

Introduction

Rethinking Tantra through Ethnography

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The word *Tantra* conjures radically different images and seemingly irreconcilable associations, ranging from spiritual enlightenment to sex and sorcery. In Indian popular culture, wealthy politicians hire “Tantriks” to secure their success through black magic. In the Netherlands, a group practicing “Tantric Dance” regularly organizes workshops and summer courses.¹ In Bengal, groups known as Bāul, Fakir, and Sahajiyā maintain practices broadly recognized as Tantric, but they do not wish to be identified as such (Openshaw 2002). Tantric traditions gain attention in modern-day media. For example, the 2014 Kalachakra Tantric empowerment led by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, constituted a highly digitalized ceremony experienced by global audiences through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other outlets. The Netflix documentary series *(Un)Well* (2020) represented Tantra in one of the episodes, focusing on expensive North American retreats to enhance sexual power in a spiritualized fashion. In 2018, the documentary *Wild Wild Country* exposed the dark side of the transnational Tantric community of Osho devotees, their morally transgressive practices, and their criminal activities. In Europe and North America, religion scholars have produced an impressive scholarship on Tantra predominantly based on disembodied texts and silent inscriptions. While their understanding of Tantric texts often

emerges through the cooperation of Asian pandits and scholars, credit for such assistance remains often unacknowledged, and living voices of Tantric practitioners remain largely outside the scope of these studies. Is there a bridge for these distant milieus?

This edited volume seeks to connect distant shores of Tantric scholarship and lived Tantric practices using ethnography as the most suitable material to build this bridge. Findings unpack Tantra's relationship to the body, ritual performance, sexuality, secrecy, power hierarchies, death, magic, and healing. We approach these issues with vigilant sensitivity to the ethics of fieldwork, moving beyond the centrality of written texts, while voicing the everyday life and livelihoods of a multitude of Tantric actors: not only ritual specialists and learned elites of initiated practitioners, but also mediums, beggars, singers, healers, and craftsmen, who equally participate in the dynamic worlds of Tantra.

Attention to lived Tantric practice can decolonize and enrich Tantric studies, a field that has largely marginalized ethnographic research and has yet to give adequate attention to the experiences and discourses of living Tantric communities. Further, engaged scholarly dialogues with contemporary Tantric practitioners present new and diverse ways of imagining Tantra within the dynamic contexts of fieldwork. These dialogues potentially forge reciprocal relations between Tantric studies scholars, their respective fields of specialization, and participants of lived Tantric traditions. In an effort to critically reflect upon how to facilitate these dialogues, this introduction sets out to answer two key questions: (1) What is gained through ethnographic engagements with Tantra? (2) How do the contributions in this volume lay the groundwork for establishing a collaborative and interdisciplinary ethnography of Tantra?

Shifting Paradigms for the Study of Tantric Traditions

Tantric studies, like the academic study of religion, has developed largely with a focus on texts, while often neglecting diverse living traditions and communities involved in Tantric lifeworlds. While Tantric studies scholars have resided alongside these communities, often to conduct textual research at local archives occasionally with the aid of community members, the lived dimensions of Tantra remain

absent in much of the early literature in the field. The scholarship produced through such methodology has influenced the way in which anthropologists working with Asian religious traditions relate to Tantric practices and practitioners.

Previous generations of ethnographers of Buddhism experienced, as David Gellner put it, a kind of perplexity (2017, 113): the perplexity of scholars trained exclusively in elite textual discourses, who are then confronted, in Asia, with a reality of spirit cults, magic rituals, and activities wildly differing from the monastic, rationalistic, and quasi-atheistic religion that they were exposed to in the classroom. Geoffrey Samuel shared a similar befuddlement: “I was struck by the huge gap between the way Tibetan religion was treated in Indological and Buddhological literature, and the way it was described by the smaller number of anthropologists who had worked in Tibetan societies” (2005, 4). Vasudha Narayanan articulated the same perplexity in terms of “diglossia” (2000, 761–62) between the study of Hinduism and lived religion. Soon after joining Harvard University, she realized that the everyday activities Hindus think of as “religious,” from cooking the right kind of lentils to singing songs, were dismissed as “anthropological stuff” and did not make it into the textbooks. The same perplexity might arise when comparing classic academic books on Tantra with the incredible diversity of contemporary phenomena deemed as Tantric. These phenomena may include mantras and mandalas, blood sacrifice, and wrathful goddesses. They might also include online gift shops of aphrodisiacs, Dracula-like characters of Hindi movies (Iyer 2013), mainstream South Indian temple activities, massage techniques advertised in the streets of Bali and Phuket, or the choice of a life outside of conventional society, dedicated to the quest for self-realization. This cacophony of examples draws from representations of Tantra that scholars are also responsible for consuming, constructing, distorting, repeating, and disseminating through academic representations of Tantra.

