

Remembering Ourselves: On Some Countercultural Echoes of Contemporary Tantric Studies

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ABSTRACT: Through a brief cultural genealogy of the West's encounter with Asian Tantric traditions from the late 1880s through the early 1980s and some personal reflections on the controversies surrounding the author's *Kali's Child*, this essay suggests that contemporary Indology's orienting turn to Tantric texts and traditions and its occasional "excessive" focus on sexuality and gender do not derive in any direct or primary sense from Western colonialism, as is often argued, but rather from the altered states and newly won freedoms of a shared American-British counterculture. That is to say, Euro-American scholars turned to Tantric subjects in the 1980s and 90s because the counterculture from which they had just emerged in the 60s and 70s had earlier turned to these same traditions as "Asian countercultures" in which historical actors, accurately or no, saw their own convictions and experiences ecstatically reflected and religiously authorized. This thesis is then fleshed out through brief studies of Pierre Bernard, Sylvais Hamati, Sir John Woodroffe, Atul Behari Ghosh, Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, and Aghananda Bharati. Some final reflections on the poignant integrity of both the controversial scholarship and its critics conclude the essay.

KEYWORDS: Advaita Vedanta, counterculture, orientalism, Ramakrishna, Tantra.

([Sri Ramakrishna] to [Pundit] Vidyasagar with a smile): "Okay, so what's your orientation?" [*Accha tomar ki bhab?*]

Vidyasagar chuckles very softly and says, "Ah, I'll tell you someday when we're alone together." (Everyone laughs.)

Kathamrita 3.12

We are hardly alone.¹ Still, I want to reflect for a moment here with you on what I see as some of the most basic cultural, historical, even metaphysical,

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the plenary lecture for the Spalding Symposium on the Study of Indian Religions, Jesus College, Oxford University, 31 March 2006. My sincere thanks to Anna King for inviting me and to Gavin Flood for his generous response.

orientations of Indology in a geopolitical context increasingly defined by religious fundamentalisms of all stripes, including Christian and American ones. I have already written much – too much, in my opinion – about the controversies surrounding my first book, *Kali's Child*, on the erotics of the Bengali corpus surrounding the life and teachings of the nineteenth-century Shakta saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa (Kripal 1995). I will not return to those controversies here, not at least directly. Both my approach and my subject are different. In essence, I want to weave a particular kind of story, a broad cultural genealogy, as it were, that might help us better understand the place from which at least some of us within Indology think and write about the religions of South Asia today. In essence, I want to tell you about my own cultural, historical and spiritual orientations as I have come to remember and understand them, my own *bhava*, if you will, which – or so I am guessing – may speak privately to the cultural and spiritual orientations of some of you.

Much has been written about the colonial and postcolonial histories of the Hindutva movement in India and its rise to political power in the 1990s through the BJP as the social driver of the various kinds of ban or protest movements that have been on so many minds recently. Precious little, though, has been written about the socio-political genealogies of the Western scholars who have chosen to write transgressively about traditionally taboo topics, who embrace psychoanalytic methods warmly and naturally, and who are fascinated by the transcultural and intercultural issues of gender and sexuality. After *Kali's Child*, I began such a project in *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* with respect to the comparative study of mystical literature, which turned the psychoanalytic lens back onto the scholars themselves (including this one) to uncover and analyze some of the erotic and mystical dimensions of the study of erotic mysticism (Kripal 2001). I developed this reflexive project further in *The Serpent's Gift*, where I tried to re-imagine the study of religion as a modern form of erotic gnosis (Kripal 2006). I want to continue this project here in a much more restricted and focused fashion, that is, as it applies to the contemporary practice of Indology and, more specifically, to one, and only one, form of that discipline, that is, the study of Tantric texts and traditions. In short, I do not want to analyze 'them'. I want to analyze 'us' (even if, in the end, I think all such dualistic designations are finally illusory). Perhaps this will result in at least a little more understanding, which is not at all the same thing as agreement, and in the process create a more humane and deeper sense of 'we'. That is my hope anyway. In the spirit of our opening epigraph, you are free to laugh at me. Or with me.

My thanks also to Lorilii Biernacki, David Haberman, Prem Saran, Hugh Urban and David Gordon White for their critical readings of earlier versions. Portions of this essay appear in much fuller form in my *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007b); they are used here with permission of the University of Chicago Press, copyright by Jeffrey J. Kripal.

DEFINING ONE'S TERMS: 'TANTRA' AND 'COUNTERCULTURE'

Before I attempt such a genealogy, however, I need to define my two central terms: *Tantra* and *counterculture*. Neither are ahistorical essences or stable categories for me. Both rather are altered states of consciousness and energy that have crystallized into 'altered categories' (Kripal 2007b), that is, into carefully constructed terms of art with which historians imagine in their work various sorts of intercultural patterns, encounters, translations, controversies, conversions, disillusionments, initiations, pilgrimages and creative misreadings, that is, the very stuff of the history of religions.

