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Why Are the Skull Bearers (Kāpālikas) Called Soma?*

Judit Törzsök

1. The Question

The Kāpālikas or Skull Bearers, who formed the third group of the Atimārga next to the Pāśupatas and the Lākulas,1 were perhaps the most notorious Śaiva ascetics in classical India. They were known for their cremation ground rituals and for wandering around with a skull for an alms bowl. The skull (kapāla), their most conspicuous attribute, also provided their name. But the Kāpālikas are also mentioned as “Those of the Soma Doctrine” or Somasiddhāntins2 or the “Soma People with the Skull.”3 These appellations seem to have been of some importance because their initiation names also included or ended in -soma in most cases (e.g. Satyasoma, Devasonā,4 Somibhaṭṭāraka).5 What was this Somasiddhānta, doctrine of Soma or teaching about (the) Soma? In what way

*The first version of this paper was delivered at the Symposium Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions held in honour of Prof. A.G.J.S. Sanderson at the University of Toronto, on the 26th of March, 2015. I am grateful to the organizers for inviting me to this memorable event, in particular to Srílata Raman and Shaman Hatley. I would like to thank all the participants for their questions, comments and criticism, in particular Prof. Sanderson and Prof. Bakker. I am also indebted to Csaba Kiss for comments on and corrections of the final draft. This paper reproduces some aspects of the oral presentation stylistically. Needless to say, it builds on Prof. Sanderson’s important discoveries about the Kāpālikas and is dedicated to him.

1For these distinctions within the Atimārga, the term Atimārga itself and the Kāpālikas as being an Atimārgic group, see Sanderson 1988 and 2006.

2This term figures in the Pauśkaravṛttī of Jñānaprakāśācārya IFI transcript 110 p. 591. They are also called “Knowers of the Doctrine of Soma” (somasiddhāntavedinah in Sarvajñānottāra 14.4 ed. Goodall), which could be corrupt for somasiddhāntavādinah, “Those who Profess the Doctrine of Soma.”

3Or “Skull-Bearers Who are the Soma People,” somajanakāpāli in Jayadrathahāmala 3.35.33c. There may be an attempt here to distinguish the skull-bearing Soma ascetics from other skull-bearers such as those who follow a Bhairava tantra or a Kaula tantra.

4The names of the two Kāpālikas in the Mattavilāsparāhasana.

5The name or title of a Kāpālika in the Kannada inscription of ancient Kollipāke, Andhra, in 1050 CE, cited by Lorenzen 1989: 233–4. This Kāpālika is said to be mukha-kamala-vinirgata-Somasiddhāntābhātripraja-parayanam ‘devoted to the meaning of Somasiddhānta issued from the lotus mouth [of Śiva]’ (Lorenzen’s translation). While this implies that the Somasiddhānta or Soma teaching was ultimately considered Śaiva revelation (if we accept Lorenzen’s suggestion of supplying Śiva), it does not tell us anything about its nature and content, nor about the meaning of the word soma itself. The wording suggests, nevertheless, that it is not Śiva who is called Soma.
was it typical of Kapālikas? Why did -soma figure in their initiation names?

I am afraid I will not be able to answer most of these puzzling questions. However, I propose to look at a few passages about the Kapālikas which may shed more light on what the word or name Soma possibly meant for them.

Now I am not the first to ask this question. An ingenious answer can already be found in commentaries on the Prabodhacandrodaya of Krṣṇamiśra (itself dating from 1041–73): commentators understand soma to mean sa-umā, i.e. “with/accompanied by Umā”, with reference to the fact that a male Kapālika normally had a consort, just as Śiva is accompanied by Umā.⁶

This understanding seems rather forced. Female Kapālikas or tantric consorts are not normally called Umā and this interpretation does not seem to figure at all in earlier sources. It also fails to explain how we are to understand the element -soma in female initiation names (such as Devasomā), in which it cannot mean ‘with Umā/with a female consort’. Nevertheless, the sa-umā explanation of soma highlights an important trait of the Kapālikas, namely that they were exceptional in the Atimārga in that male and female initiates performed rituals together⁷ and they were obviously not required to maintain celibacy, unlike (most probably) the ascetics of the Paśupata and Lakulīya groups.

David Lorenzen has proposed a different hypothesis.⁸ He identified a Kapālika called Kāpalīśarman in a (probably) sixth century inscription from Karnataka. This Kapāliśarman is said to have performed vedic Soma sacrifices. Therefore, Lorenzen suggests that Kapālikas were perhaps dedicated vedic Soma sacrificers.