This volume is born out of the necessity to bring to the forefront of Tantric studies the individuals, communities, and institutions that constitute living Tantric traditions as located in particular sociocultural environments. While Tantra has predominantly been studied through premodern scriptures of elite male priests and monks, this book underlines the multifarious life of vernacular Tantric practices and livelihoods across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Himalayan

regions. We question predominant methodological frameworks and incorporate ethnographically informed approaches to Tantra.

Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology constituted broadly by the use of fieldwork, in either face-to-face or virtual settings (e.g., “online” or “digital ethnography”). We address the need to bring more ethnographic research into the field of Tantric studies—a field that largely remains oriented to text-centric analysis. We envision the “ethnography of Tantra” as a collaborative and interdisciplinary endeavor dedicated to analyzing ethnographically drawn data on the various dimensions of Tantra in the lives of people as they manifest on the field, using theoretical frameworks from diverse domains, including history, anthropology, gender studies, and religious studies.

Dismissing lived Tantra derives from the text-centric attitude in the study of religions (King 1999; Masuzawa 2005) and, in some cases, a bias among anthropologists against local traditions they perceive as less authentic or debased because of the literature they are exposed to in their academic training (Gellner 1990). The fields of anthropology and religious studies are both entangled with colonial and Orientalist legacies. These legacies emerged through a history of imperial encounters in which, as Van der Veer (2001) has shown, notions of religious, political, and cultural identities were forged and contested in the colony and metropole through the shared experience of colonialism. Although ethnographic work can easily replicate and perpetuate problematic stereotypes and prejudiced presuppositions, the chapters in this volume demonstrate how ethnographic dialogues bring to the forefront the perspectives of lived traditions and the practices of self-reflexivity, unsettling the epistemic paradigms of modern academia.

We suggest that ethnographies of Tantra have been in part neglected because they present scholars with methodological challenges, including the problem of secrecy in Tantric esoteric practices, the limits of traditional ethnographic practices such as “participant observation” (see Hornbacher’s chapter), the contested use of “Tantric” as an emic category, and stigmas associated with Tantra in both academic circles and on the ground in various fieldwork settings. Meeting such methodological challenges requires sophisticated ad hoc ethical and epistemological tools for the study of contemporary Tantric traditions.

Ethnographic studies are never situated in a vacuum of power dynamics, and in the context of British colonialism, early ethnographic accounts sustained the production of inequalities cocreating notions of deviancy and heterodoxy. The contemporary academic field of anthropology is not free from asymmetrical power relationships either, as Talal Asad (1973, 16–17) and others have saliently discussed. However, ethnographic theory and practice has grown in different directions with self-reflective criticism, particularly through the perspectives of feminist, postmodern, and post-structural lenses; critical race theory; queer theory; and postcolonial theory. Feminist ethnographers and postcolonial scholars have discussed racial and gender inequalities inherent in the history and use of ethnographic methods.

The ethnographic method began to achieve rapid legitimization by the academic research establishment only in the 1980s. According to LeCompte, ethnography was marginalized because it was subversive to positivistic, entrenched conceptions of research rigor, and it privileged alternative ways of thinking, knowing, and viewing the world (LeCompte 2002) that can challenge the epistemic ethnocentrism of the modern Western academy. Ethnographic training ideally prepares ethnographers to critically self-reflect on issues of positionality and reciprocity, while systematically addressing their own cultural bias (LeCompte 1987). With its interest in taking other lifeworlds seriously, and its narrative representations of Indigenous cultures, nonwhite communities, women, and nonbinary people, modern ethnography sustained the process of dislocating the dominance of North Atlantic objectivist and heterosexist perspectives in the social sciences and in education.

The ethnography of Tantra attempts to decolonize² the academic knowledge production on Tantric phenomena by questioning the importance that has been given to ancient textual traditions analyzed by European and North American scholars as normative of what constitutes “real” religion. Certainly, ethnography alone is not the solution to the legacy of colonialism and cultural imperialism, and ethnography itself needs to be decolonized in many respects (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019). However, ethnographically informed and interdisciplinary perspectives on the voices and practices of contemporary Tantric communities can contribute to a more inclusive global history and anthropology of Tantra. This book serves as a starting point to

address the lack of ethnographically informed perspectives on Tantric traditions by offering contributions by ten scholars who have engaged in long-term, linguistically competent fieldwork with living Tantric communities across diverse yet interconnected regions: South India, Southeast Asia, Bengal, Assam, the Tibetan cultural region, the sub-Himalayan region, and the digital field of online media.

Indologists, Buddhologists, and religion scholars have written profusely on Asian phenomena condensed into the ambiguous and problematic term *Tantra*. But why have ethnographic methods remained underutilized in exploring Tantric traditions in contrast to the preponderance of textual studies on Tantra, and what are the repercussions of the way academics generate knowledge on Tantra?

