By Yogi Maheśvara
The Pious System
A Yogic Tool

The Pilous System: a Yogic *Tool*

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"For as long as he is dedicated to his vow, the razor will not go over his head; until the fulfillment of the days during which he devoted himself to the Divine, he will become saint and will allow his hair to grow freely.[1] *"*

"There are many reasons for a yogi to let his hair grow, let me think about it... Yes, there are many reasons... Let's just forget about it, shall we, talking about them would be misleading.[2] *"*

"Your hair is not there by mistake. It has a definite purpose, which saints will discover and other men will laugh at.[3] *"*

Why do (some) yogis wear beard and long hair[4]? More generally, why do many practitioners of different traditions let their hair grow?

This particular style is often perceived as a sign of renunciation of mundane life and its conventions[5]. It has a symbolic aspect, of belonging to a group, notably among Saïvites

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[1] La Bible, Nombres, VI-5.

[2] Drubwang Konchok Norbu Rinpoche, *The Yogis of Tibet*, Jeffrey M. Pill, 2002, Jehm Films, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFSjxc2Vg14

[3] Yogi Bhajan.

[4] Similarly, some *yoginis* do not cut or shave their hair. In this article, I refer to *sadhakas* (male practitioners) because I am a man and I describe observations made on a masculine body. I think we can extrapolate these observations to women, at least concerning head hair, since bearded women are rare.

[5] About the social meaning of hair in India, see the works of indologist Patrick Olivelle, notably *Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions*, in: A. Hiltebeitel & B.D. Miller, Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures, Albany, 1998, 11–49.

yogis who worship a hairy Divinity. Wearing hair and beard thus constitute a whole yogic practice.

Sri Sri Sri Satchidananda yogi, around the age of 50, vowed to not cut his hair and beard, and to stop talking. He is called the silent Yogi of Madras. A couple of friends had the chance to have him as a master and to welcome him in Brittany. They told me that the mass of hair he was carrying was rather disabling, notably for the practice of *asanas*, due to its weight and volume. This gives a dimension of *tapasya*[6] to the wearing of hair, and therefore a yogic dimension.

Beyond these aspects, how can hair be useful in the practice of yoga, in particular on the *technical*, *pranic* level? In this paper, I discuss some elements related to this question, by sharing the results of some yogic experiences that have invited themselves into my body throughout the past years and that I have had the benediction to witness[7].

Before getting into the heart of the matter, I would like to precise that there exist at least as many *sadhakas* who, on the contrary, shave completely, certainly for reasons linked to the *sadhana*, notably, as for the hairy, to renunciation and erasing of the ego. Quite baffling that within one same tradition, some shave and others do not touch anything! For example, among Tibetan Buddhists, most monks and nuns shave, but some let it all grow, as for the *Rinpoche* whom I cited before, or the *Ngagpa*, non-monastic practitioners who receive an initiation via their hair, which then becomes the dwelling of the *Dakinis*.

I only speak confidently about what I know through *direct* experience: for me, hair and beard invited themselves as *yogic* tools; and consequently, I can only speak of this option (at least for now; if one day my *sadhana* requires me to experience the "hairless" version, I will then be able to speak about it). It is uncontestable that the "shaved" option has practical advantages since the maintenance of a beard and long hair, even entangled, increases (not necessarily linearly) with the size of said beard and hair. Not to mention the supplementary care necessary when little bugs offer us their *darshan* by establishing a residence in our pilous system...

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[6] *Tapasya*, which can be translated as "kindling the internal fire", refers to a set of rather extreme *sadhanas* which may have served as fertile ground for the development of *hatha yoga* (see the works of James Mallinson on this topic). For example, some *tapesvaris* keep an arm up in the air, maybe even both arms, for a period of 12 years or for life; some remain standing on one foot for similar periods. See the recent movie that focuses on *tapesvaris*: "Naga, the Eternal Yogi".

[7] I would like to express gratitude, devotion and surrender to the source of these teachings; as well as to the masters, physical and non-physical, for the relay.

As a child, I desired to wear long hair, which my family did not allow. It is thus during adolescence that I started to wear long hair almost all the time, except for when I would cut them; quite rarely. Never very long, at most down to the shoulders, because they did not grow further, despite the years. As I was a reggae enthusiast, I also tried to let them entangle, without success. As for my beard, it did not grow beyond 2-3 centimeters, very slowly.

