Guest Editorial

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As a category, Tantrism is not—or at any rate was not until our days—an entity in the minds of those inside. It is a category in the minds of observers from outside. To use the fashionable jargon of today: it is an *etic*, not an *emic*, entity.

(Padoux 2002: 17)

I suggest that Tantra is a far messier product of the mirroring and misrepresentation at work between both East and West. It is a dialectical category ... born out of the mirroring and mimesis that goes on between Western and Indian minds. Neither simply the result of an indigenous evolution nor a mere Orientalist fabrication, Tantra is a shifting amalgam of fantasies, fears, and wish fulfillments, at once native and Other, which strikes to the heart of our constructions of the exotic Orient and of the contemporary West.

(Urban 2003: 3)

‘What is Tantra?’ is probably one of the most debated and still unsolved questions in the fields of Indology and Asian Religions (Hayes 2011: 222). Nowadays Tantra’s definition is far from the initial colonial description of this phenomenon ‘as the most horrifying and degenerate aspect of the Indian mind’ (Urban 2003: 2), a description which was probably influenced by the Christian belief of the British colonists; hence ‘Tantra was quickly singled out as India’s darkest, most irrational element’ (p. 3). In recent decades, however, academic interest in Tantra has been increasing, so that many scholars have tried to find a comprehensive definition able to describe Tantra, which is a religious phenomenon that throughout the centuries was appropriated by and adapted to the Indian mainstream religions in and outside South Asia.

1. Paolo E. Rosati obtained a PhD in Asian and African Studies (South Asia section) from Sapienza University of Rome, defending a thesis on the *yoni* cult of Kāmākhyā. Paolo’s main field of research is the medieval and pre-colonial development of Assamese Tantra, applying modern social theories. He is co-editing (with Andrea Acri) a volume provisionally entitled *Tantra, Folk Religions, and Magic: Experiences, Practices, and Practitioners at the ‘Margins’ of Monsoon Asia*.

The word *tantra* appeared in the Vedas (*R̥g Veda* 10.71.9; *Atharva Veda* 10.7.42) around 1500–1000 BCE, meaning ‘warp’ or ‘loom’. In the light of etymological interpretations (e.g. Flood 2006; Padoux 2010), the Vedic term Tantra seems related to the order of the phenomenal world (Kramrisch 1981). In the later *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (14.2.2.22), around 1200–900 BCE, Tantra took on the far more abstract meaning of ‘essential part’ or ‘framework’, whereas in the *Mahābhārata* (13.48.6) (around 500 BCE–500 CE) it meant ‘doctrine’ or ‘scientific work’.

In the seventh-century *Kādambarī* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, the term *tantra* describes a collection of manuscripts written on palm leaves (Kale 1956: 38–39). Thus, it seems clear that *tantra* does not have a univocal meaning preserved throughout the religious history of South Asia. Rather, its meaning was subject to changes and adaptations, perhaps as the result of a dialectic and/or fusion between different traditions.

Benard reports an interestingly emic explanation of Tantra, using a form of etymology:

Many contemporary Hindu ascetics define Tantra as action done with the body (*tanū*) for the purpose of protecting/bringing about release (*tra*). One etymology of Tantra divides the word into two roots, *tan* to stretch or expand and *tra* to save or protect. By combining these two roots, Tantra means the increase of methods available in order to liberate oneself from cyclic existence.

(Benard 1994: xii)

Hence, what is today defined as Tantra is a non-univocal religious phenomenon, which since the middle of the first millennium CE spread out from South Asia to Central, East and Southeast Asia, affecting both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical religious systems. There have been many attempts to classify Tantra in order to better understand and explain this heterogeneous phenomenon. Among these attempts, Gupta, Goudriaan and Hoens affirm that Tantra

stands for a collection of practices and symbols of a ritualistic sometimes magical character (e.g. *mantra*, *yantra*, *cakra*, *mudrā*, *nyāsa*) ... applied as means of reaching spiritual emancipation (*mukti*) or the realization of mundane aims, chiefly domination (*bhukti*) in various sects of Hinduism and Buddhism.

