

**MASTERS OF MAGICAL POWERS:  
THE NĀTH YOGIS IN THE LIGHT OF ESOTERIC NOTIONS**

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To Ivan and Cailleach

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## INTRODUCTION

How do we understand and represent the modes of thought and action of other societies, other cultures? Since we have to undertake this task from a Western baseline so to say, how are we to achieve the 'translation of cultures,' i.e. understand other cultures as far as possible in their own terms but in our language, a task which also ultimately entails the mapping of the ideas and practices onto Western categories of understanding ... ?

Stanley Tambiah,

*Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*

... by bringing together and juxtaposing two different, previously unrelated things, we can gain new insights into both. I am by no means searching for some universal archetype or deeper identity; rather, I am simply employing comparison as a pragmatic tool or heuristic device, which can help us to see new things that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Hugh B. Urban,

"Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power  
in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry"

The intention of this study is to argue a 'family resemblance' between Indian and Western forms of esotericism. Contextually, my argument is based on the interpretation of the anthology of yogic texts in medieval Hindi, known as the *Gorakh-Bānī* (*The Sayings of Gorakh*). The translation of this work, from which I quote extensively, has a joint authorship; it is the product of collaboration between the late Shukdev Singh and myself.<sup>1</sup> We translated the *sabad* and *pad* section of the anthology in Benares, India, in the period between November 2002 and April 2003,<sup>2</sup> and a number of

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<sup>1</sup> This translation is based on the collection of texts in medieval Hindi compiled by Pitambaradatta Barthwal and issued as *Gorakh-Bānī* (Allahabad: Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, 1955 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1942]).

<sup>2</sup> For these translations, see Shukdev Singh and Gordan Djurdjevic, trans., "The *Sabads* and *Pads* from the *Gorakh Bānī*," in Gordan Djurdjevic, *Masters of Magical Powers: The Nāth Siddhas in the Light of Esoteric Notions*, Ph.D. Diss., (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2005), 200-326.

shorter texts in December 2006. Because of the vernacular provenance of the original works, I tend to employ Hindi, rather than Sanskrit, forms of technical vocabulary.

*The Sayings of Gorakh* is traditionally ascribed to Gorakhnāth, a celebrated adept of *haṭha* ('intense') yoga, and one of the founders of the order (*sampradāy*) of the Nāth Siddhas. On the level of hermeneutical engagement with the text, and in my conceptual approach to the theory and practice of the Nāth Siddhas in general, I am suggesting that we cannot fully understand these yogis unless we conceptualize and theorize about the categories of esotericism, the occult, and magic (soon to be explained). In this sense, this study is, in addition to the translation of texts, an attempt at the translation of cultures, in the light of Stanley Tambiah's remarks quoted in the motto above. My central argument is that Indian tantra and *haṭha* yoga stand in analogical relation to Western esotericism and that these regional traditions, although rooted in their respective cultural environments and shaped by their particular historical trajectories, share a number of formal similarities. I will start my exposition by providing a necessary introduction to the phenomenon of the Nāth Siddhas, following which I will present my understanding of the ways that their enterprise could be interpreted as an esoteric current in general, and as a form of magic in particular.

The *Nāth Siddhas* - 'masters of magical powers' - is a generic term for a North Indian group of yogis who claim spiritual descent from the god Śiva, his human disciple Matsyendranāth, and the probable historical founder of their order, the great guru Gorakhnāth. Popularly known as the *jogīs*, they are credited with the development of the discipline of the cultivated body, *haṭha* yoga, the central practices of which concern the assumptions of various bodily postures and a regime of breathing exercises and meditations. The metaphysical aspect of this form of yoga implies the possibility of achieving immortality by inwardly drinking the elixir, produced through the sublimation of semen and the awakening of latent energies in the body. This position places the Nāth Siddhas within the broader milieu of Indian tantra.<sup>1</sup> The historical origins of the group lie in medieval times, and although the order still exists, it has

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<sup>1</sup> There is no scholarly consensus as to the tantric nature of the Nāthist yoga and some, notably David Gordon White, prefer to regard the tantra and yoga as discrete traditions. I do not engage the issue for the simple reason that my suggested conceptual category, that is to say esotericism, encompasses *both* tantra and yoga (or, at least, the *haṭha* yoga variety associated with the Nāths).