The last time I cut my hair goes back to the end of 2009, before going to Chile, during this peculiar trip in which I began to awaken[8]. Following this cut, the hair did not grow one bit for more than two and a half years, and I was loosing a lot of them.

It is during summer 2012 that my hair "woke up". During this period, a singular dream comes to me[9]: I dream that I wake up in the morning, pass a hand through my hair, but it is locked, knots begin to form. Some days, maybe some weeks later, this happens in "real" life: I pass my hand through my hair upon waking up and note that they are beginning to entangle. I then remember my dream and decide to let it happen. Against all odds, my hair begins to grow again and naturally entangle. I let it happen, guided by the memory of this dream.

Once these hairs, grouped in *jatas*[10] reach a length of a few centimeters, I quickly notice that hairs constitute *nadis*. I have been able to observe[11] that the more the locks of hair entangle and thicken, the more *prana* goes through them, in the same way that we can make more electricity go through a large section cable. If I take a lock of hairs between my fingers, I can clearly feel that this lock conducts *prana* between my hand and my cranium. The circuit is closed, *prana* circulates better; and it results in more harmonious global circulation.

After growing for two years, the *jatas* are long enough to be placed in a bun on top of the skull. I then notice that it fosters an ascending flow of energy. The bun "communicates" with *moola bandha*, *khecari*, *shambavi* and defines a new anchor point. I thus understand why, two years before, my hair began to grow and entangle: a *yogic tool* was beginning to

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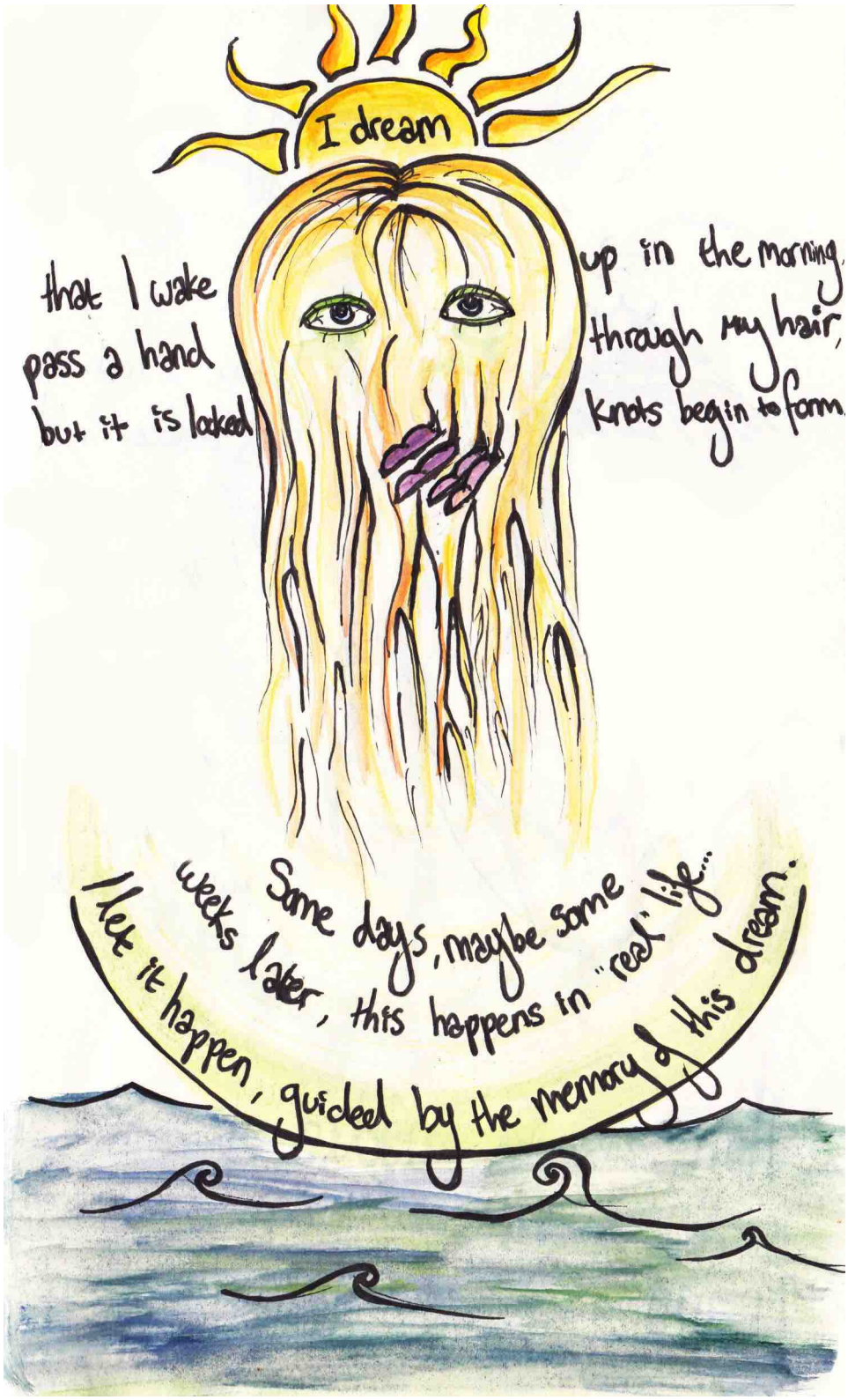
[8]See my booklet on *Khecari Mudra*.