This is also rather unlikely, for at least two reasons. First, Kapāliśarman may not have been a Kapālika in the strict sense, for his name does not include Soma and does not appear to conform to other kinds of Kapālika names either.⁹ Second, nowhere else is it said that Kapālikas performed vedic Soma sacrifices. However, as we shall see they were particularly interested in other kinds of essences than the vedic Soma, and in a metaphorical sense they perhaps did perform their own kind of Soma ritual.

2. Somaśarman and the Moon Image

We reach firmer ground when we turn to the often-cited Malhar or Junwani copper plate inscription (647 CE, see Bakker 2000 and 2015; Sanderson 2012), which lists a lineage of Kapālikas as identified by Prof. Sanderson. It mentions Somaśarman, and the ‘line of tradition starting with Soma’ (continuing later with Rudrasoma, Tejasoma, Bhūmasoma). It is in Somaśarman’s house that Lakulīsa, founder of the Paśupata order, is said to have been born as an

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⁶For this and some other references to Kapālikas associated with some Soma doctrine, see Lorenzen 1991: 83.
⁷Two well-known literary examples are the Kapālika man with his partner in the Mat-tavilāṣaprahasana and the Kapālika couple in the fifth act of Bhavabhūti’s Mālatimādhava.
⁸Lorenzen (1989: 235) citing K.V. Ramesh Inscriptions of the Western Gangas 70–74, n.19, inscription from Bangalore distr., 6th cent.? (sic!).
⁹Since Kapālīna/Kapālika can denote Śiva/Bhairava himself, the name could simply mean ‘Protected by Śiva/Bhairava’ without being markedly Kapālika.
incarnation (*avatāra*) of Śiva. Lakulīśa was then initiated into or through the *mahāvrata*, perhaps by Somaśarman himself.

... adhunā kāli-kālam āsādyya śrīnā-Lakulīśa-nātho 'vatīrya Somaśarmākhyā-brāhmaṇa-kule jātāh mahāvrata (te?)na ḍīkṣito jagad-indus tenāpī Musalīśas tataḥ Somādi-pāramārya-krameṇa sthānaguru-śrī-Rudrasoma-praśisya-śrī-Tejasoma-śisyebhyah śrīmad-Bhūmasoma-pādebhyaḥ [...]

(te) suppl. ISAACSON; Musalīśas conj. SANDERSON : mugalīśas; sthānaguru conj. MAJUMDAR : sthāne guru

... reaching the present Kali age, the venerable Lord Lakulīśa took up an incarnation and was born in the family of a brahmin called Somaśarman. He was initiated into the Great Observance by him (?) [and became] the Moon of the World. Then by him, Musalīśa [was initiated], then, by the unbroken tradition starting with Soma, the local Master Rudrasoma, his disciple Tejasoma, whose pupil is the venerable Bhūmasoma [...]

Before examining the question of Soma and related questions, I would like to point out some details concerning the word *mahāvrata* or Great Observance. Lakulīśa and others were most probably initiated into the *mahāvrata* (*mahāvrata* and not with/by the *mahāvrata* (*mahāvrata*), for this observance is not known to be used as a rite of initiation in any Śaiva system.10

By the beginning of the seventh century, this certainly meant the imitation of Śiva's expiation for cutting off Brahmā's fifth head. According to this well-known story, Śiva must wander with a skull he uses as an alms bowl, for he has committed the sin of killing a brahmin, i.e. Brahmā. Wandering with a skull for twelve years is in fact the expiatory observance for killing a brahmin as prescribed in the Dharmasūtras,11 but there it is not yet called *mahāvrata*.

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10 This supports the conjecture proposed by ISAACSON, although the reading of *mahāvrata* is of course grammatically acceptable. However, it is also possible that the instrumental *mahāvrata* was understood to stand for the locative, and that no additional instrumental *tena* was meant. In that case, it is not expressed that Somaśarman initiates Lakulīśa, although it may again be implied. BAKKER 2015: 143 opts for the instrumental, but assumes that it only implies the Paśupata affiliation of Lakulīśa.