For my purposes, then, I am defining Tantra as a broad comparative category that scholars of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism have forged over the last century (but particularly in the last four decades, that is, since the American and British counterculture) to describe a broad pan-Asian 'deep worldview' or 'super tradition' that weaves together such local traditions as Hindu Shakta Tantra, some forms of Indian Jainism, certainly Vajrayana Buddhism, much of Chinese Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism, as well as various forms of esoteric Japanese Buddhism, including and especially many aspects of Zen (White 2000: 8). The doctrinal features of this super tradition have been debated endlessly, but I am adopting here those of the American Indologist David Gordon White. For White,

Tantra is the Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.

(p. 9)

What fascinates me so about this particular definition (although we could cite many others) is that it can also function as a perfectly accurate description of many of the metaphysical assumptions of the American-British counterculture, that broad band of utopian and mystical movements that arced between America and England in the 1960s and 70s and helped energize other more political projects, from civil rights, early feminism and the sexual revolution, to the anti-war and gay rights movements. Not accidentally, these same decades also saw the height of Freud's popularity in American culture and the entrance of most of its Asian immigrant families after the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 was officially lifted in 1965. It also saw the creation of the American Academy of Religion (in 1964) and the birth of 'comparative religion' or 'world religions' as a regular fixture of American university curricula (Haberman 1999). There was a lot going on in these two decades, and all of it, I am suggesting, is relevant to our present topic, to one present Western *bhava* or spiritual orientation vis-à-vis Asian religion.

The term *counterculture* (originally as *counter culture*) was first brought into popular consciousness by the American historian Theodore Roszak in 1968, first in a series of magazine essays, then in a monograph, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Roszak 1969). Interestingly, there were close connections between Tantra and the coining of the counterculture from the very beginning. Roszak saw clearly that in order to make sense of what he had just named the counterculture one had to understand its fundamentally new and fundamentally *erotic* relationship to Asia, that is, one had to come to terms with what he called 'the tantric tradition' (a phrase, as we shall see, that he almost certainly borrowed from Agha Khan, whose *The Tantric Tradition* had just appeared in 1965 and would be reprinted in 1970 with the very same press that was publishing Roszak). Here is how Roszak described the Asian religious accents of what he had just named 'the counter culture' in 1969:

The amorality of Zen, as one might imagine, was rapidly given special emphasis where sex was concerned. And in this respect, the latest European-American journey to the East is a new departure. The Vedantism of the twenties and thirties had always been severely contemplative in the most ascetic sense of the term. One always has the feeling in looking through its literature that its following was found among the very old or very withered, for whom the ideal swami was a kindly orientalized version of an Irish Jesuit priest in charge of a pleasant retreat... But the mysteries of the Orient we now have on hand in the counter culture have broken entirely from this earlier Christianized interpretation. In fact, nothing is so striking about the new orientalism as its highly sexed flavor. If there was anything Kerouac and his [Beat poet] colleagues found especially appealing in the Zen they adopted, it was the wealth of hyperbolic eroticism the religion brought with it rather indiscriminately from the *Kama-sutra* and the tantric tradition.

(pp. 135-36)

Speaking in purely Indic terms, we might say that Roszak understood that Tantra had overtaken Vedanta as the privileged deep worldview or super tradition of the American counterculture. If Advaita Vedanta had captured the imagination of the first colonial half of the century, various forms of Hindu and Buddhist Tantra would now capture the second postcolonial half. Theravada would give way to Zen and the Vajrayana, and Advaita Vedanta would give way to Shakta Tantra, the *Devi* or Goddess, and Kashmiri Shaivism. In effect, the ascetic flipped over to its deep but related opposite, the erotic. Spirit gave way to Sex. At the very least, Consciousness now embraced Energy as real, as something that truly matter-ed. This, of course, is putting it much too simply, as Tantric themes began to resonate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Advaita Vedanta continued to have a major influence in the second half of the century, all of these traditions possessed profound ascetic dimensions, and popular countercultural movements like ISKCON emphasized rich emotional-devotional orientations that were sensuous in form but almost entirely ascetic in practice. Still, there is something worth noting here.

Perhaps, then, this deep resonance between ‘Tantra’ and ‘counterculture’ makes the most sense from a more abstract, structural point of view. After all, both the American-British counterculture and the historical Asian Tantric traditions often functioned as imagined ‘counters’ to their respective normative or conservative cultures: in more traditional scholarly terms, they *transgressed* or reversed the value systems of their respective societies through various antinomian rituals and doctrines toward what they perceived to be a deeper and more satisfying vision of reality.² Hence Prem Saran’s elegant study of Tantrism as a permanent ‘counter-system’ or ‘core’ esoteric counterculture within Indic civilization (Saran 1995). It is this *structural* fact or culture/counterculture pattern that perhaps best explains the various cross-cultural echoes I hear between the American-British counterculture of the 1960s and 70s and the much older Tantric traditions of South and East Asia. Every culture is different, but their respective countercultures, and particularly their mystical countercultures, are *countercoherent* in the antinomian, apophatic and erotic ways they go about deconstructing and transcending their specific local customs and beliefs (Kripal 2006: 112-13).