[9]Singular in the sense that the flavor was different from my usual dreams.

[10]In Sanskrit, *jata* designates the locks of matted hairs, which we often call *dreadlocks*. *Jatadhara*, the wielder of jatas, is in fact one of the names of Lord *Śiva*. I do not use the correct transliteration of the sanskrit terms, since I do not have the adapted numeric tool for the moment.

[11]I have a particularly developed sensitivity to *prana*; it is in fact the spontaneous awakening of this feeling in my body that brought me to yoga. Among the five senses, vision and touch are the ones at play, which means that I see (even with eyes closed, I refer to the sense of vision as it is turns inwards) and touch (without necessarily using my physical hands) *prana*. I discuss this in my booklet on *Khecari Mudra*.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set itself up! Henceforth, the bun "pulls" *sushumna nadi* upwards and increases the feeling on the level of *sahasrara chakra*. It so happens that it is precisely during this period that the access to *sahasrara chakra* began to operate in my body[12]. Overall, with long hair arranged in a bun, the *aura* is more stable and powerful, the global circulation of *prana* is more harmonious. The consequences of the improvement in the circulation of energy, not only in the body but also between the body and its environment (which has a tendency to diminish the apparent barriers between "this body" and the rest) are the following: the state of awareness follows the tendency to get a little closer to "What I Am"; the receptivity to teachings increases[13]; the mind is more settled; the meditative/contemplative states are closer; the sensitivity to *prana* increases, *bhakti* is kindled...

Four years later, in the summer of 2016, it is my beard's turn to begin to grow; in a rather aggressive way, the hairs of the beard grow like never before. I cut it once, as a matter of social convention, but I very quickly let it happen and explore the *pranic* aspect of beard hairs. It is clear: they also make up *nadis*. Less than a year later, this beard entangles and I end up with a beard *jata*. As for the hair, I notice that the amount of *prana* that goes through a tangled beard is greater than for an untangled beard. I observe that this *jata* tends to set up a descending flow of energy, which responds to the already present ascending flow along the spine. The combined effect is to work on verticality, the spine straightens up[14]. In short, as for the hair, this beard is also a *yogic tool* that set itself up at the moment I needed it; or maybe would it be more correct to say that these tools set themselves up when my sensitivity was sufficiently developed to appreciate them to their true measure? Right away, the image of Egyptian pharaohs with their hairpiece beards comes to my mind. Pharaohs wore it during ceremonies, it was a symbol of power and a mark of divine affiliation. That being said, it seems that they would shave their whole bodies, hair being a symbol of animality and impurity. In hieroglyphic writing, the determinative of the divine is written as a man sat down wearing the hairpiece beard.

This beard *jata* has interesting pranic effects for the practice. Generally, these effects go in the direction and accord themselves with the effects I have described for hair: global energy circulation is more harmonious, with all that follows and that I have already discussed for head hair.