11 See e.g. *Baudhāyanadharmaśūtra* 2.1.2–3: bhrūṇahā dvādaśa samāḥ kapāli khaṭvāṅgi gar-dharmacākṣayaḥ / kṣetra kṣetraṇaḥ tato kauśika dūrītā / tām āvaseṇā / saptāpōriṇi bhakṣaṇam ca deva kṣetraṇaḥ / tām pravāhin dhūryāt. ‘A man who has killed a learned Brahmin should do the following for twelve years. He should carry a skull and a post from a bed-frame; wear the skin of an ass; reside in the wilderness; and, using the head of a corpse as his flag, get a hut built in a cemetery and live in it. He should maintain himself by begging almsfood from seven houses while proclaiming his crime.’ Translation by OLIVELLE 2000: 241. See *Gautamadharmaśūtra* 22.4: khaṭvāṅga/kapālapānir vā dvādaśa samāvatvarān brahma-kṣetra bhakṣaṇaḥ / kṣetram pravīṣet / kṣetram pravīṣet. ‘Or else, for twelve years he should live a chaste life and, carrying the post from a bed-frame and a skull, enter a village only to beg for food while proclaiming his crime.’ Translation by OLIVELLE 2000: 175, who explains in the notes to this passage that *khaṭvāṅga* must mean skull-staff (a staff topped with a skull) rather than the post of a bed-frame. See also *Yājñavalkyasya* 3.243: śrīnākapāli dhwajavān bhikṣāśi karma vedayan / brahmahā dvādaśābdāni mitabhuk śuddhim āpravayāt.
Although most attestations of the mythological story come from late puranic sources, the myth already figures in the (original) Skandapurāṇa (chapters 5–7), dated around the end of the sixth and beginning of the seventh century.

Moreover, the Kāpālikā Satyasoma in the Mattavilāśaprahasana (600–625 CE) mentions that it was thanks to the practice of the mahāvrata that his Lord bearing the crescent moon on his head was purified of his sin, which he had committed by cutting Brahmā’s head. The verse clearly identifies Śiva’s mahāvrata as an expiation of the brahmin killer and it also shows that Kāpālikas were practising the mahāvrata in imitation of Śiva. In fact, the Skandapurāṇa (6.5–6) also seems to associate this observance with sanguinary practices such as those of the Kāpālikas. For, when Śiva-Nilalohita starts looking for suitable alms, Viṣṇu tries to fill his kapāla bowl with his own blood—a very odd, rather Kāpālikā, notion of what alms should consist of.

Now turning back to the question of the Soma lineage: Lakulīṣa, whether he was indeed initiated by Somaśarman or not, is said to have been born in Somaśarman’s house. According to the inscription, the Kāpālikas belong to the spiritual lineage starting with Soma, and their initiation names therefore seem to be derived from the founder’s name. The name Soma can naturally be understood as a short form of Somaśarman. Thus, Kāpālikas are the Soma people because they follow the tradition started by Somaśarman.

Our investigation could stop here. For the name Soma seems to be sufficiently explained in this way. However, several things remain unexplained. It is not clear whether Somaśarman was a historical person. If he did exist, it still remains uncertain whether he was indeed the founder of the Kāpālika movement or whether Kāpālikas claimed retrospectively that he was their founder. Thus, we cannot take it for granted that the Soma name indeed comes from him.

For this reason, I suggest we look at some other details more closely. Lakulīṣa, after his initiation in Somaśarman’s house, is called the Moon of the Word jagadindu in the inscription. There are at least three interpretations of jagadindu:

1. A natural understanding of the moon as having cool rays. ‘Moon [whose cooling rays have calmed the fever] of the world’ (trsl. SANDERSON Śaivism and Brahmanism Handouts, 2012)

2. Moon on Earth, i.e. having a white body (sitāṅga) because of the ash-bath. BAKKER 2000 and 2015: 153. This understanding is backed up by the description of Lakulīṣa in the Skandapurāṇa as being white-bodied when covered with ashes. The version related replaces the figure of Śiva with one of his ectypes, Nilalohita. For this narrative device, which is used here to distance the supreme deity from such sanguinary practices, see GRANOFF 2006.

3. āstāṁya prayato mahāvrataṁ idam bālenduṣṭādāmāṇiḥ / svāmī no mumuce pitāmahāśīrśāchedodhavād enasaḥ 17ab. It must also be noted that the Skandapurāṇa (180.10) calls the mere ash-bath a/the great observance (mahāvrata). It also says that Somaśarman with his family received Lakulīṣa’s grace when he visited their house and that they were given yogasiddhi (167.125ff). The Skandapurāṇa appears to represent an earlier(?)/pāśupata version of the story. (Cf. also BAKKER 2015: 133ff.) BAKKER 2015: 143–4 (note 442) also proposes that the Soma name suggests a parallel with the Soma-vanśa dynastic affiliation of Mahāśīvagupta. However, the
3. Without going against either of these interpretations, of which both could well be intended, I propose that, in addition, the expression jagadindu may also allude to an indirect Kāpālikā affiliation if we take it to be a syn. of *Jagatsoma, suggestive of a Kāpālikā initiation name. This may imply two things. First, it is possible that the Kāpālikas derive their name Soma from Lakulīša who is considered the Moon of the World. Second, the sequence of events as presented in the inscription may also suggest that Lakulīša himself came to be called the Moon of the World (possibly representing an initiation name) because of Somasārman. Whatever is the case, the moon image is emphatically present in the name or epithet of both founders as well as in the initiation name of Kāpālikas.