Colonial officers, missionaries, and Orientalist scholars have developed enduring paradigms for the study of Asian religions based on their own religious and sociocultural backgrounds and the Asian sources they deemed the most authoritative. In the last three decades, these paradigms have been denounced as “scriptist” (Harris 1986), “Protestant” (Schopen 1991), and “mentalistic” (Meyer in Belting et al. 2014, 207–10).³ The assumption that the “real” religion emerges through the study of text also shaped how modern communities in Asia present their own religions to foreign audiences (Lopez 1998; Van der Veer 2001; Urban 2003). This creates biases to what scholars might observe or ignore on the field and whom they select or exclude from their studies. For example, Geoffrey Samuel observes that in the early development of Tibetan studies, “Buddhologists mostly worked with high-status refugee lamas and monastic scholars and saw little or nothing of the social and ritual context of their informants’ lives within the Tibetan community as a whole” (2005, 4).

Anthropologists of religion in Asia have conducted focused studies of groups and societies that define themselves as, or are profoundly influenced by, Tantric traditions. However, they did not engage in an organized intervention toward an anthropology of Tantra. While scholars of diverse Buddhist traditions and geographic regions have strived to develop a comparative and ethnography-grounded “anthropology of Buddhism” (Gellner 2001; Sihlé and Ladwig 2017),

ethnographers of Tantra have not collaborated to create a similar endeavor in the field of Tantric studies. For example, Ron Barrett's ethnography (2008) of Aghor practitioners and healers is framed as a contribution to the field of medical anthropology, but it shies away from debates and comparisons in the field of Tantric studies. Often taken as the emblem of antinomian Tantric practice, Aghoris themselves show ambivalence toward the category of Tantra: its association with sexuality and sorcery could cause misunderstandings and bring counterproductive effects in their search for social recognition. Some Aghoris eschewed the term when talking to North Indian visitors to their ashram but "reversed their position when speaking with Bengalis in Calcutta, where tantra has more positive connotations" (Barrett 2008, 11). In the lack of a systematic effort toward an ethnography of Tantra, salient works grounded in ethnographic fieldwork remain confined to the scholarship on ritual and society in a particular area and religious tradition. For example, Rich Freeman's work on Hindu Tantric traditions of Kerala and David Gellner's research on Newar Buddhism are framed as contributions to the field of South Indian Hinduism (Freeman 1997, 2003) and Mahayana Buddhism in Nepal (Gellner 1992).

In a similar manner, French ethnohistorians and social anthropologists like Raphaël Voix, Gérard Toffin, Gilles Tarabout, and Véronique Bouiller, among others, have produced exceptional scholarship on Tantric rituals, festivals, monastic traditions, and verbal arts, combining linguistic expertise and familiarity with textual sources with extensive ethnography in particular fieldwork sites.⁴ However, their analysis and theoretical contribution has not addressed the field of Tantric studies at large. Hence, previous anthropological works have mostly considered their Tantric communities in specific contexts and in isolation from the rest of the inter-Asian and transregional Tantric world. What Geoffrey Samuel has noted for Tibetology thus could be easily said for previous anthropologists of Tantra: these works avoid relating the traditions under analysis to larger regional discourses and tend to remain isolated and inward-looking (Samuel 2005, 195). In the lack of an organized, inclusive, and ethnography-oriented field of Tantric studies, their bodies of knowledge have been seen in isolation rather than used to illuminate each other. Ethnography not only produces opportunities for comparison, generating empirical data on diverse sociocultural and geographical contexts (McDaniel,

this volume), but comparison *is* part of the method, inherent in the analysis of the fieldworker experiencing the life of their participants. Suggesting comparative ethnographies as well as ethnography as comparison, an ethnographic future for Tantric studies would enable “the development of a sharper grasp of both emic and etic concepts” and help “us to understand distribution of traits and processes of diffusion and appropriation” (Sihlé and Ladwig 2017, 117). Ethnographies of Tantra could then offer the documentation and analytical tools needed for broader theorizations, allowing particular communities of practitioners to be seen not solely in isolation, but also in cross-regional and inter-religious connections to one another, with a global and comparative outlook.⁵

Bridging textual studies on Tantra and fieldwork-based anthropology of religion, this volume strives to do justice to the multiplicity and fluidity of Tantric traditions in practice. We propose that ethnography—including digital ethnography—and the comparative outlook inscribed in the ethnographic method, can help remap the center and periphery of Tantric traditions.⁶ Furthermore, these studies help to rethink matters of authority and authenticity by accentuating the role of previously underrepresented actors of the Tantric world.

Tantras, *Tantricking*, and Tantric Culture

Looking for God on sacred scriptures [is] like
licking the paper where the word “sugar” is written
The mouth doesn’t learn [through it] the taste of sweetness.

—Baul song of Duddu Shah

Etymologically tied to the loom as the instrument (*-tra*) for weaving and extension (its verbal root $\sqrt{tan-}$ meaning stretching, extending, continuing, propagating, accomplishing, or performing), *tantra* is a Sanskrit term that refers to poetic composition and to textual corpora (often called *tantras*, but also *āgama* and *sānhitās*). In the colloquial compound *tantra-mantra*, used in many South Asian languages, it has a derogatory connotation (something like “hocus pocus”); it refers to incantations and magic practices for suspicious ends. Tantra can

also refer to a holistic system of philosophical and ritual knowledge (Kaviraj 1966; Satpurananda 1996).