An example: If I place my hands in *anjali mudra*, it sets up a *pranic* circulation endowed

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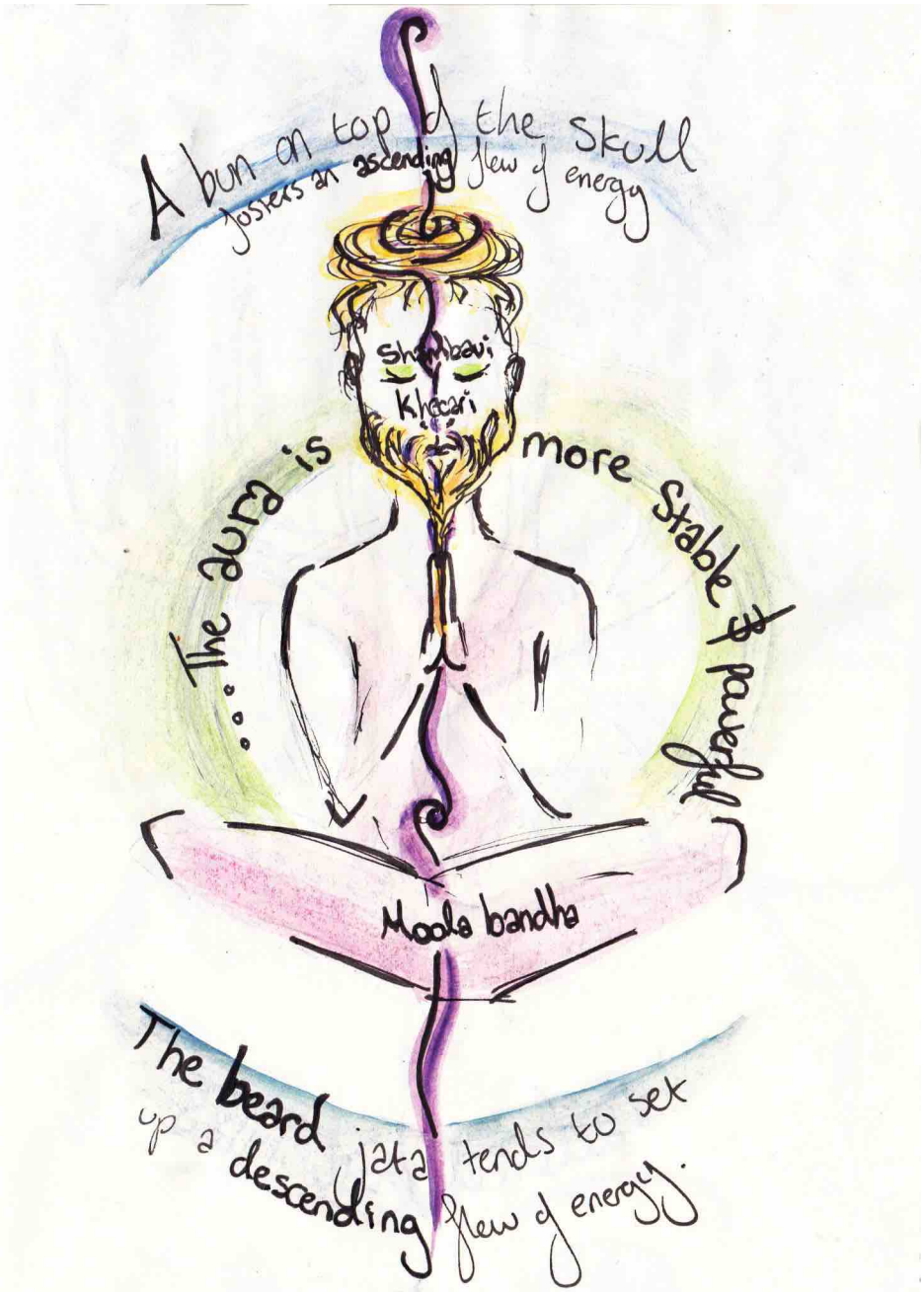
[12]See my booklet on *Khecari Mudra*.

[13]Here I refer to the teachings contacted without the intermediary of a physical master.

[14]In the beginning, when some were criticizing the esthetic of this beard *jata*, I replied that it allowed me to hold myself more upright! I had back problems for a long time, and as a child, I had (a little) hunchback.