Now naming Lakulīša the ‘Moon,’ in the manner of a Kāpālikā, may be more than a coincidence. It may well be understood as an attempt to present Lakulīša as a true Kāpālikā, perhaps via his association with another ‘Moon person,’ Somasārman. Or, from another point of view, by presenting Lakulīša as a Kāpālikā initiate, the text may suggest the preeminence of the Kāpālikas over the other two Atimārga groups, the Pāśupatas and the Lākulas.

But no matter how we understand the hidden agenda of the above inscription (if there is one), it is undeniable that the Kāpālikas’ initiation name ending in -soma is understood to recall both their founder(s)’ name and the image of the moon.

3. The Moon and the Nectar of Immortality (amṛta) in the Skull(s)

The moon also forms an important part of Pāśupata yogic practices. As we learn from the Skandapurāṇa (179.28ff. pointed out by Bakker 2015: 141), their ‘accomplishment in yoga’ (yogasiddhi) comes about through a withdrawal of the senses until the practitioner can see a moon disc (somamāṇḍala) in his heart. From the light inside his body, yogic powers, omniscience and the like are produced. They also include being safe from diseases (vyādhyo nāviśanty enam) and having a divine body (divyam vapuh).

Speaking of the moon and practices related to its visualization, the Kāpālikas appear to share the pan-Indian idea that it also contains the nectar of immortality. In one passage of Bhavabhūti’s Mālatīmādhava (5.23) an invocation is addressed to the fierce goddess, Cāmunḍa, which describes her violent tāṇḍava dance. The verse is uttered by the two Kāpālikas in the cremation ground. During this dance, the goddess inadvertently slashes the moon, from which the amṛta flows down and fills her garland of skulls. The skulls are thus resurrected and start emitting a loud and harsh laughter.

Soma name figures elsewhere, in seventh century South India (in the names of Kāpālikas of the Mattavilāśaprahasana), where no such parallel can be assumed, therefore such implications seem unlikely.

This idea perhaps also contributed to the spread of various visualization practices centered around the image of the moon.
This image is not particularly significant in itself. However, it seems that Kāpālikas were particularly interested in a special sort of ambrosia. In their quest for the *amṛta*, they probably joined a large group of ascetics or yogins of the period who, in various ways and through different practices, were all searching for the same magic essence.\(^\text{17}\) So what was exactly the *amṛta* of the Kāpālikas and how did they expect to find or to produce it?

4. What is the Kāpālikas’ Nectar (*amṛta/soma*)?

We can turn again to the Kāpālikas of the Mālatīmādhava. At one point in the story (5.2), the female practitioner mentions that she can extract the so-called ‘five nectars’ (*pañcāmṛta*), which are five vital essences of the human body. They have a powerful, invigorating effect (as one would expect from such a nectar), so much so that the female Kāpālika can fly a great distance in a few seconds.

The extraction of the five nectars (*pañcāmṛtākṛṣṇa*), as well as other, Kāpālika-type cremation ground practices, also figure in the *Brahmayāmala*, as Hatley 2007: 143ff points out. The five substances are not listed in a systematic way, but they usually seem to include these four: semen (*śukra*), blood (*rākta*), fat/marrow (*medas*) and *sneha* (see also Tāntrikabhidhānakośa III).

Other sources also describe Kāpālikas as making use of various parts of the human body. Kāpālikas use human flesh (*mahāmāmsa*), brain (*maṣṭikṣa*), intestines (*antra*), fat (*vāsā*) and blood (*kīlāla*) in ritual, and drink alcohol (*sura*), according to Prabodhacandrodaya 3.13.