The suffix *-tra* indicates an instrument or means to an action, and *tan-* is closely related to *tanu* (the body), allowing local interpreters to address Tantra as a range of actions and things people do with their body-mind complex, “a set of techniques”—or, as Geoffrey Samuel put it (2005, 31), a matter of “procedures” (16) rather than a set of beliefs that adepts follow. Tantric texts, medieval and modern, are often practice-oriented, contain ritual instructions, and underline the importance of experiential and embodied knowledge, as illustrated in the verses of Duddu Shah—a Bengali (Muslim) composer (1841–1911) whose songs directly referenced Buddhist Tantras.⁷

Recent scholarship on religious studies has emphasized practices and performed acts rather than beliefs and texts, investigating *religion-ing* as a verb rather than religion as a noun for assumed crystallized entities (Nye 2000). The study of lived religion breaks away from the preoccupation with official texts, institutions, and experts and instead lays emphasis on how religiosity, spirituality, and ritual meaning are lived out in the everyday practices of ordinary people (Ammerman 2016). Earlier, Catherine Bell (1992) had argued the need to substitute static definitions of “ritual” with a more attentive approach to the ritual processes of what she calls “ritualization.” Echoing these concerns, we are interested in understanding Tantra as *tantricking*, an ever-changing and complex array of things people do: actions, practices, and disciplines (*sādhana*) rather than any static or essentialized category that can be unequivocally called “Tantra” or “Tantrism.” In its applied definition, “Tantra” needs to be considered as plural and dynamic.

Tantrism as a single category has been questioned and ultimately abandoned as something constructed by modern, largely Western scholarship (Padoux 1986). *Tantricking* stands for doing Tantra, as a process rather than a given system, a single doctrine, or a “religion.” By focusing on Tantra as *tantricking* we highlight what Tantra means in practice, in its diverse and evolving manifestations. Adding a verbal suffix, we move away from singular reifications and emphasize instead the unstable character of traditions and communities that are constantly in the making. We explore Tantric traditions in the plural form (Gray 2016), given the extensive variety of lineages, teachings,

texts, and practices that bind communities across space and time, often in trans-sectarian and transregional ways. With our introduction of this term, we are not suggesting or imposing upon lived traditions a new normative category. Instead, we emphasize the need for new language we can use to discuss the dynamics encountered in the field.

The term *tāntrik* in some modern South Asian languages came to be associated with superstition, violence, and black magic. In India, negative perceptions of Tantra are generally paired with positive understandings of bhakti. These diverging popular perceptions are usually attributed to the influence of British and Christian Orientalist scholars, missionaries, and colonial administrators (Burchett 2019). As a result, some groups of practitioners, although directly connected to self-defined Tantric gurus, texts, or practices, wish to disassociate from the term. Others employ it as a source of status and prestige. In Southeast Asia and in the Tibetan region, the term *Tantra* might not be used at all. The Balinese *pedandas* who perform “tantric rituals” (Stephen 2015), the *ngakpa* (*snags pa*) ritual specialists of northern Nepal whom Nicolas Sihlé calls “tantrists” (2013), the Newar Vajracharyas whom Gellner called “Tantric priests” (1992) do not define themselves as Tantric,⁸ nor do the Fakirs and the singing beggars who populate this volume. Whether these practitioners prefer *Tantric* or other terms to define their traditions, their contribution and participation in the world of *tantricking* is unquestionable. The range of uses of the attribute *Tantric* as an etic, emic, or even post-emic term⁹ is contextual and always historically and geographically contingent. Gathering the insights of diverse practitioners, from Balinese priests to Bengali Vaiṣṇava beggars, under the rubric of *tantricking* disambiguates the problem of self-definition: while it does not reflect a local noun or an emic category, it allows their voices to participate in the larger field of Tantric studies, beyond the microscale of isolated regional ethnohistories.

Tantra in the colonial encounter was insistently portrayed as the ultimate Other, the “most extreme and perverse aspect of the Indian Mind—as the ‘extreme orient’ and ‘India’s darkest heart’ ” (Urban 2010, 148). The Orientalist gaze of colonial ethnographers represented Tantric groups as exotic and transgressive, while implicitly assisting in the so-called civilizing mission of British imperialism (Dirks 1997). Using the case study of British responses to hook-swinging, a body-piercing tradition aimed at propitiating the goddess, Dirks

examined “the institutional links between anthropological knowledge and the apparatuses of colonial state power” (1997, 186). Key to this process of policing tradition was the inclusion of elite Brahmans into colonial administration, which formed the “basis for increasing collaboration between Brahmanic precepts and Victorian morals during the nineteenth century” (1997, 200) in India.