(Gupta, Hoens and Goudriaan 1979: 6)

They then enumerate eighteen characteristics of Tantra (pp. 7–9). However, the Tantric milieu is so heterogeneous that not all its sects share these characteristics. Brooks (1990: 52–72), following ‘a “brainstorming” session’ that took place ‘at one of the earliest conferences of the STS [Society for Tantric Studies]²

2. The STS is ‘a learned society established in 1986 to promote the academic study of Tantric traditions across regions and disciplines’. It is ‘a forum of exchange for scholars engaged in the academic study of Tantra both in its traditional Asian contexts and more recently in diverse global manifestations’ (www.tantricstudies.org). Its origin ‘may be traced back to

near Syracuse, NY (1988)³ (Hayes 2011: 222), uses a polythetic classification in order to define Tantra, so 'there is no a priori justification for deciding that any single characteristic is the most definitive' (Brooks 1990: 52–53). Brooks identifies ten main characteristics that Tantra may have (but that may also be shared by non-Tantric sects) (pp. 55–72), which 'combine theoretical and intellectual concepts with practical ritual formulations and prescriptions' (p. 55). Among these, apart from its connection to yogic practices and cosmo-physiology, he underlines an 'extra-Vedic' character of Tantra. This concept allowed Tantra to be considered as an 'anti-Vedic' phenomenon which does not reject Vedic and Hindu 'exoteric' corpora and practices but that 'subordinate[s] them either as separate or inferior forms of *sādhana*' (ibid.).

The identification of the elements which contribute to identifying Tantra is still extremely problematic because of their fluidity within the constructed category of Tantra. According to Padoux (2002: 17) 'Tantrism is a protean phenomenon, so complex and elusive that it is practically impossible to define it or, at least, to agree on its definition.' However, in the last three decades many studies have converged on the idea that there is a relationship between Tantra and *śakti* (power or energy) encompassing the divine and the political categories. Orzech (1998: 8) considers Tantra as a tool to spread religious and political ideas; while White (2000: 9) describes Tantra as 'a body of beliefs and practices' which are needed to manipulate the divine energy manifested in the concrete universe. Both these ideas seem to have been developed by Davidson (2002: 119–21), who links Tantra with kingship and power, and by Urban (2001: 779–80), for whom Tantra 'centers around the release ... *optimization and harnessing of power*'.

To muddle things even further, any attempt to define Tantra is messed up by the sub-classification of its sects into left-hand Tantra (*vāmācāra*) and right-hand Tantra (*dakṣiṇācāra*). Left-hand practices are those related to sexual and other transgressive performances; while right-hand practices 'grew out' from left-hand, probably to institutionalize Tantra (White 2000: 4–5). White (2003) has proposed another binary classification, into hard-core and soft-core Tantra. Hard-core Tantra is a more exclusive category that is composed by those elements of Tantric doctrine and practice that are not found in other Asian religions; soft-core Tantra, on the other hand, is a more inclusive category, whose doctrine and practices are found in almost all Asian religions since the Vedas. Soft-core Tantra sanitized those ritual performances

1984, when James H. Sanford of The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and Charles D. Orzech of The University of North Carolina Greensboro, circulated a letter to see if there was sufficient interest in forming an academic society dedicated to the study of Tantra. Right from the start, Sanford and Orzech were faced with the vexing categorical queries about just how "Tantra" would be defined, and whether we would study particular regions or religious traditions' (Hayes 2011: 222–23).

3. According to Hayes, participants identified around 25 characteristics of Tantra.

which were considered dangerous and contaminating for the practitioners; hence, in what is described as soft-core Tantra impure substances—such as flesh, blood, urine, faeces, sperm, woman's sexual fluids—are replaced with vegetable ones. On the other hand, hard-core Tantra includes sexual rites which are not found in any other Asian religion. These sexual rites are the translation into sexual terms of ritual decapitation, and hence are an exaltation of the combining symbolism of sex and death (White 2003: 13–17).