THE THESIS

Having noted (or claimed) all of that, it must be acknowledged, up front and immediately, that many Indologists, including David Gordon White, are quite critical of much of this countercultural translation, particularly in the later depoliticized and highly eclectic and consumerist New Age forms of the 1980s and 90s (White 2003). Let me admit that I do not fully follow White on this particular point and that I am much less inclined to dismiss modern Western forms of Tantra as somehow illegitimate or metaphysically less than their Asian counterparts, although I do, of course, recognize that they are often much less developed. In this, my approach is more similar to that of Hugh Urban, who treats New Age Tantra and modern sexual magic as perfectly legitimate and related objects of study (Urban 2003, 2006), Geoffrey Samuel, who has written eloquently and positively of what he calls ‘the attractions of Tantra’ in the modern West (Samuel 2005) and, again, Prem Saran, who has suggested that the counter-core, sensual Self of Indic Tantric practice may provide deep metaphysical resources for genuine transcultural communication and realization (Saran 1995).

2. I am aware that scholars have demonstrated convincingly that Tantric traditions in South Asia often serve conservative ends and can be read in these counter-structural ways only with significant qualification (Brooks 1992; Urban 2003). I would simply point out that other scholars have suggested more transgressive readings with other materials (Sanderson 1985; White 2003), and that it is popular versions and intuitions of the latter understandings, not of the former, which drove the countercultural embrace of Tantra.

There are two further reasons for my position on this point. First, I have become convinced that this Tantric transmission into American culture is much older and much more sophisticated than is usually recognized; it hardly began in the 1960s or 50s, as is often assumed, and its psychological, philosophical and scientific sophistication far surpass that of the consumerist forms on which scholars have tended to focus as representative. And second, I have come to realize that at least some types of Indological scholarship, including my own, historically emerge from this same countercultural lineage, that at least some of us share, if you will, in a kind of Western Tantric transmission.

Put much too simply, then, the thesis that I want to propose is that contemporary Indology's turn to Tantric texts and traditions and its occasional 'excessive' focus on sexuality and gender do not derive in any direct or primary sense from Western colonialism, as is often claimed, I assume, as a kind of attempted immunization from this type of scholarship. The exact opposite, in fact, is much closer to being the case. Such moves, after all, followed closely on the heels of a shared British-American counterculture that enthusiastically embraced Asian religious practices and doctrines in an effort to deconstruct and move beyond conservative forms of Western religious and political culture, which these same countercultural actors found stale, unbelievable, materialistic, militaristic and sexually repressive (for analogous readings of other moments in this Euro-American encounter, see Albanese 2006; Clarke 1997; Halbfass 1988; Schwab 1983; Versluis 1993; Weir 2000). Arvind Sharma had it exactly right, then, when he suggested that devotees of a countercultural icon like Rajneesh were essentially rejecting major features of Western culture (Sharma 1985). Similarly, one major reason Western scholars turned to Tantric subjects in the 1980s and 90s was that the counterculture from which they had just emerged was driven by thousands of individuals that had similarly turned to these same traditions as 'Asian countercultures' in which they saw their own American and British countercultural experiences accurately and ecstatically reflected. Put most simply and succinctly, *what inspired us was counterculture, not colonialism.*

As with any cross-cultural encounter, there were, of course, projections, transferences and distortions within this prehistory, but there were also real comparative insights and real cultural and personal transformations. I do not want to dismiss or deny any of the distortions or projections. But I do want to point out that there is 'another side' to this story and one that is not nearly as dark or depressing. I want to point out that we have only begun to take the comparative insights and transformations of the counterculture as serious objects of study, perhaps because we lack a theoretical practice that grants the same integrity, agency and authority to those among us as to those living in an 'exotic' culture or in an irretrievable past. It is easy to honor, fetishize and divinize the dead. It is difficult to take the living quite so seriously, particularly when they are among us. Or are us.

The counterculture I seek to honor and analyze here, I must stress, was a shared American and European experience extending over many decades, with major influences on both sides of the pond. From the British-American novelists Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood, through the British Buddhist Alan Watts and the Viennese Hindu monk turned American anthropologist Leopold Fischer, to George Harrison and the Beatles, it was actually Europeans who provided much of the real action. Put affectionately, if I may speak as an American to my European colleagues, it's *your* fault too.

Put just as affectionately, if I may speak to my Asian colleagues now, it's also yours. Many of the missionary gurus, lamas, and roshis, after all, who appeared on the scene in the 1970s and 80s were heavily inflected toward Tantric ideas and themes, and sexual scandal followed in the wake of many, if not most, of them. From Bhagwan Rajneesh, who fled the US a wanted federal criminal, and Swami Muktananda, who died in the midst of a sexual scandal that has never really lifted (Harris 1999; Caldwell 2001), to Chogyam Trungpa (Butterfield 1994), Kalu Rinpoche (Campbell 1996), and the non-traveling Sai Baba – the list is long and remarkably consistent: again and again, the Western devotee's faith has been seriously challenged, if not entirely shattered, by striking sexual revelations that simply cannot be fit into the celibate public images and orthodox truths of these remarkable charismatic individuals. Hence Bernard Faure opens his multi-volume study of Buddhist sexuality by insisting on the transgressive and mystical uses of the erotic within Buddhist history and by placing his own work in a very specific cultural context. He points out, for example, that, '[o]ver the past two decades, a number of scandals have shattered Buddhist communities in North America and Europe' (Faure 1998: 3). As demographic evidence of this truth, he cites Jack Kornfield's study of 54 Buddhist, Hindu and Jain teachers in North America. The study revealed that 34 of them had had sexual relationships with their students.