In addition to the extraction of the five nectars, the *Brahmayāmala* also includes rituals which make particular use of human body parts and are to be performed in the cremation ground. A notable series of chapters prescribing such rites forms a small cluster around chapter 46. Since the practices prescribed seem very close to what Kāpālika rituals were supposed to be, these chapters could well be adaptations or assimilations of originally Kāpālika rituals,\(^\text{18}\) although this remains a hypothesis in the absence of any surviving Kāpālika scriptures. It is also notable that the *Brahmayāmala* describes possession (*āvesa*) by Bhairava, stating that through possession one obtains Bhairavahood; and possession was, according to numerous Śaiva sources about the subject, the way in which Kāpālikas claimed to attain final liberation.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) Obtaining the nectar of immortality and, thanks to it, an immortal physical body is the main goal of the hathayogic and Nath yogic traditions, see Mallinson 2007 and Ondračka 2007.

\(^{18}\) For more arguments, see Törzsök 2011 and 2015.

\(^{19}\) On this, see e.g. Sanderson 2009:133 n. 311.
Now in chapter 46 of the *Brahmayāmala*, similarly to the Kapālikas, the practitioner uses human flesh, hair (*keśa*), bones (*asthi*), body fluids (*picu*), particularly blood (*rakta*) and intestines (*antra*); moreover, he offers and drinks alcohol (*madira*).

It is also in this chapter that the *āmṛta* is in the focus of the ritual again. For the main subject here is *āmrṭamanthāna*, the churning and drinking of the *āmṛta*. Pots are made of clay obtained in the cremation ground, the sacrificial pavilion is constructed of bones, a corpse is placed underneath a cauldron. The Śādhaka is required to churn a mixture including *mahāpicu* (sexual fluids? or various human fluids?) with a piece of bone as churning stick, with a rope made of human hair, intestines and skin(?). The cauldron is identified with Aghori and the churning stick with Bhairava. The cosmic churning of the gods is enacted by the Śādhaka, and the same miraculous objects appear (the Kaustubha gem etc) as during the mythological churning. Then the terrifying goddess, Caṇḍikā, is honoured. She appears in the form of Aghori, offering the Śādhaka a boon. The practitioner chooses to drink Aghori’s milk from her breasts. The chapter ends by saying that having produced the *āmṛta* and having drunk left and right (probably meaning having drunk Aghori’s milk from both breasts), one becomes omniscient, Bhairava himself. Although Aghori’s milk and the *āmṛta* that the Śādhaka prespares are not identified, they could well be the same thing.

What transpires from this chapter is that the preparation of the nectar of

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20The following working edition is based on Shaman Hatley’s transcription. Only the relevant verses are given here.

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mahāpicususampūrṇaṁ kuryāṁ sthāim śavopari /44/
āgatyasya tu na lokam mahā-masti śavopari /
cēṣa manthānako devi asmin tantrre prāṣasyate /45/
keśeśu netraṁ kuryāṁ antraṁ karttr-vimāritaih / (kṛttṛ in the sense of kṛttṛ?)
nvahastam susampūrṇaṁ vidyāmālāyojitam /46/
śuśuddhamahāhāgaṇaṁ rajasampātaśobhitaṁ /
mahāsthāṁ tu pārśve tu evaṁ kṛtyā mahātape /47/
Aghoryā sthāirāpāṁ tu dhyāyāṁ mantri saśobhanām /
saktīthāṁ saktirāpāṁ ca dhyāyāṁ somāntake sthitiṁ /48/
Manthānabhairavan ca devaṁ ādhasphāṭikanirmalam /
sahasrabhumābhājaṁ rajasam pātāsobhitaṁ /
Aṣṭāḥastam susam. pūrṇ. am. vidyāmālāyojitam /49/
....
mahāmanthāna kuryāṁ yam sthītvā tu Śiva bhavet /61/
... namaskṛtvāvūrāṁ divyāṁ tataḥ sādhanam ārābhet /62/
... evaṁ mālaṁ tu tāṁ dīptam dhyātvā manthānānandiram /
netraṁ ca tathāvaseha cintayet Vāsakirūṇaṁ /66/
kṣaṭiśaṁ sthārapāyāṁ sthāā śāṁ bhairavarūpyaṁ /
pajayītvā tu manthānāṁ prakṣipet sthātimāḥyataṁ /67/
...
kṣaṇamātrāṁ maṁhaṁ yāvoc chāsaṅkotiṣṭhate priye /92/
Kauśubhaṁ ca tato tiṣṭhe vinnāṇaṁ Puspaṅaṁ tathaḥ /
evam śāṁyāṁ siddhāṁ pūrvāstṛṣeṇa bhāṣitaṁ /93/
uttīṣṭheta mahābhāge śataṣaḥ [/1]iha sahaṣārṣaḥ / (mahābhāga MS)
... kṣaṇamātrāṁ maṁhaṁ yāva namaskṛtvā tu Caṇḍikāṁ /
tattīṣṭheta vai devi Aghorī siddhidāyiskā /107/
...
immortality was also an important way in which one could obtain Bhairavahood. Moreover, it involved worship of a fearsome goddess, Candikā or Aghori, which again recalls the Kāpālikas in the Malatīnādīhava, who worship Cāmuṇḍā.