White, however,⁴ says he is now inclined to abandon his hard-core/soft-core terminology in favour of Saraogi's (2016, 2013) division into *haṭha*- (fierce) and *priya*- (pleasant) *melaka* (meeting), 'a special term denoting all kind of encounters with *yoginīs*' (Saraogi 2016: 51). Saraogi, studying the Vidyāpīṭha texts *Jayadrathayāmala*, *Brahmayāmala* and *Tantrasadbhāvantra*,⁵ points out a different classification of Tantra rituals. In the Vidyāpīṭha texts neither *haṭhamelaka* nor *priyamelaka* is univocally described. The *haṭhamelaka* is variously linked to the violence of blood sacrifices and the consumption of human blood and flesh. On the other hand, 'the potential sexual character of *priya*- is neither connected ... nor contradicted by *Jayadrathayāmala*' (p. 56). What Saraogi highlights is the supernatural and dangerous nature of the *yoginīs*, although the *Tantrasadbhāvantra* (p. 16) suggests *yoginīs* could also be born as human women. Nonetheless, sexual fluids seem to have been an important offering to call the *yoginīs* before the Tantrika, but usually they were obtained through sexual intercourse with a *dūtī* (consort).⁶

To sum up, defining Tantra exclusively on one of these classifications seems to be a flawed attempt, particularly in the case of the Vāmācāra religious landscape. Coming back to Padoux's observation quoted at the beginning of this editorial, perhaps it is necessary not only to consider Tantra through texts and rituals, but to remove our scholar-lens and consider far more the practitioners' view of Tantra—something that could drive Tantra either towards or away from what may be described as mainstream—and any psychological implication due to the forced encounter of South Asian societies with the British colonizers.

Another controversial issue regards the 'birth' of Tantra. Recently, in the British Museum website presenting the exhibition 'Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution',⁷ Tantra is called 'a philosophy originated in Medieval India'.⁸

4. Personal communication with D. G. White (email correspondence, 30–31 May 2019).
5. The Vidyāpīṭha tradition was influenced by the Kāpālika culture of cremation ground (Sanderson 1988: 670).
6. Personal communication with O. S. Saraogi (email correspondence, 30 June–10 August 2020).
7. The exhibition was organized by I. Ramos (Curator of South Asia section) from 24 September 2020 to 24 January 2021; see www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/tantra-enlightenment-revolution.
8. See <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/what-is-tantra> (accessed 24 September 2020).

Reflecting on this phrase, the question that arose in my mind was ‘is it correct to use the term “origin”, or should we use the plural “origins” when we discuss Tantra?’ The question is open, and closely linked to the issue of Tantra’s categorization. I am inclined to support the idea of multiple origins of Tantra, considering its heterogeneous sectarian traditions which developed across Asia. Indeed, there is no evidence to affirm a common origin of what we categorize as Tantra.⁹

Currently, there is no agreement on Tantra’s roots, and what Tantra was before its integration within the mainstream Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic religious theologies is still obscure. While some scholars claim Tantra as a mainly Brahmanic phenomenon (Flood 2006: 14), which was successively appropriated by non-Brahmanic religious systems, it cannot be ignored that a number of ethno-indological studies have pointed out that a cross-cultural dialectic between Brahmanic and South Asian non-Vedic traditions stands at the origin(s) of Tantra. The later involvement of heterodox Brahmanic Śaiva sects in the formation of Tantric Buddhism is still dubious.

Considering some pioneering studies, such as Zimmer (1953: 576–78), Eliade (1971: 203–05) and Kinsley (2008: 3), a convergence between Tantra and ecstatic cults has emerged. In this view, Tantra would be an affirmation of corporeal existence which finds its roots in non-Vedic substrata as well as in the autochthonous worship of Mother Goddesses across South Asia. Samuel (2008: 254–56) terms these traditions ‘proto-Śākta’ in order to describe religions and ideologies which were already part of the South Asian cultural identity, even before 1500 BCE when contacts between the inhabitants of Indian sub-continent with the Indo-Aryan speaking groups began. After this cultural encounter it is difficult to point out which religious and cultural patterns belong to the Indo-Aryan culture and which to the indigenous traditions of South Asia (Olivelle 2003: 273).¹⁰

What is known is that around the middle of the sixth century the concept of *śakti* arose, around two thousand years later than the encounter between Indo-Aryans and South Asian autochthonous people in the northwest of the Indian sub-continent. What happened during those two millennia is not known, although a proto-*śakti*, to adopt Samuel’s terminology, is already present in the Vedic corpus; in fact, the gods cannot trigger the cosmogony without any participation of the Goddess. The *śakti* pervades not only the cosmos but also the social order; hence, when the devotees, through the ritual praxis, break the tension between purity and impurity, they are breaking the order of the Vedic universe. In this way, practitioners are able to unleash the

9. For a very detailed introduction on the studies of Tantra and its geographical origin see Aciri (2017).
10. Unfortunately, there is also an essential lack of information regarding the non-Vedic Indo-Aryan speaking groups, which could either clarify or mess up the issue of the roots of Tantra.