'If I add the beard jata between my hands, the circulation is modified: to the initial circulation are added other circulations, which result in a more global circulation endowed with greater intensity.'

with a certain intensity. If I add the beard *jata* between my hands, the circulation is modified: to the initial circulation are added other circulations, which results in a more global circulation and endowed with greater intensity. In other terms, including the beard allows for more *prana* to circulate, the global effect on the *aura* is more powerful than without the beard. It is at the same time the quantity and the quality of the *prana* that are enhanced. I have noticed that taking my beard between the palms of my hands allows me to keep my balance more easily in *virancyasana* (Fig. 1): quite simply, a better circulation of *prana* in the body notably signifies that the spine straightens up: the top of the skull pulls towards the sky, and from the base, a *pranic* anchor establishes itself... we end up in a full "yogic combo", the physical body is "held" by *prana*, the balance sets itself up with less effort and more stability.

I sometimes, since the length of my beard allows it, hold the single *jata* between the thumb and index finger of my left hand, benefitting of the associated *pranic* effects. I call this the *beard mudra*, which to me seems unknown in yoga manuals[15]. Interestingly enough, I have come across an indication on this particular *mudra*, engraved on a temple wall. During a family pilgrimage in India, we ended up, for visa reasons, staying for ten days around the temples of Angkor, in Cambodia. Magnificent and impressive "profligacy of pebbles", this place of several hundred square kilometers preserves a powerful vibration in spite of massive tourism, essentially laypeople. One day, my younger son exclaims: "Here, look, he is holding a trident in his hand". Indeed, in a maze of dozens, perhaps hundreds of meters of mural engravings, there is a character holding a trident in his right hand (Fig. 1).[16]

What does this character hold in his left hand? His beard!

A peculiarity of the *jatas* is that sometimes, they get entangled with each other, which means that several *jatas* merge to form a larger one. I have a tendency to thing that if *jatas* merge, I should let it happen: it is the flow of *prana* that takes care of the architecture of the *jatas*, shaping them to be most adapted for us; tailored antennas. Moreover, preventing *jatas* from fusing would require me to spend extra time in the bathroom, maybe even to frequent salons specialized in *jatas*. Finally, a fusion is sometimes so sudden that once I become aware of it, it is already too late to attempt to stop the process simply and rapidly.

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[15] I sometimes, not often, contact yogic techniques for which there does not seem to exist refences in yoga manuals, and that teachers do not know about, at least for those I know. Nonetheless I believe there is nothing to invent, to discover, and that these techniques have existed for millenia and that scriptural references probably exist.

[16] Also see a little video of this engraving and its surroundings : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHewpwXHTIA

Fig. 1.— *Left:* Engraving on a wall of Angkor Wat, Cambodia : this character is holding a trident in his right hand, and his beard in his left hand. *Middle:* Detail on the beard. *Right: virancyasana*, using the *beard mudra* to root the posture.

I have known wielders of *jatas* who do the necessary so that their *jatas* do not merge. For others, they naturally do not fuse. Conversely, I have met people who had only one single enormous *jata* on their head[17]. A Danish friend told to me that he cut his hair because his *jatas* became so thick that they could no longer dry at the center and were thus rotting, which says a lot about the Danish climate...

Beyond my intuition (and lazyness) that pushes me to confide the management of *jatas* to *prana*, my profession as an astrophysicist[18] incites me to evoke a parallel with natural processes which occur on the scale of the Universe. In the context of the hierarchic growth model of structures of the Universe, small structures are the first to form (galaxies) and which, through time, fuse and form large structures (galaxy groups and clusters). If we let it evolve for long enough, all the small halos of matter end up fusing into one single halo. We represent the evolution of these processes with a merger tree, a diagram which resembles the evolution of *jatas* (Fig. 2). It has happened to me during a meeting to illustrate this idea of merger tree for students by displaying a *jata*...