passed the zenith of its strength and influence. The literature authored by these yogis is preserved both in the Sanskrit texts and in vernacular poetry, traditionally transmitted, *inter alia*, through the medium of song by traveling ascetics.<sup>1</sup>

The Nāth Siddhas have been the subject of a relatively modest number of academic studies in the Western languages. In 1937, Mohan Singh authored a pioneering study, *Gorakhnath and Medieval Hindu Mysticism*,<sup>2</sup> which introduced the subject of the Nāth yogis and provided basic information on their most important adepts. Singh also speculated on historical issues, and presented some translations, the most important being the *Gorakh Bodh*, consisting of the conversation between Gorakh and his teacher Matsyendranāth.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by George Weston Briggs' *Gorakhnāth and the Kānpṛaṭa Yogīs*.<sup>4</sup> Briggs presents a wealth of information – for example, he has supplied a Sanskrit text of the *Gorakṣa Śataka* together with the English translation – but his exposition is marred by a condescending approach and poor organization of the material. More important was Shashibhushan Dasgupta's *Obscure Religious Cults*,<sup>5</sup> which treated the Nāths together with some non-orthodox Buddhist, Vaiṣṇava, and Muslim groups. Dasgupta is probably the first scholar who emphasized the connection between the techniques of *haṭha yoga* and Indian alchemy. Akshaya Kumar Banerjea wrote the most detailed study on the subject of the *Philosophy of Gorakhnath*,<sup>6</sup> mostly based on material from Sanskrit sources. Some of the most interesting and valuable work on the Nāth yogis was done by Gopinath Kaviraj, who also focused on doctrinal issues and Sanskrit texts, exemplified by essays such as

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Edward O. Henry, *Chant the Names of God: Musical Culture in Bhojpuri-speaking Area* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1988), in particular 160-89; Ann Grodzins Gold, *A Carnival of Parting: The tales of King Bharthari and King Gopi Chand as Sung and Told by Madhu Natisar Nath of Ghatiyali, Rajasthan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; and Catherine Champion, "A Contre Courant (Uṭṭā Sādhana). Tradition Orale du Nord-est de l'Inde: L'exemple des Recits Chantes Bhojpuri" in *Living Texts from India*, eds. Richard K. Barz and Monika Thiel-Horstmann (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1989), 63-85.

<sup>2</sup> Mohan Singh, *Gorakhnath and Medieval Hindu Mysticism* (Lahore: Oriental College, 1937).

<sup>3</sup> See *ibid.*, 48-67.

<sup>4</sup> George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnāth and the Kānpṛaṭa Yogīs* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. Calcutta, 1938]).

<sup>5</sup> Shashibhushan Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Akshaya Kumar Banerjea, *Philosophy of Gorakhnath: With Goraksha-Vacana-Sangraha* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. Gorakhpur, 1962]).

“Philosophy of the Nāthas,”<sup>1</sup> and “Some Aspects of the History and Doctrine of the Nāthas.”<sup>2</sup>

Charlotte Vaudeville provided an important contribution by drawing attention to the Nāthist influence on the poetic imagery of the great Kabīr.<sup>3</sup> Ann Grodzins Gold has focused her research on the tension between the ethos of renunciation and the pleasures and drives of domestic life, as attested in the cycle of stories about the kings, and subsequent yogis, Bhārthari and Gopīcand.<sup>4</sup> The work of Véronique Bouillier deals with the Nāths in Nepal, their relationship with the ruling dynasties, and her particular insistence that the main aspect of the yogic stories and legends is related to the *princely* character of their heroes.<sup>5</sup> Catharina Kiehnle has produced a study on the yoga of the Nāths based on Marāṭhī sources attributed to the famous Mahārāṣṭrian saint Jñāndev.<sup>6</sup> David Cashin authored a very fine study of what he designates as ‘the Sahajiyā-Nāth-Sufi confluence in Bengal.’<sup>7</sup> The relationship between *jogīs* and sufis is also admirably explored in the series of essays by Carl Ernst.<sup>8</sup> The most comprehensive work so far is a study by David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body*.<sup>9</sup> White’s work, a veritable *magnum opus*, is very broad in its scope, although the kernel of his book centers on yogic internalization of the methods of Indian alchemy.

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<sup>1</sup> Gopinath Kaviraj, “Philosophy of the Nāthas,” in *Selected Writings of M. M. Gopinath Kaviraj* (Varanasi: Mata Anandamayee Ashram, 1990), 159-64.