śakti, ‘a suprasocial and suprahuman power’ (Urban 2001: 786). Where, when and how this theology was introduced within Vedic theology is unknown. There is, indeed, no indisputable evidence to prove that it was stimulated by encounter with the indigenous people of the Indian sub-continent. Therefore, due to the lack of material evidence, it is strenuously debated whether, to use again Samuel’s words, ‘the fierce goddess practices’ have their roots in ‘a Śākta or at least “proto-Śākta” tradition, which was gradually incorporated into Śaiva and Buddhist practice’ or, whether they result from ‘an essentially “orthogenetic” development out of the Vedic material’ (Samuel 2008: 255).

Wedemeyer considers those who try to understand the relationship between Tantra and ‘otherness,’ a term that describes the cultures at the margins of Brahmanism, to be ‘retrograde’ and ‘not serious’ scholars:

The notions of Tantrism as a primordial tradition of matriarchal mother worship, magic, and sex rites, or as representing a perennial ‘pre-Āryan’ religion of India—are largely defunct. On the other hand, more historically and anthropologically savvy writers continue to maintain that these rites and traditions must have come from similarly primitive tribal communities in India. This view consequently continues to attract considerable attention and assent in the contemporary scholarly accounts.

(Wedemeyer 2012: 24)

However, while Wedemeyer’s argument regarding the lack of material evidence to link the South Asian tribes of the first millennium CE with Tantra’s origins is indisputable, there is also no evidence to relate the birth of Tantra to the Vedic milieu. Each of these approaches to the issue seems to have its disadvantages. The first approach lacks any proof of ‘nonaffiliation’ to ‘specific institutionalized lineages’ (Davidson 2002: 171–72). The second approach is based on the identification of some transgressive practices preserved in the Vedas, although it seems to be not enough to trace a ‘continuity between these and later developments’; on the contrary, these Vedic inconsistencies could be used by mainstream religions to legitimize transgressive practices (Samuel 2008: 256).

Indological academia seems to be divided into two factions: on the one side, textual scholars who base their studies mainly on philological methods, and on the other, scholars who base their studies on other methodologies, sometimes failing to consider the written sources related to their research. My perspective coincides with the need to place on the same level textual studies and other disciplines—such as art history, archaeology, history, religious studies and ethnography—in order to have a comprehensive perspective of social phenomena (White 2003: 1–2).

This special issue on Tantra, which the editors of *Religions of South Asia* generously invited me to guest edit, is the result of a thematic panel (‘The Blend of Tantra: Continuity and Discontinuity within South Asian Mainstream Religions’) which I organized for the seventeenth conference of the European

Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) entitled *Religions: Continuities and Disruptions*, which was hosted at University of Tartu, Estonia, 25–29 June 2019. ‘The Blend of Tantra’ was an attempt to construct an international network of scholars involved in the field of Tantric studies in order to put into dialogue various disciplines and methodologies, and to underline the necessity of multidisciplinary dialogue for research on Tantra. Furthermore, ‘The Blend of Tantra’ was born from the need to explore ‘tribal and marginal communities’ not only as ‘the targets of Tantric transmission’ (Wedemeyer 2012: 26), or as the objects of ‘aggressive Hinduization’ since medieval times (Davidson 2002: 225), but also as a possible source of transmission of transgressive and highly polluting practices from the *periphery* to the so-called *centre*.