Tantric traditions would have appeared barbaric, uncivilized, and outside the fold of Brahmanic Hinduism and “high” Buddhism in the eyes of colonial administrators and ethnographers. Colonial encounters with Tantric practitioners often came in the form of peripatetic warrior ascetics and mercenaries for hire who would go by different titles: yogis, siddhas, pirs, and *sheikhs*. Their personas challenged idealized images of Hinduism that emerged out of the Brahmin and British encounter (see Pinch 2006). The 1891 British imperial census designated many of these groups as “Miscellaneous and Disrespectable Vagrants,” and colonial officials began campaigns of disarmament and criminalization against them (White 2009, 240). Influenced by European notions of how a modern religion ought to be, high-caste Hindu reformers openly condemned communities that followed Tantric cultural traits, proclaiming them deviant sects (*apasampradāyas*; see Lorea 2018b) and denouncing them as filthy, depraved, and immoral (see Bhattacharya 1896). Modern-day reform-minded Buddhists incorporate European and American understandings of “authentic” religion to critique lived ritual practices and traditions associated with Tantra (Singh 2020).

Tantric studies scholars, as well as early ethnographies, contributed eroticized and exoticized representations of Tantric traditions, with titillating academic book titles prominently featuring sexuality, secrecy, and transgression. The most direct way in which today’s ethnographers of living Tantric tradition contribute to a more responsible scholarship is by de-Orientalizing representations of practitioners and their lives. For example, ethnographic portraits can demystify representations of Tantra, showing how several forms of Tantra are mainstreamed and institutionalized, where they became the official form of worship officiated by high castes or qualified monks. In Kerala, for instance, the designation *tantri* can apply only to Brahmans, and it is not tinged with any sense of heterodoxy or antinomy (Freeman 1997). In the Tiwari tribe of Assam, “mother Tantrics” (*tāntrik mā*) are female community leaders and ritual specialists who intervene when a

member of the community dies in order to settle unfinished communication between the departed and the bereaved ones (Borkatakya-Varma 2017). In Gujarat, a “safe, Sanskritic and Brahmanically-oriented Tantra” amenable to the taste and aspirations of upwardly mobile, urban middle classes pervades the shrines of the goddess servants (*sevak*) studied by Dinnell (2017). In Varanasi, the controversial image of the skull-bearing Aghor eating human flesh from the cremation ground has been substituted by a reformed Aghor lineage of social workers, providing sought-after cures for stigmatizing ailments like barrenness, skin diseases, and leprosy (Barrett 2008).

These portraits, rather than exceptional or eccentric, show Tantrics embedded in noncontroversial ways in their sociocultural environment; they have domains of expertise widely recognized in their social context and are not always considered unorthodox or transgressive. Ethnographies unsettle the assumption that Tantric traditions are anti-modern and anachronistic, revealing their skilful negotiation between modernizing expectations and fidelity to preexisting cosmological principles. Following Lidke (2017, 5), we could broaden the etymological root of *tan-tra* (instrument to weave) to include the ways Tantra has traditionally provided patterns and fabrics *interweaving* individuals with their social worlds.

Tantricking against the Trope of Loss

Textual studies often emphasize centers of imperial authority, elite specialists affiliated with the ruling class, and texts belonging to these groups as the starting point for understanding the origins and historical development of Tantra. Within these historical narratives, texts possessed and employed by an elite few provide the framework for writing about Tantra. For example, Ronald Davidson’s groundbreaking scholarship (2002, 2005) describes the social history of esoteric Buddhism through the lens of the “Imperial Metaphor.” Davidson describes how the language, rituals, and power dynamics of esoteric Buddhism came to reflect Indic feudal culture, and as esoteric Buddhism entered the Tibetan cultural sphere, “the systems of ritual, yoga, and meditation that so assisted the reemergence of Tibetan public life also embodied the Indian feudal world in its models and vocabulary” (2005, 6). While we acknowledge that the Imperial Met-

aphor paradigm provides insights into certain dimensions of Tantra's social history, we argue that ethnography brings in a broader range of voices and perspectives by centering the lived religious traditions of those often on the peripheries and margins of society. Through the process of fieldwork we find that Tantra does not simply come from the top down. Subaltern groups actively contribute to the ongoing practices, discourses, and experiences involved in the dynamic process of *tantricking*.

The concept of Tantra as lived processes and practices challenges the axiom that "Tantric traditions must be understood in terms of pre-modern scriptural traditions" (Flood 2006, 10) and that Indology, or "the philological study of Sanskrit[,] is the *sine qua non* for the study of Tantric traditions." This view projects authenticity into the bygone past, dislodging vernacular literature and lived practice as less authoritative than Sanskrit sources, and it inadvertently treats living lineages and contemporary practitioners as inauthentic, as spurious, or as curious remnants of an ancient past where "real" Tantric traditions (i.e., those based on scriptures) existed. We argue that participative, immersive, long-term ethnography can fill the gaps produced by such scriptist bias in the academic knowledge production on Tantra. Here, Gregory Grieve's insights on the study of Tantric rituals in Bhaktapur, Nepal, come to mind: "by privileging scriptural accounts based on the printed book, subalternative lived worlds are being lost because they are being resignified to support elite ideologies" (Grieve 2006, 5).