Not everything has been so controversial, of course. Indeed, I would venture to say that the general mood of the American counterculture in the 1960s and 70s with respect to Asian religions was both ecstatic and Romantic, not to mention psychedelic. As Roszak saw so astutely, the counterculture was about consciousness not class, hence it did not look back to Karl Marx but out to William Blake (Kripal 2007a). This ecstatic countercultural embrace of Asia in the 1960s and early 70s, followed by this long series of painful disillusionments in the 1980s and early 90s, followed again by a period of painful debate, mourning and cultural processing by practitioner and scholar alike, constitutes the heart and core of the Euro-American experience of Asian religions. There is no getting around this. This is how we remember ourselves.

Similarly, these same decades constitute the precise historical context from which Tantric Studies emerged as a subdiscipline within Indology in the late 1980s and 90s in order to process, as a culture, what had happened in the 60s and 70s. This, I believe, is the best explanation for why Tantric traditions and themes became the focus of so much scholarship. Basically, it had to do with counter-

culture, with the attempted transgression of Western conservative norms and with a sincere desire to be transfigured by an encounter with the Asian religions. And it worked. There were, after all, literally hundreds of thousands of altered states of consciousness and energy catalyzed by everything from *bhakti* to *bhanga* to the Beatles, by gods, goddesses and gurus (Kripal 2007c).

I have learned to be grateful, not dismissive, of this phenomenon. And I have learned to see 'Tantra' as an altered category that crystallizes and encodes these altered states of consciousness and energy, forms of mind in which some of us still participate and out of which we still think and write. Whether we were actually there or not (and I, for one, was not – I first encountered Hinduism in a Benedictine monastic seminary in the early 80s), it often seems to me that the spirit of Arthur Avalon still hovers over our pages and that Jimi Hendrix still sings and strums in our words.

That anyway is my thesis, my Memorable Fancy, as Blake might say. I am certainly not suggesting that such a thesis fits every individual case. I am perfectly aware that numerous scholars who have worked on Tantric texts and traditions had no personal connection to the counterculture (and would want none). My countercultural thesis, then, is more about 'echoes', about the general *Zeitgeist* or ecstatic resonance through which some of us have moved, often, I suspect, without being fully cognizant of its profound intellectual, moral and spiritual effects on the rhythms of our work. I, at least, have only recently come to this conclusion.

As a kind of humble beginning of coming to terms with this possibility, allow me to propose four different moments in this history involving the following seven individuals: (1) Sylvais Hamati and Pierre Bernard; (2) Sir John Woodroffe and Atul Behari Ghosh; (3) Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary; and (4) Agehananda Bharati. The first two moments set up the intellectual and cultural foundations of the countercultural Tantra; the second two expressed it archetypally. Such moments and figures, of course, could easily be multiplied into the hundreds: the Beat poets' turn East to Mahayana and Zen Buddhism; Alan Watts's celebration of Taoism, Tantrism and Zen; the cultural influence of Sri Aurobindo's Tantric evolutionary metaphysics; Joseph Campbell's fascination with the mythology of the hero (*vira*) and *kundalini* yoga; the Kashmiri Shaiva systems of Gopi Krishna and Swami Muktananda; and on and on. I have, in fact, explored the details of this larger story in a recent work (Kripal 2007b). Four brief moments will have to suffice for our present purposes. Obviously, they are merely emblematic, hardly exhaustive, of what I am trying to articulate so imperfectly here.

SYLVAIS HAMATI AND PIERRE BERNARD (1875–1955)

It appears that the first documented and truly serious American encounter with Indian Tantra involved a cross-cultural friendship between two men: an eccen-

tric Iowan by the (likely) name of Pierre Bernard and a Syrian-Indian by the name of Sylvais Hamati. Bernard met Hamati in Lincoln, Nebraska, sometime in the late 1880s.³ Hamati, by his own description, was an accomplished Tantric yogi, probably from Calcutta, with whom Bernard studied intensely for years. From the late 1880s to just pass the turn of the century, the two men traveled across the country together, perhaps as entertainers in a circus. Bernard first comes into clear historical view on 29 January, 1898, on the front page of *The New York Times*, and under the symbolic banner of the Hindu goddess Kali no less. He had given a public demonstration of what he called his *Kali-mudra* or 'death trance' to a group of physicians in San Francisco, during which he seems to have successfully slowed his vital functions sufficiently to mimic the vital signs of death. The newspaper photo shows him, well, dead.