<sup>2</sup> Gopinath Kaviraj, “Some Aspects of the History and Doctrines of the Nāthas,” in *Notes on Religion and Philosophy* (Varanasi: Sampurnanand Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya, 1987), 56-79.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville, *Kabīr* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Ann Grodzins Gold, *Carnival of Parting*; “Gender and Illusion in a Rajasthani Yogic Tradition,” in *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, eds. Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret A. Mills (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 102-35; “The Once and Future Yogi: Signs of Rule and Renunciation in the Rajasthani Tale of Gopī Chand,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 48, 4 (1989), 770-86.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Véronique Bouillier, *Ascètes et Rois: Un monastère de Kanphata Yogis au Népal* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1997); “Growth and Decay of a Kanphata Yogi Monastery in South-West Nepal,” in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 28.2 (1991), 151-170; “The King and His Yogī: Prithvi Nārāyaṇ Śāh, Bhagavantānāth and the Unification of Nepal in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Gender, caste and Power in South Asia: Social Status and Mobility in a Transitional Society*, ed. John P. Neelsen (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), 3-21.

<sup>6</sup> Catharina Kiehnle, *Songs on Yoga: Texts and Teachings of the Mahārāṣṭrian Nāths* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> David Cashin, *The Ocean of Love: Middle Bengali Sufi Literature and the Fakirs of Bengal* (Stockholm: Association of Oriental Studies, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Some of his work is available online: <http://www.unc.edu/%7Eernst/articles.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

## THE OCCULT, THE NĀTH YOGIS, AND TANTRA

There is one element, fundamental to the phenomenon of the Nāth Siddhas, which although recognized by scholars remains insufficiently conceptualized. What I have in mind is that particular aspect of religious thought and behaviour that is attested cross-culturally and often designated under the rubric of magic, the occult, or esotericism. I will elaborate on these concepts in Chapter One, but I provide basic definitions immediately, so that the reader may follow the line of my argument.

By *magic* I mean an action, often ritual and symbolic in character and metaphysical in its assumptions, by which the performer attempts to acquire power and induce desired change. Unlike prayer, which is based on expectation of divine grace, the effects of magic are supposed to ensue as a necessary outcome of the performed act(s). I will subsequently argue that in magic power has a sacral character, that its driving mechanism is the cultivated imagination, and that its nature is 'erotic.' Magic is also one of the occult disciplines or 'sciences.'

The *occult* itself is sometimes taken as a synonym for magic, at other times its semantic range is conflated with esotericism.<sup>1</sup> I try to maintain a distinction, put forward by Edward Tiryakian<sup>2</sup> between esoteric theory and occult practice. The gist of Tiryakian's analysis is that the occult practices rely on hidden forces in nature and the human mind in order to produce empirical results. The occult disciplines include magic, alchemy, divination, astrology, and the like.

The occult practices rest on the assumptions of *esoteric* theory. Hugh Urban explains the concept as follows: "Derived from the Greek term *esoterōs*, esotericism refers to what is 'inner' or hidden, what is known only to the initiated few, and closed to the majority of mankind in the exoteric world."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most fundamental esoteric idea consists of the notion of correspondence between various aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> To give just one example, in a recent and excellent study on the place of occultism in the formation of modernity, the author makes a reference to the prolific writer A. E. Waite who "noted that the terms 'transcendental, Hermetic, Rosicrucian, mystical, esoteric or occult' were used 'indiscriminately' during the nineteenth century..." Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 52. Owen herself blurs the distinctions when she refers, for example, to "'esoteric philosophy' or occultism." Ibid., 4.

<sup>2</sup> Edward A. Tiryakian, "Towards the Sociology of Esoteric Culture," in *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (November 1972): 491-512.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh B. Urban, "Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry," in *Numen*, 44 (1997), 1.

reality. This idea leads to the postulate of the human being as a *microcosm*, or to use the Sanskrit term, *kṣudra brahmāṇḍa*. The whole world, god(s) included, is analogous with and / or present within the hidden aspects of the human body and mind. This orientation determines the typically esoteric mode of spiritual attention, which is often characterized by the inward turn and the rejection of trappings of external (exoteric) religion.

