divine Name like *huwa*, 'He'; but it does not follow that the word *huwa* is limited, for God is indivisible, and to say "He" is to say "She". It is however true that the *Dhât*, the divine 'Essence', is a feminine word, which—like the word *Haqîqah*—can refer to the superior aspect of femininity; according to this way of seeing things, which is precisely that of Hindu Saktism, femininity is what surpasses the formal, the finite, the outward; it is synonymous with indetermination, illimitation, mystery, and thus evokes the "Spirit which giveth life" in relation to the "letter which killeth." That is to say that femininity in the superior sense comprises a liquefying, interiorizing, liberating power: it liberates from sterile hardnesses, from the dispersing outwardness of limiting and compressing forms. On the one hand, one can oppose feminine sentimentality to masculine rationality—on the whole and without forgetting the relativity of things—but on the other hand, one also opposes to the reasoning of men the intuition of women; now it is this gift of intuition, in superior women above all, that explains and justifies in large part the mystical promotion of the Feminine; it is consequently in this sense that the *Haqîqah*, esoteric knowledge, may appear as Feminine.

The Prophet said of himself: "The Law (*sharî‘ah*) is what I say; the Path (*Tarîqah*) is what I do; and Knowledge (*Haqîqah*) is what I am." Now this third element, this "being," evokes a mystery of femininity in the sense that "being" transcends "thinking," represented by masculinity inasmuch as it may be conceived as lunar; woman offers happiness, not by her philosophy, but by her being. The crescent moon is so to speak "athirst" for plenitude, which is conceived as solar; thus the feminization of spiritual plenitude is partly explained by the metaphysics of men. (In German as in Arabic and Lithuanian, the word 'sun' is feminine and the word 'moon' is masculine, which evokes the perspective of matriarchy, of feminine priesthood, of women-prophetesses, and obviously of Saktism. Tacitus made much of the respect ancient Germans had for women. And let us recall here the beatific function of the Valkyries, and also this quasi-Tantric sentence from Goethe: "The Eternal Feminine draws us heavenward" [*Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan*]).

But there is more: the feminine character that one can discern in Wisdom (*Hikmah*, *Sophia*) results moreover from the fact that the concrete knowledge of God coincides with the love of God; this love, which to the extent it is sincere implies the virtues, is like the criterion of real knowledge. And it is in this sense that the saving Sakti is identified at once with Love and with Gnosis, with *maHabbah* and with *Haqîqah*.

In his *Fusûs al-Hikam*—in the chapter on Muhammad—Ibn al-‘Arabî develops a doctrine which on the whole is Saktic and Tantric, by taking as his point of departure the famous hadith on women, perfume, and prayer: the "three things" that God "made lovable" to the Prophet. This symbolism signifies above all that for the male, woman occupies the center among the objects of love, whereas all the other things

that are lovable—such as a garden, a piece of music, a glass of wine—are situated on the periphery, which is what the "perfumes" indicate—prayer represents the quintessential element—the relationship with the sovereign Good—which gives meaning to everything else. Now, according to Ibn al-‘Arabî, man, the male, loves woman as God loves man, the human being; for the whole loves its part, and the prototype loves its image; and this implies metaphysically and mystically the inverse movement, proceeding from the creature to the Creator and from woman to man. To say love, is to say desire for union, and union is a relationship of reciprocity, whether it be between the sexes or between the human being and God.

In loving woman, man tends unconsciously toward the Infinite, and for that very reason he has to learn to do so consciously, by interiorizing and sublimizing the immediate object of his love; just as woman, in loving man, tends in reality toward the Absolute, with the same transpersonal virtualities.

In Sufi mysticism the Divine Presence, or God Himself as object of love or of nostalgia, is readily presented as a woman. To quote the *Dîwân* of Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Alawî: "I drew near to Layla's dwelling, when I heard her call. O would that sweet voice never fall silent! She favored me, drew me toward her, and took me into her precinct; then with words most intimate addressed me. She sat by me, then came closer, and raised the garment that veiled her from my gaze; she took me out of myself, amazed me with her beauty . . . She changed me and transfigured me, marked me with her special seal, pressed me to her, granted me a unique station and named me with her name." The "divine dimension" is called Layla, 'Night', for its a priori nonmanifested quality; this makes one think of the dark color of Parvati and of the Black Madonnas in Christian art.

Prophet Muhammad's love of women had the spiritual capacity to find concretely in Woman all the aspects of the Divine Femininity, from immanent Mercy to the infinitude of universal Possibility. The sensory experience that produces in the ordinary man an inflation of the ego, actualizes in the "deified" man an extinction in the Divine Self.

Flowers are loved for their perfume as well as for their beauty; now both these qualities relate to femininity and thus to the Sakti; beauty gladdens the heart and appeases it, and perfume makes one breathe, it evokes the limitlessness and purity of air; the "dilation of the breast," as one would say in Sufi mysticism.

Every virtuous or beautiful woman is in her way a manifestation of Sakti; and since virtue is a moral beauty, it can also be said that beauty is a physical virtue. The merit of this virtue devolves upon its Creator and, by participation, to the creature as well if she is morally and spiritually up to this gift; this is to say that beauty and virtue on the one hand pertain a priori to God, and on the other hand, for that very reason, demand that their spiritual implications be brought out by the creature.

The quality of Sakti in woman goes with the quality of *deva* in man. Each sex participates—or can participate—in the opposite sex. (This is shown graphically by that fundamental symbol that is the Chinese *Yin-Yang*, which in all its applications expresses the principle of compensating reciprocity.) The human quality is one and has priority over the sex, but without in the least abolishing the latter's capacities, functions, duties, and rights.

The character of *deva* and *Sakti* show that the human being is, by definition, a theophany and that one has no choice but to be so, any more than one could choose not to be *Homo sapiens*. The human vocation is to realize that which is man's reason for being: a projection of God and, therefore, a bridge

between earth and Heaven; or a point of view allows God to see Himself starting from an other-than-Himself, even though this other, in the final analysis, can only be Himself, for God is known only through God.



When we write *Sakti* in the Arabic alphabet, the numerical value of the letters totals 730. (*Shîn*=300, *kâf*=20, *tâ'*=400, *yâ'*=10.) It is illuminating to compare Sakti with the other Arabic words that total 730:

***dhakî* 'intelligent'** — this word comes from a root meaning the blazing up of a fire; Sakti is the Power that energizes the Intellect.

***dhalla* 'to be lowly, humble'** — the Feminine is relegated to a lowly status in patriarchal systems.

***khalāqa* 'to create'** — Sakti is the Power that engenders all creation.

***ladhdha* 'to be sweet, pleasant, delightful'** — Sakti brings transcendental delight and enjoyment to Her lovers.

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