Catalyzed by such publicity and psychophysical stunts, Bernard now morphed into 'The Hypnotist Dr Bernard' and became something of a personality in the Bay area. He left San Francisco sometime around the great earthquake in 1906. Around this same time, he also founded both the first Tantric Press and the first Tantric Order in America and published what must be the first Tantric publication in America, the *International Journal of the Tantrik Order* (1907). By 1909 we find him in New York, where, after various legal and criminal fiascos involving his sexual practices, Bernard eventually emerged as a successful teacher of yoga and opened a series of institutions. From one of these, the local press, which had now dubbed him 'The Omnipotent Oom', reported any number of slightly scandalous or just scandalous happenings, most of them involving Bernard's relationships with his female disciples. Yoga and sex, in other words, were already joined at the hips in the popular imagination, literally.

By 1919, Bernard had moved his teaching practices to a lush 73-acre estate in Upper Nyack, where he was teaching some of New York's elite, including Mrs William K. Vanderbilt and her two daughters, and making a great deal of money in the process. The next year he bought another Nyack estate of 39 acres and later in life he would settle down as President of the State Bank of Pearl River and collect expensive automobiles, much like Bhagwan Rajneesh would do decades later up in Oregon. He died in 1955, just before the counterculture would take up many of the themes he taught – from the importance of the *chakras* to the divinity of the body – in its own excessive and colorful ways.

'ARTHUR AVALON'

About the same time Bernard was founding his Tantric journal in America, a High Court Judge in Calcutta by the name of Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936)

3. My treatment of Bernard here is indebted to conversations with Robert Love, currently working on a biography of Bernard entitled *The Great Oom* (Viking Press, forthcoming).

was beginning his own writing career on similar subjects. Woodroffe's life and writings have been thoroughly studied by Kathleen Taylor. Drawing on her marvelous work, I would like to make three simple points here that bear directly on my narrative.

First, as Taylor has shown, Woodroffe's personal desire to study the Tantric texts, and probably even engage in some of the esoteric rituals, was supported by his life-long friendship with the Bengali pundit, Atul Behari Ghosh, who actually did most of the Sanskrit translation work. 'Arthur Avalon', as Taylor has shown so convincingly, was most likely a pen-name designed to fuse the historical personalities of Woodroffe and Ghosh into a single transcultural icon. Second, this engagement with the Tantra was both scholarly and religious for Woodroffe. According to Taylor, sometime after 1904, Woodroffe met a Tantric saint, who likely initiated him into Tantra and before whom Woodroffe is said to have received a very dramatic 'electric shock' *shakti-pat* experience during the night of Kali Puja, probably of 1906 (Taylor 2001: 102-104). Third, Woodroffe and Ghosh's impact on Jungian psychology, Western understandings of Tantric yoga and on the whole human potential and New Age language of the *kundalini* and the *chakra* system has been immense. Indeed, there are probably few previous texts, with the possible exception of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (itself a Blakean tract inspired by *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*), that were more influential on the practice, art and metaphysical assumptions of the counterculture than Arthur Avalon's *The Serpent Power*.

All of this is to say what I hope is obvious, namely, that Tantric Studies began in the first decades of the twentieth century on a powerful note of cross-cultural affirmation and friendship, and it was designed precisely to counter the kinds of gross cultural misunderstanding that had been propounded against the Tantric texts and rituals in the nineteenth century, mostly by Christian missionaries and colonial administrators. Little wonder, then, that 'Arthur Avalon' became such a central and beloved figure of the American counterculture of the 1960s and 70s. This British-Bengali icon expressed perfectly, if also secretly, what that counterculture was partly about – a friendly fusion of East and West via Tantric practice, a bit of Sanskrit and the serpent power of sexuality.

ALDOUS HUXLEY, TIMOTHY LEARY AND THE
ORIGINS OF PSYCHEDELIC ORIENTALISM (1962)

Anyone familiar with the counterculture knows that mind-altering substances played a major role in both its countering and its turn East. Often, this Asian turn is read as a kind of foolish Western projection on cultures somehow completely devoid of such meanings. I think such a reading is both demeaning to the human beings it claims to understand and seriously mistaken in terms of

the actual cultural facts. The truth of the matter is that the countercultural visionaries saw their own altered states fantastically reflected in the mythologies and mystical systems of Asia, many of which had been employing various psychotropic agents for centuries (hence the Tantric South Asian term for cannabis – *siddhi*). These were deeply revelatory experiences that cried out for an explanation and a cultural frame generous enough to hold them. That explanation and that frame were commonly provided by Asian myth, symbol and practice (Grinspoon and Bakalar 1997). That is why so many young Westerners traveled to Asia in the 1960s and 70s. That is why they loved India, Tibet, Nepal and Japan. Yes, they were projecting (but so was everyone else, including the Indians, Tibetans, Nepalese and Japanese). Yes, they missed the ascetic and conservative orthodoxies of these ancient cultures. But they also found something very real and very important there. They found the Asian countercultures.