To return to the *jogīs*: they are customarily described as being involved in magical practices and as possessors of esoteric knowledge and occult powers.<sup>1</sup> They have diamond and eternal bodies, fly through the air, generate living beings out of ashes, and perform all sorts of other magical feats – generally associated with the eight supernatural powers or *siddhis*.<sup>2</sup> According to Dasgupta, “The general religious nature of Nāthism is characterised by a wide-spread belief in *occult power* attained through the practice of yoga.”<sup>3</sup> George W. Briggs, in his pioneering work on the *jogīs*, declares that, “Quite in keeping with the claims to supernatural power, which skill the Yoga is supposed to confer, is the popular belief that Yogīs work in magic.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar manner, Catherine Champion states that “Gorakhnāth is described [in the yogic lore] as a magician, as a *vidyādhara* or the possessor of *the occult powers*, the knower of *the occult science*.”<sup>5</sup> The category of the occult is not, however, engaged in a serious way nor is it given adequate treatment in the academic works dealing with the Nāths. This attitude would be less problematic if the occult was generally well known and clearly understood. However, this is hardly the case. There is little in the literature on the

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<sup>1</sup> The terms ‘esotericism,’ ‘magic,’ and ‘occult,’ will be defined and elaborated upon in a due course. At this stage, I am using them interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> “The eight supernatural faculties, viz., *Aṇimā* (the power of becoming as small as an atom), *Mahimā* (the power of becoming big), *Laghimā* (the power of assuming excessive lightness at will), *Garimā* (the power of becoming as heavy as one likes), *Prāpti* (the power of obtaining all objects at will [sic.; ‘will’ is meant]), *Prakāmya* (the power of obtaining all objects of pleasure at will), *Īśitva* (the power of obtaining supremacy over everything) and *Vasitva* (the power of subduing, fascinating or bewitching) are well known in the school of yoga. ... These powers are generally known as the eight power of the lord Siva himself, who is the lord of yoga. The Nāth Siddhas ... displayed throughout these eight supernatural powers.” Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, 212. The *locus classicus* indicating these powers (*aiśvaryas*) is Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* III: 44, glossed by Vyāsa and Vācaspati Miśra. See also, *inter alia*, *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* III: 8; *Śiva Saṃhitā* III: 52, 78, V: 142; and *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* 152.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 211. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Champion, “A Contre Courant” 68. Emphases added.

Nāths that provides adequate answers to the questions: What is the occult, what are its ideological presuppositions, its cross-cultural similarities and regional particularities?

This same critical remark – the lack of adequate theoretical engagement with the category of magic or esotericism – can be applied to tantric studies in general. There is a noticeable tendency to emphasize and focus on the spiritual and philosophical aspects of tantra, at the expense of its ‘dark’ side characterized by the occult quest for power. Jeffrey Kripal makes the following pertinent remark: “Too often scholars have equated Tantra with a philosophical school enshrined in ancient Sanskrit texts and have ignored the popular connotations of the term *Tāntrika*, almost all of which revolve around the notions of *magical power*, strangeness, seediness, and sex.”<sup>1</sup> He goes on to comment that, “As scholars have pointed out, perhaps too often, Tantra is an *esoteric culture*, infamously difficult to study.”<sup>2</sup> Douglas Renfrew Brooks also sees the particularity of tantras and *tāntrikas* in the context of “their popular associations with eroticism, alchemy, and magic”<sup>3</sup> and claims that “Tantric tradition ... provides a wealth of materials for studies in *esotericism*, mysticism, ritual ...”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, according to Teun Goudriaan, “The magic lore ... is almost universally present in Tantric literature...”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it appears a desideratum to conceptualize the issue of esotericism as it manifests itself within the framework of tantra. What is exactly the occult? And what do we *mean* by magic?

I propose to demonstrate that there are advantages in applying the conceptual vocabulary and theoretical conclusions of Esoteric Studies to the study of Indian tantra and to the Nāth Siddhas as a group with tantric connections. I intend to show that even the Faivrian, the most formal, model of Western esotericism (*vide infra*) exhibits a number of similarities when correlated to its Indian counterpart. I want to make it evident that in establishing this correlation we gain a deeper and novel understanding of both esotericism and yoga. My purpose is then to broaden the field of research

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 28. Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Renfrew Brooks, *The Secret of the Three Cities: An Introduction to Hindu Śākta Tantrism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>5</sup> Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism* (Leiden and Köln: E. J. Brill, 1979), 23.