The focus on text contributed to a "trope of loss" that is common among Western scholars of Tantra. "Such is the broken world of Tantra at the dawn of the new millennium," asserts White (2000, 34–36)—a scenario of erosion and fragmentation after the end of royal patronage for Tantric officiants. The end of the "Tantric Age" (Burchett 2019, 60–63) is portrayed as coinciding with the spread of Turkish power across North India, from the beginning of the twelfth century, when institutional Tantra "largely collapsed, and the sphere of tantric religion underwent transformation and contraction, into less institutionalized lineages of yogis, warrior ascetics, rural tantric healers and magicians."

Studies on early Indian *tantras* became representative of the entire Tantric world of past and present, Indian and elsewhere. Indologists' opinion that Tantra's "real nature" is not in "the world outside" but in India (Padoux 2017, 175) glossed over the textual and

ritual vitality of Tantric traditions in East, Central, and Southeast Asia, as well as in Himalayan regions. Focus on premodern Indian texts also produced a lack of attention to the way Tantra adapted in the Sultanate period (thirteenth to sixteenth centuries) with the rise of influential bhakti movements, and over the colonial period to take the shape of what ethnographers find today, in Asia as well as in its global ramifications. The adaptations that took place in various specific regions and in vernacular linguistic milieus in the colonial era, mediated by occultism and the Theosophical Society, for example, often played a role in the transmission of Tantra to the West (Cantú 2021; Strube 2022).

While the so-called Tantric Age in the Indian subcontinent comes to an end with the hegemony of the Delhi Sultanate (Burchett 2019, 321; Flood 2006,71; Sanderson 2009), Tantric rituals, techniques, and imaginaries persisted, sometimes in Sufi disguise and within bhakti contexts. Tantric texts and practices traveled through inland and maritime routes and settled from India to other Asian regions. Despite the predictions of the “trope of loss,” Tantric religiosity is alive and well, if in forms and contexts often quite different from the royal patronage and public spectacles of the Tantric Age in medieval India that became so paradigmatic in outlining the characteristics of “real” Tantra.

Whether erotically engaged in consort practice or meditating in haunted cremation grounds, Tantric practitioners are often represented as anachronistic survivals of a golden Tantric past, when Tantric experts were not threatened by modernization and westernization. Indologists often confess these kinds of anxieties: “The traditions that do remain will inevitably continue to undergo change and probable erosion. . . . The Tantric body is at odds with modernity. . . . The order of being in the Tantric universe remains at odds with a materialist, evolutionary understanding of the world [and with] contemporary understandings of gender” (Flood 2006, 186). Indian scholar-practitioners have also internalized this view and have proudly appropriated it to assert the superiority of Tantric “nonmodernity” vis-à-vis Western modernity (Saran 2008).

Predictions of loss and erosion remain largely unaware of the vibrant sociocultural ecologies of living Tantric communities across Asia and beyond. Tantric studies scholars faithful to textual traditions have looked with contempt at modern and contemporary incarnations of Tantra in India as well as in the “West,” reducing neo-Tan-

tra to spiritual commodification and cultural appropriation (Timalsina 2011). However, anthropological perspectives abstain from this judgment and help us to understand these phenomena as meaningful and efficacious from the perspective of participants in new ritual contexts (be it the “*yonis* massage” discussed in Plancke 2020, the Western Shaktas studied by Perkins 2021, or the transnational Tibetan Tantrics in Joffe 2019).

Reversing the “trope of loss,” ethnographies of Tantra recover “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2002) in which Tantric traditions find a significant role and shape what modernity means to a local society. Ethnographies of Tantric traditions are less occupied with the search for origin and authenticity and more interested in what people think, feel, and do within diverse social, political, and economic contexts. For Indian, urban middle classes, Tantra evolves in conversation with burgeoning bourgeois patronage. Philipp Lutgendorf (2007) exemplifies how *tantrification* has operated with the process of upward mobility, while Dinnell studies a “consumer-friendly Tantra that is sufficiently mainstream to play a part in the performance of realizing and reiterating class status” (2017). While the Imperial Metaphor emphasizes ruling institutions as the foundations of Tantric societies, ethnographic studies of Tantra in Tibetan cultural regions provide insights into the ongoing dialogues, debates, and competitions for power and authority taking place on the ground (Mills 2010; Mumford 1989; and Singh 2020). Rather than being confined to rural and uneducated milieus as remnants of a lost Tantric splendor, living Tantric agents and institutions have an active role in negotiating what modernity means in the making of contemporary religious identities, both local and transnational. Based on his ethnographic fieldwork, Jeffrey Lidke views Tantra in Nepal as “a dominant social and cultural force” that has spread across levels of Nepalese societies to the extent that “its ubiquitous presence is unquestioned” just like “all Americans are to some degree influenced by ‘American values’” (2017, 17). Borrowing from Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, Lidke’s findings suggest that the Tantric Śrī-Vidyā tradition permeates all aspects of Nepalese society in the Kathmandu valley like a “complex cultural fiber that reveals itself in architectural codes, iconographic images, ritual practices, city layouts, regal insignia, and a host of other artifacts of material culture that stamp Nepal as a *Tantric culture*” (2017, 66, emphasis added). As suggested by Kripal (2012), Tantra in this