It should hardly surprise us, then, to learn that many contemporary American Buddhist meditators found their first taste of enlightenment in psychedelic states (Badiner and Grey 2002). Nor should we be shocked to discover that the American guru Ram Dass (previously Richard Alpert) identified the two most transforming factors of his life to be psychedelics and his Indian guru, Neem Karoli Baba. This psychedelic orientalism hardly escaped the notice of any number of countercultural actors. Few, however, were so taken with it than Ram Dass's former Harvard colleague, Timothy Leary (1920–1997).

As my thesis would predict, Leary's East was a Tantric East. The likely origin point of this psychedelic-Tantric orientalism appears in a letter from Aldous Huxley to Leary that Robert Forte has preserved for us. According to Forte and as evidenced by this letter, there is little doubt that Timothy Leary's turn to Asia stems finally back to Huxley. The two had been corresponding throughout 1961 on the subject of LSD. Huxley at this point was finishing his final novel and testament, *Island*, about a utopian community whose two central cultural practices involved the ingestion of a mind-altering mushroom (called *moksha*) and a form of contemplative sexual intercourse (called *maithuna*). At some point, Leary seems to have asked Huxley about the subject of Tantra. On 2 February 1962, Huxley answers this question. He begins by suggesting the works of Sir John Woodroffe, Heinrich Zimmer's chapter on Tantra in *Philosophies of India* (which was really ghost-written by Joseph Campbell), and the scholarly works of Mircea Eliade and Edward Conze. In other words, he suggests that Leary read Western scholarship.

Then Huxley launches into his own interpretations of Tantra. He praises it as the highest ideal possible, explicitly links it to Zen Buddhism (recall Roszak), invokes psychoanalysis and *gestalt* therapy to explain its psychological mechanisms, offers some rather pointed criticisms of Asian traditions that ascetically reject the world (within a sentence that makes no grammatical sense), and finally suggests that it is Tantra that supplies the best context for the ritual use of psychedelics:

...the basic ideal [of Tantra] seems to me the highest possible ideal – enlightenment achieved, essentially, through constant awareness. This is the ultimate yoga – being aware, conscious even of the unconscious – on every level from the physiological to the spiritual. In this context see the list of 112 exercises in awareness, extracted from a Tantrik Text and printed at the end of ‘Zen Flesh Zen Bones’ (now in paperback. The whole of gestalt therapy is anticipated in these exercises – and the world) as the Vedantists and the Nirvana-addicts of the Hinayana School of Buddhists. Tantra teaches a yoga of sex, a yoga of eating (even eating forbidden foods and drinking forbidden drinks)... LSD and the mushrooms should be used, it seems to me, in the context of this basic Tantrik idea of the yoga of total awareness, leading to enlightenment within the world of everyday experience – which of course becomes the world of miracle and beauty and divine mystery when experience is what it always ought to be.

(Forte 1999: 108-109)

Not that Leary always followed Huxley’s sage advice. Psychedelics, Leary quickly realized, often had the effect of releasing and amplifying erotic energies and ecstasies. Huxley had recognized this effect as well before Leary, and he had warned Leary ‘to not let the sexual cat out of the bag’, that is, to not link psychedelics with sexuality in a public forum, even if, as everyone in the know knew, they were in fact linked. Leary ignored this advice and gave a very famous interview, ‘She Comes in Colors’, to *Playboy* in 1966 on exactly this topic.

There were, of course, many reasons for Leary’s legal fate, but the *Playboy* interview hardly helped him here. Huxley had guessed correctly what would happen in such a situation. As Leary gave this interview, he faced a series of court appearances that would eventually land him in federal prison for years and, through a dramatic prison escape, turn him into an international fugitive. President Nixon went so far as to call Timothy Leary ‘the most dangerous man in America’. The sexual cat was out of the bag. And it was having sex with the psychedelic cat. And it would be a long time before anyone could get these two cats back in the bag again.

A TANTRIKA AMONG US: AGEHANANDA BHARATI (1923–1991)

Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary were hardly alone in their psychedelically tinged turn to Tantra. Agehananda Bharati was born Leopold Fischer on 20 April, 1923, in Freud’s Vienna. Of Czech and possibly Jewish descent, Leopold was an apostate from Catholicism by age 13 and at 14 was sitting in on the classes of the Sanskritist Erich Frauwallner. At 16 he was formally accepted into Hinduism as ‘Ramachandra’ by an itinerant Indian preacher who was visiting the Indian Club in Vienna. After the war, he studied Indian history, Buddhism and Sanskrit under Herbert Guenther and eventually sailed for his beloved India, arriving in Bombay on 30 January, 1949.