The six articles gathered in this collection analyse the intersection of Tantric phenomena with other doctrines—folk, vernacular and so-called ‘marginal’ traditions—from the Himalayas to southern India. They are placed in a regional order: from the northwestern to the northeastern extremes of the Indian sub-continent, then running to southern India. Through very different methodologies and disciplines—such as textual studies, ethnography, anthropology, religious studies, neurocognitive sciences and cognitive science of religions, which are often blended showing the need to work on an interdisciplinary ground to better understand Tantra—these articles show Tantra to be not a unitary category but a multifarious phenomenon which developed in South Asia in different ways.

Chiara Livio delves into the connection between the non-dual (*advaita*) Śaivism from Kashmir and Mañkha’s ‘court epic’ (*mahākāvya*), the Śrīkaṇṭha-carita. In the hymnic section of the seventeenth canto, the superiority of Śiva emerges through a systematic inclusion of all the other philosophical schools within its primary *advaita* view. This hierarchical strategy evokes that of the two major representatives of the Pratyabhijñā Tantric school, Utpaladeva (c.925–975 CE) and Abhinavagupta (c.975–1025 CE). Through an in-depth analysis of this section, the author establishes to what extent Mañkha’s hymn can be interpreted in the light of their doctrines.

Fabio Armand in his article analyses a connection between Tantra and *chemā pūjā*, an incorporation ritual practice of the Newar, a Nepali indigenous group living in the Kathmandu Valley. The Newars integrated Śiva-Mahādeva in their religious universe as the one able to transmit knowledge of ‘tantra-mantra’ to practitioners, through the mediation of the Himalayan figure of *Suna Jhākri*. Thus, Tantric orientations can integrate typical shamanic features. Hence, through a neurocognitive anthropological perspective, Armand underlines the body, and its neural dissociations generated at the temporo-parietal junction of human brain, as the meeting point between human (‘Self’) and divine (the numinous ‘Other’).

Through a preliminary study of *The Garland of Bones* (*Hāramālā*)—a Middle Bengali Tantric and yogic text in which the human body emerges as the main

subject—Lubomír Ondračka points out not only the material derived from the Kaula Sanskrit tradition but also its encounter and fusion with a ‘vernacular Tantric milieu’, in order to explain the unique material that appears in this Tantric vernacular text.

Paolo E. Rosati combines Religious Studies and Cognitive Science of Religions to investigate the Tantric cult of the *yonī* at the *pīṭha* (seat) of Kāmākhyā in Assam. The Goddess Kāmākhyā is outlined as a hyper-blend which fuses blood and sexual symbolism. Hence the double-sidedness of Kāmākhyā, who is a lovely and caring mother as well as a dangerous and dreadful mother. In this way, the article points out the cross- and trans-cultural superimposition in the construction of the Tantric Mother Goddess of Assam.

Through an anthropological approach, Monika Hirmer observes how practitioners of a contemporary southern Indian Śrīvidyā tradition negotiate continuity and discontinuity. Focusing on one of the tradition’s central rituals aiming at identifying with Devī, Hirmer traces the underlying forces that gradually replace its emphasis on the body and sexual pleasure with conventional and meditative practices—in the process refashioning the tradition and making it part of mainstream Śāktism. Undertaking an archaeologico-genealogical analysis, Hirmer observes which ontological predispositions allow for the transformed ritual to maintain efficacy, and which, instead, cause its inefficacy, inducing some *sādhakas* to secretly continue embodied practices.

Finally, Maciej Karasinski’s article discusses ritual aspects of the *śākta* Tantra of Kerala that weds ritualistic practices of Kashmirian Śaivism with indigenous forms of Goddess worship. The study is primarily based on readings of previously unstudied ritual texts of the *śākta* Tantric Brahmins. This article is an attempt to analyse the *śākta* tradition through philological study of its scriptures, but introduces additional information about the tradition gathered during the author’s fieldwork in Kerala. The article indicates that the *śākta* Tantra of Kerala seeks continuity and validity by integrating local cults of goddesses with Krama ritualism.

In conclusion, although this special issue does not presume to cover Tantra in all its inflections, it shows an indisputable level of heterogeneity of Tantra, geographically and historically. Notwithstanding, it has the merit of pointing out an in-depth cross-cultural dialectic that affects Tantra, across South Asia and throughout the centuries, through the use of a number of distinct disciplines and their interrelation.

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