related to the disciplines of esoteric and tantric studies, to indicate the presence of cross-cultural similarities, and to suggest some theoretical improvements. In that sense, this study is a response provoked by the comments made by Douglas Brooks and Hugh Urban, both of whom voiced a complaint that there is a lack of comparative dimension in the scholarship on tantra and esotericism.<sup>1</sup>

I must emphasize at the outset that I will not be engaging in a comparative effort in the classical sense. Rather, I intend to construct what Hugh Urban refers to as “a *dialectical* image – born out of the mirroring and mimesis that goes on between Western and Indian minds.”<sup>2</sup> My purpose then lies in the effort to understand a particular yogic / tantric manifestation, the Nāth Siddhas, in the mirror of the theoretical apparatus developed in the study of (Western) esotericism. In order to do so, I will take advantage of a model established in the work of Antoine Faivre, Arthur Versluis, Ioan Couliano, and other scholars. This model, taken *cum grano salis*, will be amplified, and perhaps modified by my application of it onto a non-Western subject. The advantages of this application need at this point to be addressed.

#### ADVANTAGES OF THE MODEL OF ESOTERICISM

An apparent objection could be made: What is the purpose of applying the model of esotericism to the study of the Nāth Siddhas, since this is a Western and not Indian category? However, as C.J. Fuller argues, “Anthropological or sociological analysis abstracts from empirical data and also attempts to make them intelligible by using concepts and deploying generalizations that are formulated comparatively and rarely corresponds precisely to indigeneous categories in any particular society.”<sup>3</sup> The use of native vocabulary in constructing scholarly conceptual apparatus is not in and of itself a guarantee of clarity and accuracy. It is now widely known how flawed are the

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks, *Secret of the Three Cities*, 210, n. 4, writes that “there has so far been no systematic effort to provide a theoretical footing for studying Tantrism in the context of comparative studies in religion.” In his assessment of the state of esoteric studies, Hugh B. Urban makes a comment that “what is still lacking, I believe, is any broader cross-cultural and comparative-framework; nor has there been adequate attention given to the concrete social and political role of the esoteric traditions within their historical context.” “Elitism and Esotericism,” 2.

<sup>2</sup> Urban, *Tantra*, 3. The concept of the ‘dialectical image’ was advanced by Walter Benjamin. See his *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 10.

concepts such as ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Tantrism,’ although they are based on Indian terms. The point is therefore moot.

A more proper way of looking at the model of esotericism would be to regard it as scholarly and theoretical, rather than as ‘Western’ category. Without denying the historical continuity and the presence of common elements, which make it possible to argue the existence of specifically Western forms of esotericism, we need to keep in mind that the term itself is relatively recent.<sup>1</sup> In addition, it is much more rarely used as a self-referential designation of identity by esotericist themselves than by scholars who employ the term. For that reason, Kocku von Stuckrad and Lee Irwin advise against the usage of the reifying noun ‘esotericism’ and suggest instead, and as more appropriate, the adjective ‘esoteric.’<sup>2</sup> There is no esotericism as such, but certain modes of thought, discourse, and action may be qualified as esoteric on the basis of certain characteristics than distinguish them from what may be considered their exoteric counterparts.

The advantage of employing the category of esotericism lies in the prospect of making conceptualizations about Indian yoga and tantra richer and clearer, the nature of knowledge being such that it thrives on comparisons. In doing so we are simultaneously adding a further shade of meaning and theoretical complexity to the conceptual model of esotericism. Seen through various lenses, the object under scrutiny yields more information, just as adjusting the lenses to various objects improves their own capability. Whether we approach the Nāths by focusing on the more formal aspects of esotericism (as in Faivre’s model), or in the light of discourse about the possession of superior knowledge (as suggested by Stuckrad), or in terms of their search for gnosis (Versluis), the fact is that these are all fruitful avenues of

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<sup>1</sup> Faivre acknowledges that the noun ‘esotericism’ came into use at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 5.

<sup>2</sup> See Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2005). Consonant with Stuckrad’s position, Lee Irwin argues: “What exactly is the meaning of the term ‘esoteric’ in the context of the history of ideas? Perhaps ‘esotericism’ is more an adjective than a noun, a descriptor whose function is to denote an interest whose salience or significance is more emergent, exploratory and creative speculation than a factual account signifying membership in a given order or holding a particular view of the world. Perhaps “esotericism” is a signifier whose reference is more a process of discovery and exploration than a simple statement of cultural identity - particularly with reference to its most creative representatives.” Lee Irwin, “A World Full of Gods: Panpsychism and the Paradigms of Esotericism.” A paper delivered at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Association for the Study of Esotericism, College of Charleston: May 29- June 1, 2008; unpublished manuscript.

research. In the process, we not only learn something more about the Nāths but equally so about esotericism as a scholarly model.