There, after joining and then leaving the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and being turned away by over one hundred monks in three dozen different establishments, he finally found an independent renouncer by the name of Swami Visvananda to give him initiation into the more ancient, more traditional and more intellectual Dashanami sect. Ramachandra was initiated in 1951 by Visvananda, who gave him the monastic name of 'Agehananda Bharati'. Agehananda – 'Homeless Bliss'. Bharati lived in India for another six years after his initiation, wandering its roads the length of the country from north to south, interacting with hundreds of *sadhus* of all stripes, taking what he describes as a secret Tantric initiation in Assam, writing popular pieces for the papers and teaching philosophy, first in New Delhi and then at Benares Hindu University. Bharati left BHU in 1954 after a dramatic sexual scandal. He remained in the country for another two years, when he left to travel in Thailand and Japan.

He arrived in the United States in 1958, where he took a research position at the University of Washington. It was at Washington that the psychoanalytic anthropologist Melford Spiro convinced him that he needed to take up a traditional academic discipline to survive in the American academic world. Bharati chose anthropology. In 1961, he took a post in anthropology at Syracuse University, a position which he held (without a PhD) for 30 years until his death on 14 May, 1991. Writing and speaking (the latter in 15 languages) as a one-of-a-kind monk-anthropologist, Bharati's career can best be understood as an early manifestation of a renewed, culturally supported interest in the Tantric traditions. Certainly he wrote during a time in which there was a plethora of popular works on Tantra being published but very little solid scholarship available to the general public. It was this state of things that Bharati sought to redress with the 1965 publication of his self-described magnum opus, *The Tantric Tradition* (Bharati 1965a). It was this book that Roszak was almost certainly quoting when he coined the term *counter culture* and wrote of this culture's fondness for 'the tantric traditions'.

What did Bharati understand by the expression 'the Tantric tradition'? Tantra, for Bharati, was a 'total sensuous indulgence guided by certain esoteric controls' (Bharati 1973: 171). As 'instruments of opposition and criticism of the official religious establishments' (Bharati n.d.: 4), these traditions were 'antiestablishmentarian' (Bharati 1975: 128), for they defy traditional moral claims systematically. Bharati, in other words, understood that what he called the Tantric tradition was a kind of counterculture that systematically and intentionally transgressed the norms of conservative society, be it Indian or American (or both). Hence, like Huxley and Leary, he did not hesitate to celebrate the sacramental use of LSD within such a countering culture. Bharati believed that this desire for experimentation, this willingness to transgress, and this ability to bracket dogma and doctrine were valuable characteristics of Hinduism that were uniquely suited to a skeptical and radically free-thinking Western modernity.

Bharati, however, was not naive about the 'dark side' of the Tantric traditions, and his writings presciently display a deep and insightful concern for the categories of gender and power well before such categories came to dominate religious studies in the last decades of the twentieth century. Resisting any naively romantic treatment of the tradition, he rejected completely the popular American notion that traditional Tantra somehow inculcates mutual feelings of love and tenderness between the partners: 'Nonsense. The sex of Tantra is hard-hitting, object-using, manipulative ritual without any consideration for the person involved' (Bharati 1975: 130). He acknowledged that a future American-generated Tantrism might well include these emotions, but he had no patience for those who wanted to project such emotions onto Indian Tantric culture or, much worse, the historical past.

Bharati predicted in the mid 1970s that it would take about two decades of solid scholarship for knowledge about Tantrism to seep through to a wider Western audience (Bharati 1965b: 84). He was also of the opinion that the psycho-experimental methods of these traditions were 'diametrically opposed to that of the orthodox', and that mystical enstasis is achieved in them 'by activating precisely those mechanisms which the orthodox yogi seeks to suppress or eschew' (Bharati 1976: n.p.). In other words, he believed that Tantra would be a hit in America on both the popular and scholarly levels, and he predicted that this Tantric Renaissance would be deeply controversial, if not actually offensive to many orthodox Hindus.

He was correct on both counts.

HISTORICALLY UNDERSTANDING THIS MOMENT

This, of course, is where we find ourselves now, in precisely the scenario Bharati predicted. Having experienced the awakenings of the counterculture and worked through the Asian sources of this awakening through the scholarship of the late 1980s and 90s, we are now in a reactionary phase catalyzed by immigrant elites concerned about how their traditions are perceived, and often grossly distorted, by the surrounding dominant Christian culture in which they now live. When most of these families arrived, in or shortly after the counterculture, they set about doing what all American immigrant communities before them had done, that is, acculturate, adapt and build their own communities. They almost certainly did not feel like they could control what entered American culture from their original cultures, and they certainly experienced (and continue to experience) various forms of bigotry and racism on a regular basis both in their communities and in their places of work. But now they are settled in, they are often economically successful, they are enjoying the fruits of the civil rights movement (another manifestation, along with feminism and gay rights, of the countercultural period), and they feel empowered to speak out and try to take control of how their cultures

are spoken and written about. How should Euro-American scholars of Indian religions respond to all of this? I do not have many definitive answers here and I can, of course, only speak for myself, but I do have a few historical observations, with which I will close.

The first thing I believe Euro-American scholars should do is *listen*. The message is often twisted and counter-productively aggressive, but many of these voices are obviously speaking out of their own deep experiences of injustice, racism and gross misrepresentation in the workplace, the public square and the media. We need to hear these cries of the heart and take them to our hearts. Listening, of course, is not the same thing as agreeing with everything that is said.