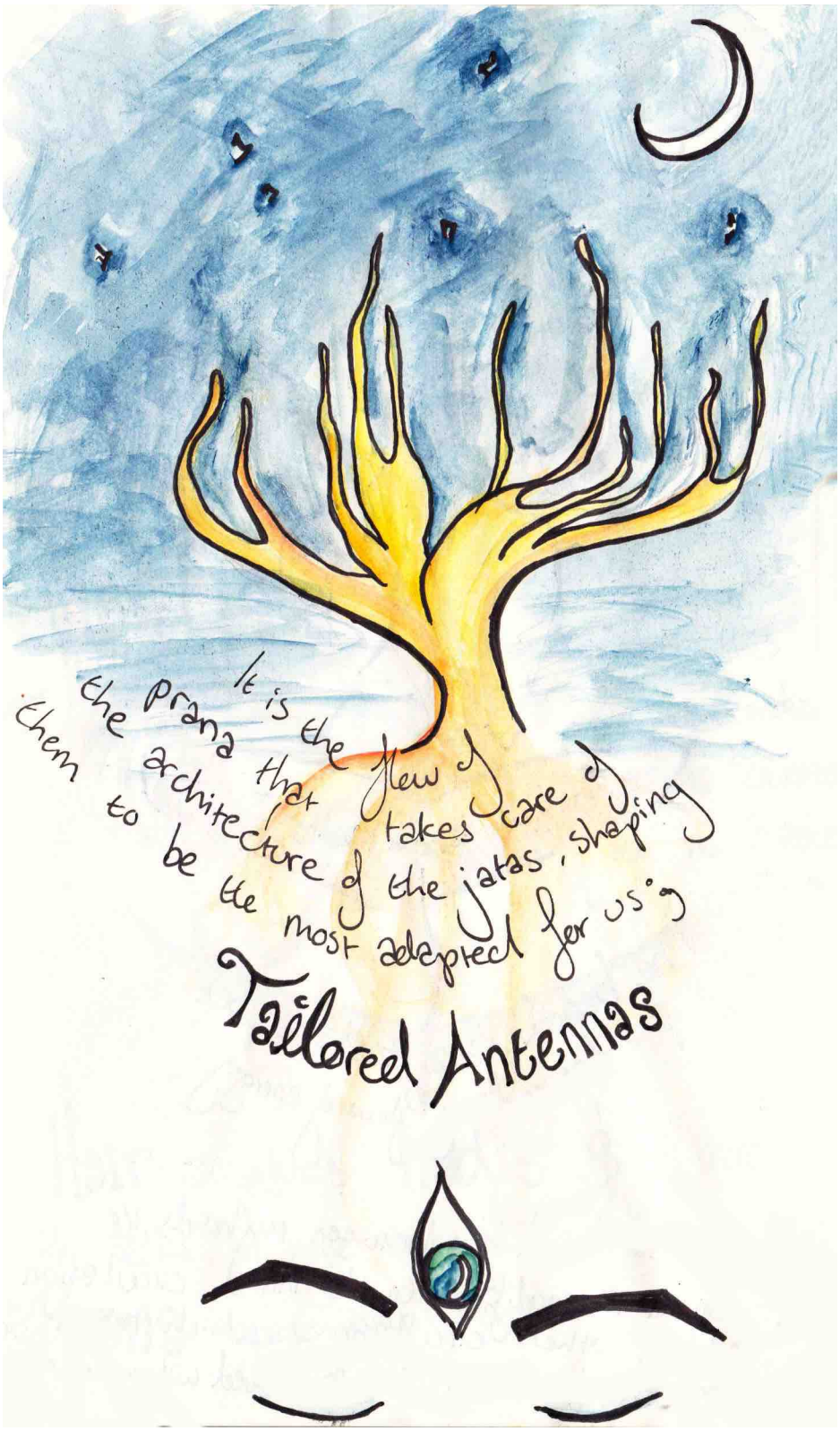
Here is my small contribution to this tousling topic. I have not had the occasion to share a lot about these hair stories with other yogis and yoginis, in particular on the *pranic*

[17]Notably in the South of India, one person had a single *jata* positioned in a way that it protected his face from the Sun!

[18]See the article: "*The Physics of Galaxy Clusters*", forthcoming.

Fig. 2.— *Left:* Representation of a *merger tree* illustrating the growth of a halo of (dark!) matter resulting from the merging of halos throughout cosmic time (represented by the vertical arrow). From Lacey & Cole, 1993, MNRAS, 262, 627. To give an idea of the scales at play, the period of time comprised between the two horizontal dotted lines is of several (earth) billion years. The size of the galaxy cluster estimated at time t_0 is in the order of several million light years, i.e. 10^{19} kilometers (1 followed by 19 zeros). *Middle: jata* in the process of evolution. In this case, the characteristic scales are of the order of years and centimeters. *Right: Jata* at $t \sim t_0$.

aspect. I hope that this article will initiate a constructive sharing of pilous experiences, as well as non-pilous experiences (why do some people shave?). I do not advise anyone to let their hair grow, even less to let them entangle. That being said, if it invites itself as it was the case for me, I hope that these few lines will be able to help those who will take a hairy path.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