But was the bodily amṛta the only nectar the Kāpālikas collected and consumed?

5. Alcohol as the Nectar of Immortality

The Kāpālikas were also known for their use of alcohol in ritual. The Prabodha-candrodaya (3.20 and prose) presents a Kāpālika rite of initiation, in the course of which the Kāpālika offers alcohol to the initiands and calls it amṛta, for, once again, it releases someone from the bondages of this word and of the state of being a bound soul. In this sense, amṛta is not just used as a simple metaphor to denote a precious or delicious liquid. It is a real nectar of immortality, for it actually makes one immortal by bestowing final release, mokṣa.21

6. The Drinking of Alcohol Compared to the Soma Sacrifice

In a more satirical way, the Kāpālikas’ alcohol is also treated as their equivalent of the vedic Soma. The Kāpālika in the Mattavilāsahasana cries out as follows, when he sees a pub:

My darling, look. This pub resembles the vedic sacrificial ground. For its sign post could be the sacrificial pillar, then alcohol is the Soma, drunkards are the sacrificial priests, the wine glasses are the special cups for drinking Soma, the roasted meat and other appetizers are the fire oblations, the drunken babblings are the sacrificial formulae, the songs are the Śaṃan hymns, the pitchers are the sacrificial ladles, thirst is the fire and the owner of the pub is the commander of the sacrifice.22
Nobody would assume from this passage that the Kāpālikas were Soma sacrificers—the comic effect intended is quite evident. It is nevertheless interesting that once again, the Kāpālikas are presented as having a special nectar of their own, whether it is called amṛta or Soma, and that the ritual significance of this nectar may be, it seems, comparable to that of Soma in vedic ritual.

7. Inventors of a New Nectar (soma/amṛta)? Or Simply the Best?

From the passages looked at here, no firm conclusion can be drawn as to why the Kāpālikas included the word Soma in their initiation names and what exactly they meant by the teaching of or about Soma. The most evident reason is found in the Junwani copper plate inscription, which associates the Soma name with the name of their alleged founder, Somaśarman. It is, nevertheless, possible that Kāpālikas identified Somaśarman as their founder only retrospectively and that this derivation of Soma from Somaśarman is secondary.

Conveniently, Soma as a proper name is also one of Śiva’s names, although it does not necessarily imply that he is accompanied by Umā (sa-umā). Soma is probably used metaphorically for Śiva, just as it is used for other gods such as Viṣṇu. In any case, somasiddhānta then could also simply mean Śiva’s doctrine’. However, as a rather generic appellation of the god’s teaching, it seems unlikely to designate the Kāpālika doctrine in particular.

Soma, meaning moon and more particularly, the nectar of immortality the moon is supposed to contain, is another possible explanation. Various kinds of nectar (amṛta/Soma), whether it is alcohol or the essences of the human body, appear to be in the focus of attention in Kāpālika rituals. In particular the vital essences were considered to have an invigorating effect that provided the Kāpālikas with magic power they were apparently famous for. Concoctions of the vital essences were probably thought to bestow omniscience and Bhairavahood. Whether it was really this nectar or these nectars that were at the origin of the name Soma is impossible to tell; but whatever is the case, the bodily nectar of the vital essences was most probably a crucial element of Kāpālika doctrine in particular.

Given this rather wide range of possibilities, the Kāpālikas themselves may have intended to use the natural polysemy of the word Soma, although it is less likely that such polysemy was intended from the very beginning.

Finally, to add one more possible interpretation: Soma at the end of a compound can also mean ‘the chief, the best’. In this sense, one could understand the Kāpālika names to imply that they considered themselves simply the best Śaivas around.

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23This may not be sufficient to explain what was meant by their ‘doctrine of/about Soma,’ but such ‘doctrine’ was not necessarily some abstract theory. The word siddhānta may be used in the sense of ‘teaching’ rather than ‘philosophy’ or ‘philosophical conclusion’.
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