We should also, I think, apply the same intellectual tools that we apply elsewhere here, that is, we should historicize and analyze our present moment with all the hermeneutical tools of sociology, psychology and philosophy that we have at our disposal. Consider, for a moment, the different patterns of censorship and control that we see manifested in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that is, in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Numerous scholars have noted that nineteenth-century India witnessed a systematic suppression of Tantric traditions, as the latter encountered the Western sensibilities of the colonial authorities, the Christian missionaries, and the Indian reformers anxious to establish Hinduism as an ethically viable world religion, mostly around an imagined Vedic and/or Advaita Vedantic narrative. Certainly my own *Kali's Child* revolved around this very issue: the various subtle and not so subtle ways that Ramakrishna's Shakta Tantra was suppressed and denied, first within Bengal immediately after his death, and then in the West, in New York to be exact, through an orthodox translation project that systematically censored the sexual components of the Bengali texts and fore-grounded the neo-Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda. It was in this way that Vedanta eclipsed Tantra.

It is perhaps worth noting here that I do not count myself among that widespread school of thought I call 'blame it on the British', that is, I do not think this suppression of Tantra was only or even originally a colonial phenomenon. This is much too easy. Historically speaking, such polemical patterns were in fact ancient and indigenous ones on the subcontinent. Tantric culture had undergone an internal major reformation in eleventh-century Kashmir through the school of Abhinavagupta (White 2003), and Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jain and Christian Indian writers had all been ridiculing and shaming Tantrikas for centuries before the British ever arrived on India's shores (Humes 2003). But colonial contact clearly exacerbated these same processes, hence the gradual domestication, 'sweetening' or censorship of Tantric motifs that numerous historians have noted as a defining feature of nineteenth-century Bengal, where much of the British-Indian encounter was focused during this period. In this, I am in complete agreement with a scholar like Prem Saran, who has suggested that the counter-system of Indian

Tantrism has been repressed by a triple Puritanism on the continent, that is, by Brahmanical Hinduism, by Islam and by British colonialism (Saran 1995: 104-105).

Seen in such a historical light, an Indological project like *Kali's Child* that zooms in on Tantric hermeneutical practices within an esoteric oral tradition recorded in a Bengali corpus ceases to be a nefarious form of 'neo-colonialism' and becomes instead an intellectually responsible project of recovery and remembrance of the precolonial, the subaltern and the oral – a dramatic historiographical example of what Freud once called the return of the repressed. Such a book can also be heard as a rather dramatic echo of the American counterculture, which similarly turned from Vedanta to Tantra in order to realize its own erotic gnosis, its own enlightenment of the body. That, in my mind at least, was the deepest project of *Kali's Child* – to recover and then analyze the Tantra behind and within the Vedanta, to recover that which had been repressed in the colonial period, to speak the secret again. It is a very clever ruse to call such a project 'neo-colonialist' or 'orientalizing', but it is the censoring reactions against such a project, not the project itself, that in fact display the clearest colonial pedigree (although, as already noted, such reactions probably lie much deeper still in traditional Brahmanical orthodoxy, against which the Tantric transgressive and antinomian rituals derive their meaning, logic and energy).

This is not to claim, however, that the secrets I spoke were identical to the secrets Ramakrishna spoke, that is, this is not to suggest that what I or any other contemporary scholar uncovers in the past is a simple reflection or representation of that past. Far from it. We too are historical beings. We too think and speak within and as bodies that, in the words of Gavin Flood, have been deeply 'entextualized' by the terms, languages and doctrines of our cultures (Flood 2006). In some sense, this is precisely what I have tried to suggest here with respect to Tantric Studies and the American-British counterculture: scholars have authored a particular body of scholarship, and the subtle sounds of that scholarly corpus echo in places a specific countercultural history, one that turned to the Tantric bodies of Asia not to reproduce or mimic them, but to encode and entextualize a new democratic-erotic body no longer bound to a traditional religious register, be it Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or otherwise. A certain enlightenment of the body and a particular mystical or apophatic theology, a 'religion of no religion', thus sparkled at the heart of the countercultural experience (Kripal 2007b).

This, I would suggest, is why questions of gender, sexual freedom and sexual orientation come so naturally and easily to some of us: these, after all, are body questions with a clear countercultural pedigree. Perhaps this is also why such questions do not always come so naturally and easily to our critics. Their own cultural histories, after all, have been defined by the historical experience of colonialism, not counterculture. Both counter-culture and countercolonialism, however, are deeply ethical stances, each with their

own profound integrities.⁴ This, it seems to me, is an exceptionally poignant, but also eminently understandable, situation.

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4. Perhaps the place for both of these groups to meet is another body issue that came to political resolution (if not practical solution) in the same counterculture, that is, the issue of race. But racial justice, gender equity and the civil rights of sexual orientation are all apiece in this democratic logic: I do not see how a society can adequately address one without eventually coming to terms with the other two. Obviously, no society, including and especially American society, has attained such a full enlightenment of the body.

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