In a recent paper, June McDaniel cautioned about the danger of parochialism, inherent in the insistence that esotericism is solely Western phenomenon. She argued for advantages of applying the category cross-culturally by stating:

If Western Esotericism is unique, it is also a culture-bound phenomenon, which cannot speak to world religious experiences. ... However, if esotericism is not bound to a particular time and place, but instead reflects a set of experiences, which have existed in many ways within human history and culture, it becomes more valuable for study. ...World phenomena are more significant than local phenomena, simply because there is more data to examine and richer comparisons are possible.<sup>1</sup>

Echoing the expression of the physicist Peter Russell, Lee Irwin similarly suggests a ‘convergence of paradigms’ as the most appropriate methodological principle in the study of esotericism.<sup>2</sup> In the context of comparison between Indian and Western esoteric traditions, the task is additionally appropriate due to the presence of linguistic denominators, theoretical speculations, and ritual activities that closely resemble what we in the West imply by the terms esotericism, the occult, and magic.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE PLAN OF THE WORK

The central thesis of this study argues that there is a formal compatibility or ‘family resemblance’ between the principles of (Western) esotericism and the yoga of the Nāth Siddhas. That the previous scholarship has neglected to explore this issue in a meaningful and thorough way is due, I suggest, to the residual tendency to marginalize

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<sup>1</sup> June McDaniel, “Is There an Eastern Esotericism? Siddhis, Magicians and Spiritual Bodies in Some Bengali Yogic and Tantric Traditions.” A paper delivered at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of the Association for the Study of Esotericism, College of Charleston: May 29- June 1, 2008; unpublished manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> See Irwin, “World Full of Gods.”

<sup>3</sup> McDaniel mentions the following as terms falling within the semantic range of ‘esoteric’: *adhyātmika* [spiritual]; *alaukika jñāna* [non-worldly knowledge]; *gupta sādhanā* [hidden practice]. McDaniel, “Is There and Eastern Esotericism?”



the occult.<sup>1</sup> In *chapter one*, after the Nāth Siddhas have been introduced and their project briefly described, in order to clarify the conceptual apparatus utilized in this work, I proceed with an elucidation of the principles of esotericism as defined by Antoine Faivre. I then demonstrate that all four major and two minor characteristics that are supposed to be essential to Western esotericism have their formal parallels in the theory and practice of yoga. *Correspondences* are observed (the Indian term for them is *bandhu*); *imagination* is analogous to meditation and visualization; *living nature* is exemplified by *śakti* (which is microcosmically manifested as *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, often glossed in “The Sayings of Gorakh” as ‘the fire of *brahman*,’ *brahmāgni*); and *transmutation* has its counterpart in the practice of reversal (*uḷṭā sādhanā*). As for the two minor elements of esotericism, the *transmission* of knowledge is in yoga also done through the rituals of initiation, and the fact that similar ideas and practices are also found among Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim esoteric groups points to the presence of the *practice of concordance*. The formal correspondence between these two esoteric traditions is thus both observable and meaningful.

Next in the chapter, I introduce the topics of magic and alchemy, as the particular branches of esotericism that are of relevance to yoga as practiced by the Nāths. I have to clarify that various conceptual models used to explain the style of yoga advocated by Gorakhnāth are adopted for the purpose of throwing light on the topic from various angles. It is a matter of selection and emphasis, and not a contradiction, that I designate this form of yoga in general terms as esotericism and at other times, more specifically, as magic or alchemy.

I define magic on the basis of three principles. 1. It is oriented towards power (where power, as Marcel Mauss has argued, is understood as the sacred). 2. It is, according to the historian of religions Ioan Couliano,<sup>2</sup> a science of the imaginary. 3. It is,

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<sup>1</sup> This tendency has a historical genesis and it is related to changes in Western culture and epistemology. See, for example, Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and, approaching the issue from a different angle, Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970 [1<sup>st</sup>. ed. published as *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966]).