sense, as a singular noun, can be understood as a “deep world-view” that underlies the thoughts and actions of diverse communities that may or may not define themselves as Tantric. Our use of the term *tantricking* encompasses the domains of ritual and meditation and pervades spheres of everyday action as diverse as bathing, cooking food for guests, singing, practicing martial arts, and carving conch shells. This volume demonstrates that Tantric culture as deep worldview pervades people’s bodies, behaviors, and social relations in ways that can only be traced through extensive fieldwork.

Unity in Multiplicity: Key Terms and Frequent Features across Tantric Traditions

Tantric texts and practices emerged in the Indian subcontinent and formed distinct traditions in the second half of the first millennium. From India, Tantric traditions were disseminated to other parts of South, Central, East, and Southeast Asia. Modern scholarship often differentiated between Hindu and Buddhist Tantra and established that Tantric traditions significantly intersected with other religious communities, including Jainism, Sikhism, Bon traditions of Tibet, Chinese Daoism, and Shinto traditions of Japan. Mainstream academic narratives regularly omit the mutual impact of Tantric worldviews and practices on South Asian Islam, bhakti movements, and Sufi traditions (see Cashin 1995; Ernst 2005; Hatley 2007; Pechilis 2016; and Cantú 2019). These encounters and exchanges can be understood as multidirectional and mutually transformative, stemming from an early Tantric period when ritual spaces, terminologies, and technologies were shared as a common denominator (Flood 2006, 121) across diverse Asian “varieties of an over-arching tradition called Tantra” (White 2000, 8).

The Tantric way provides both a path for individual enlightenment and an empowerment for the alleviation of worldly suffering through the activities of Tantric healers (Gellner 1992, 307). Tantra according to Toffin (1984, 555) straddles various styles of religiosity being “at once an extremely popular religion . . . and an esoteric religion to the highest forms of which only a limited group has access.” Scholars of living Tantric traditions have often proposed a distinction between popular and erudite Tantra, “folk” versus “classic” (McDan-

iel 2004), “clerical” versus “shamanic” (Samuel 1993), Brahmanic versus tribal (Borkataky-Varma 2017), and “transcendental” versus “pragmatic” (Mandelbaum 1966, in Samuel 1993). These oppositions might be meaningful for local societies, but they are also animated by constant interactions, interdependence, and productive tensions.

In short, Tantric studies scholars have cogently argued the lack of a monolithic religion called Tantra, pointing instead to a complex array of ritual, theoretical, and narrative repertoires that are shared, in different form, across various religious, cultural, sociopolitical, geographical, and historical contexts (White 2000, 5). Yet there exists a grouping of common denominators and an emic perspective for Tantra that reveals a “single” yet plural tradition. After all, as White pointed out, one of the hallmarks of Tantra itself is *unity in multiplicity* (11).

For readers unfamiliar with seminal scholarly works that discuss Tantra broadly, we summarize here some of the “refrains” that appear most frequently among the shared features of Tantric traditions, but we supplement this “polythetic definition” (Brooks 1990, 52–72) with salient characteristics that emerge from ethnographic engagements with contemporary communities.¹⁰

- **Initiation.** Ritual initiation into a lineage, typically through the transmission of a secret mantra, followed by oral instruction and transmission of knowledge from a guru (called *lama—bla ma*—in Tibetan Tantra, or *muršid* in Islamic esoteric contexts) remain vital issues in Tantric communities. Initiation not only gives access to esoteric teachings but also projects the initiate into a new social network and a spiritual kinship with the community members who share the same mantra or learn from the same guru. Access to esoteric knowledge might be restricted to members of a certain caste, clan, or patrilineal descent (as it is the case for the Vajracharyas of Nepal, Balinese *pedandas*, Nayar of Kerala, etc.) or open to anyone who commits to the guru’s teachings (e.g., radically egalitarian Bauls and Fakirs of Bengal).
- *Sādhana* (in Sanskrit, and *sgrub thabs* in Tibetan). Humans are empowered with the possibility to realize the ultimate

truth and/or to become themselves divine through *sādhana* by means of embodiment. The world and the body in Tantric traditions are not an illusion (in the Vedantic sense of *māyā*) nor an inconvenient burden, but rather an appropriate vehicle to gain knowledge and access liberation. This implies “a particular attitude on the part of the adept towards the cosmos” (White 2000, 8), whereby the body and the universe reflect each other in an all-embracing net of correspondences that tie microcosm and macrocosm. Progress in *sādhana* is often codified in successive stages toward self-realization.¹¹

