

Gaṇeśa Origins

[Faure, p. 78-79](#). “The well-known stories regarding Gaṇeśa’s birth and his hybrid form reflect a late development of Puranic legend, and they actually obscure Vināyaka’s demonic origins. They have many variants, and a brief outline will suffice here. Gaṇeśa is usually described as one of the two children of Śiva and Parvatī, the other being Skanda.²³ In the standard myth, he is the guardian of Parvatī, who created him from the secretions of her body.²⁴ In some variants he is produced by Śiva alone, or by the union of Śiva and Parvati. In later Hinduism, he is also said to be self-born (*svayambhū*): being the creator, he has no father or mother.”²⁵ Gaṇeśa’s elephantine appearance is said to have originated in the following episode. On one occasion, having been told by his mother to guard the door of her bathroom while she was taking a bath, he incurred his father’s wrath for refusing him entrance. Śiva’s looks can kill, and in this case his angry third eye reduced Gaṇeśa’s head to ashes. To placate Pārvatī’s wrath, or perhaps feeling some remorse, he managed to replace the child’s head with that of an elephant, which happened to be nearby. In some versions of the myth, the confrontation between Śiva and Gaṇeśa turns into a real fight... In spite of the myth, the motif of the elephant head remains difficult to explain. Perhaps one should see there a sign of the demonic aspect of the god. Michel Strickmann attempts to explain it by citing the obedient nature of the elephant, but to be precise, Vināyaka is anything but obedient. I believe that the elephant head points to the uncanny nature of that god. On the other hand, the motif of the substitution of heads can be interpreted simply as an allusion to his non-brahmanical (lower caste, village) origin.²⁷ In another version, Śiva creates Gaṇeśa to help the devas in their fight against the asuras... In this version, it is Parvatī herself who gives Gaṇeśa his elephant head. In another version, the beheading of Gaṇeśa occurs after a fight with Śiva that calls to mind the fight between the higher (divine) and the lower (demonic) orders. Once beheaded, Gaṇapati submits to Śiva, who makes him the leader of the *gaṇa* (hence his name Gaṇapati).²⁸ We will retain from this myth not only Gaṇeśa’s antagonistic, albeit not simply Oedipal, relationship with his “father” Śiva, but also his function as guardian of the door (and keeper of secrecy).²⁹

Elephant Skin

[Faure, p. 94](#). “The demonic image of Vināyaka fuses with that of Gajāśura, the elephant demon killed by Śiva (or by Gaṇeśa himself in certain versions).⁸⁹ In Buddhist iconography, the theme of that subjugation is picked up in the motif of the elephant skin which Mahākāla holds above his head, and in the depictions of Vajrapāṇi and his doubles (Trailokyavijāya, Ācala, and Ucchuṣma) trampling supine Vināyakas (instead of Maheśvara and his consort).⁹⁰

[Faure, pp. 46-47](#). Mahākāla is often represented holding an elephant skin over his shoulders. This motif can be traced back to a mythical episode in which Śiva, appearing as Mahākāla, kills the demonic elephant Gajāśura.⁹⁴ According to a variant, the asura Nīla tried to kill Śiva by taking the form of an elephant. Nandin, the guardian of Śiva’s palace, killed him and offered his skin to Śiva. Covering himself with it, as a kind of armor, Śiva went to fight another asura, the demon king Andhaka, to punish him for desiring Parvatī, Śiva’s consort. Because the blood of the wounded Andhaka, as it fell to the ground, produced clones of him, Śiva and the other gods created female forms (śakti) of themselves—the seven or eight Mothers (mātrkāś)—to drink this blood before it touched the ground.⁹⁵ Andhaka eventually repented and took refuge in Śiva, who magnanimously gave him to Parvati as her son. Andhaka then became the leader of Śiva’s troupe, that is, Gaṇeśa. This quasi-Oedipal myth thus describes the birth of the Seven Mothers and their relation to Vināyaka.⁹⁶ In the Mahākāla mandala, the god is surrounded by the Seven Mothers <[See Slide 32 for images](#)>, to whom is added an eighth female called Bontenmo (Brahmā mother, i.e., Brahmānī).⁹⁷ Mahākāla is frequently represented as trampling on the elephant-headed deity Vināyaka (demonic aspect of Gaṇeśa), for reasons to be examined later.⁹⁸ Yet Mahākāla & Gaṇeśa were closely related and occasionally perceived as identical. The affinities (& antagonism) between Mahākāla & Gaṇeśa may explain, on the formal plane, the exchange of certain of their features (such as Gaṇeśa’s pot belly) after they enter the Japanese pantheon. Like Gaṇeśa, Mahākāla was related to female demons such as the Seven Mothers and the dākinīs.⁹⁹

Dual Form, Pairing, Twinning

[Faure, p. 89](#). “In Japan, this elephant-headed god is mainly represented in two ways: when standing alone, he is usually called Shōten or Vināyaka (J. Binayaka 毘那夜迦); when in sexual embrace with a consort, he becomes the dual-bodied Kangiten, the Bliss Deva (or devas).” [Faure, p. 10-11](#). “Kangiten 歡喜天 (or Sōshin Binayaka 双身毘那夜迦) is said to represent not only the blissful sexual union of the demon Vināyaka with his consort Senāyaka, but also the subduing of the former by the latter (a form of Avalokiteśvara/Kannon), as well as the nonduality of the Womb & Vajra realms.” [Faure, p. 77](#). Shōten, also known as Binayaka 毘那夜迦 (Skt. = Vināyaka), Kangiten, or Daishō Kangiten 大聖歡喜天, is traced back to the Indic god Gaṇeśa. His name, meaning “Saintly Deva,” appears paradoxical in view of his ambiguous nature, unless one reads it as an allusion to Shō Kannon (one of the figures that constitute the dual-bodied Kangiten).¹⁷ [Faure, p. 78](#). “Technically speaking, Gaṇeśa is not Śiva’s son, since he was produced from the filth of Pārvatī’s bath; in the same way, his half-brother, Skanda, was born from Śiva’s semen, outside his mother’s womb.²⁶ It is paradoxical that this “parthenogenetic” god would become a god of sexual union. This characteristic puts the two brothers in the broader category of gods who are not born from a mother’s womb.” [Faure, pp. 107-108](#). “Stein’s analysis shows how the pair Skanda & Gaṇeśa, the young warrior & the pot-bellied protector, after being dissociated in Buddhism, reconstituted itself partially in other pairs such as Mahākāla & Hārītī, Vaiśravaṇa & Kubera, Mañjuśrī & Piṇḍola, Vajrapāṇi & Vināyaka, and above all, Weituo 韋馱天 & Mile 弥, the gatekeepers of China’s monestaries. It is the case of Kangiten, a dual deity formed by Vināyaka & the 1000-armed Senju Kannon 千手觀音, and that of the dual-bodied Vaiśravaṇa (Sōshin Bishamon) that are the most significant. Importantly, it is the same Skanda who, under the erroneous transcription Weituo, became, as gatekeeper of Chinese Buddhist monasteries, the companion of Budai, the pot-bellied “laughing Buddha,” a great friend of children. Stein argued that the figure of Gaṇeśa influenced that of Budai, so that the pairing of Budai & Weituo at the gate of Chinese monasteries is, through a strange *détour*, that of Gaṇeśa & Skanda as “gatekeepers.” [See Slide 24 for images](#).