- Subtle body. With hydraulic flows, seminal essence (*bindu*), channels (*nāḍī*), and energetic centers (cakra), often represented as wheels or lotuses, the body is the central locus of Tantric practice. Yogic techniques are employed to control and manipulate these flows to enhance the practitioner’s body. Several traditions emphasize the awakening and upward rising of the creative energy *kuṇḍalinī* residing at the base of the spine. Tantric traditions prioritize embodied practice (*sādhana*) of yogic and ritual disciplines; for example, controlling breath, bodily heat, and ejaculation. These practices engender transformations as a result of the manipulation of bodily substances, fluids, and winds.
- Substances that non-Tantric members of the same social context might interpret as impure, unconventional, inauspicious, or “heating.” Alcohol, meat, blood, animal sacrifice, nonvegetarian offerings, and leftovers can be part of Tantric ritual offerings together with other particular means to worship or to propitiate various classes of deities. Examples might include fierce goddesses (e.g., Kali, Durga), dharma protectors (*chos skyong* or *dharmapāla*), tutelary deities (*yi dam* or *iṣṭa-deva*), and divine female entities (*ḍākinī* or *mkha’ gro ma*). In various cultural contexts, “a Tantra is defined not by the text bearing its name but by the living tradition(s) of practice relating to the main deities involved” (Samuel 1993, 204), and, in many cases, what makes a ritual Tantric is not only the nature of the gods or demons propitiated, but the means, the

materials, and media through which people interact with them (Gellner 1992, 76). In South Asia, these means are associated with the “left-handed” path of Tantric practice (*vāmācāra* or *vāmāmārga*).

- Male and female. A bipolar Tantric cosmology portrays two opposite principles that constitute the ultimate reality: variously termed (e.g., Śiva—Śakti, *puruṣa—prakṛti*, Rādhā—Kṛiṣṇa, or *yab-yum* in the Tibetan context) according to the different schools and lineages, and variously neutralized into an underlying oneness (e.g., as Void, *śunya*). A sexual symbolism is always present, at least implicitly (Gellner 1992, 143).¹² Realizing the unity of these two cosmogonic principles enables the practitioner to embody the divine as a ritual technique (e.g., for worship, healing, or divination purposes), either directly or through the use of an intermediary object—sometimes the body itself, a ritual object like the *vajra*, or a mesocosmic template (White 2000, 11–12) referred to as mandala or yantra—concentrating and representing the cosmic order and its elements. Practitioners (*sādhakas*, fem. *sādhikās*) reproduce the process of cosmogenesis and absorption into oneness within their own psychophysiological body (see Salomon 1991; Lidke 2017, 41–42; and Lorea 2018).
- Antinomian. Certain classes of practitioners adopt the use of substances, ethical codes, and behaviors that conventional society deems as polluting or impure. Tantric practice might be viewed as conceptually opposite to mainstream religious discipline, juxtaposed to Vedic concerns for ritual purity in India or to Buddhist monastic discipline in the Tibetan region (Sihlé 2013, 21). Some stages of practice may prescribe potent and dangerous substances (e.g., wine, blood, sexual fluids, ganja, psychoactive or poisonous substances) and places (e.g., the cremation ground) for ritual, alchemical, or meditative purposes. In some interpretations, these substances are employed to achieve a transcendence of dualism (pure/impure, moral/immoral, etc.) and a state of equanimity or all-acceptance. Even in “reformed” orders like the

Kina Ram Aghoris studied by Ron Barrett (2008), cremation-ground practices remain central, while the practice of embracing polluted substances was substituted by caring for and healing leprosy patients as a form of social service.

- The ritual use of specific sonic, photic, and kinesthetic media as sensational forms (Meyer 2011), such as sacred songs and dance, the use of mantras, yantras, specific gestures (*mudrā*) and postures *āsanas*. These components, especially the use of sonically powerful formulas or syllables—mantras—for meditative and ritual purposes, and energetically empowered geometric diagrams or mesocosmic objects called yantras and mandalas, are often listed as the flagship of Tantric practice. In some contemporary traditions, Tantra is synonymous with knowledge of mantras. Mantras are crucial for mind-body transformations (Rao 2018) and for traditional modalities of healing (Hyam, this volume). The sonic rather than the semantic dimension of a mantra can perform psychophysiological transformations, evoke deities, or represent the deity itself (Gellner 1992,147). However, to complicate the picture, some traditions interiorize such elements—for example, the sound of the breath itself might be regarded as ultimate *mantra*—and disregard the use of any mantra and ritual implement except for the body.¹³
- Performing rites and practices aimed at pragmatic goals for this-worldly results. Besides offering a path to liberation, Tantra provides ritual practices using the power of the Tantric guru, Tantric deities, and/or the energies of the mandala to manipulate the conditions of the mundane world. For this reason, in certain regions Tantra and magic are often conflated dimensions. Examples of these “freelance non-liturgical” practices (Gellner 1992, 145) might include ritual healing, exorcisms, amplifying wealth, bestowing peace and blessings, divination practices, and waging magical attacks to subjugate or annihilate specific human or nonhuman targets (*ṣaṭkarma*). The Tantric practitioner’s supernatural achievements (*siddhi*, often