<sup>2</sup> “The magic that concerns us here is theoretically a *science of the imaginary*, which it explores through its own methods and seeks to manipulate at will.” Couliano, *Eros and Magic*, xviii; emphasis added.

again with Couliano, a form of eros (that is to say, a practice oriented towards union).<sup>1</sup> My conclusion is that all three of these elements have their counterparts in the yoga of the Siddhas (as well as in the tantric traditions in general). 1. The Nāths are oriented towards power (the *siddhis*), the sanctity of which is the prerogative of the lord Śiva and his Śakti, who are the divine embodiments of power. 2. The principle of the imaginary is related to the work on the subtle body (*sūkṣm śarīr*) and to what is in yoga understood as the practice of meditation (*dhyān*). 3. Yoga is akin to eros both etymologically (*yoga* means ‘union’) and functionally (*śamādhi*, as the goal of yoga, is the union between subject and object). Magic and yoga are therefore in accord in their common orientation towards power, use of the praxis of imagination, and the erotic nature of their mode of operation.

As far as *alchemy* is concerned, it may be best defined as the science of transmutations, which are symbolized by the changes of base metals into gold. In the case of the Nāth yogis, transmutation is understood as the principle and practice of reversal (*ulṭā sādhanā*). I maintain that the practice of reversal is the central, most important practice in Gorakhnāth’s system. Reversal is evident in the style of yoga, where the practitioner has to return the semen, the *bindu*, from the genital level to the top of the head. In the rhetoric of the Nāths, this is represented by ‘upside-down’ poetry and by the employment of the ‘lead’ of vernaculars and quotidian themes in order to signify the ‘gold’ of spiritual truths. The principle of reversal is observable even in the initiatic structure of the Nāth Siddhas, where the young pupil Gorakhnāth replaces (against the traditional custom) the old teacher Matsyendranāth as the ultimate authority.

The rest of the work is devoted to contextualizing of the principles of esotericism, through their application as conceptual and methodological tools, in an effort to understand the poetry of *The Sayings of Gorakh*. In order to facilitate this task, I take the central concept and central practice of the Nāth Siddhas to be the anchors of my exposition. The central concept is the *bindu*. It is the most important element in the theory and practice of the *jogīs*. I use it as the focus of analysis and the point of

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<sup>1</sup> “The Renaissance conceived of the natural and social world as a spiritual organism in which perpetual exchanges of phantasmic messages occurred. That was the principle of magic and of Eros, *Eros itself being a form of magic*.” Ibid., 221; emphasis added.

departure in subsequent chapters. The central practice is reversal. It provides us with the rationale to follow the transmutations of the *bindu*, from its material to its final spiritual form.

I start with the *bindu* at the material level, and in *chapter two* I explore correspondent topics, the body and sexuality, in accordance with the principles of esotericism and in relation to power. Both body and sexuality have their exoteric and esoteric aspects. For example, sexuality as envisioned by Gorakhnāth is either projected inwards, where it consists of the ‘erotic’ (and esoteric) union between Śiva and Śakti,<sup>1</sup> or, if it entails the physical act of sex, it involves the retention of semen and renunciation of desire. It is on these points that Gorakh parts ways with his teacher Matsyendranāth, and criticizes him for indulging in sex in a manner that neglects these principles.

The body, as the locus of the main yogic work, has its esoteric counterpart in the so-called subtle body (*sūkṣm śarīr*). I correlate the subtle body and the work done with and upon it to the theory and practice of imagination. In addition, I explore in more detail the thesis that magic, yoga, and eros are compatible categories

The material *bindu*, on its reversed journey toward the head, assumes at the intermediary level of this trajectory the forms of sound and speech. *Chapter three*, therefore, attempts to interrogate the esoteric aspects of speech and its relation to power through analysis of *The Sayings of Gorakh*. The concepts of *mantra*, *sabad*, and *nād* are explored as well as the correlation between speech and *bindu*. It is emphasized that the rhetoric of the Nāth Siddhas reflects the general principle of reversal, as exemplified both in the form and content of a number of poems in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. This chapter concludes with the suggestion that esotericism itself may even be understood as a particular mode of discourse.

Following the reversed journey of the *bindu*, we finally arrive at the level of the head, where the *bindu* is transmuted into the elixir, perceived as a light, and psychologically experienced as the bliss of transcendental gnosis (*gyān*). *Chapter four*, consequently, engages the issues of ideology, of ethics, and the role of mind in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Śiva-Śakti polarity is in *The Sayings of Gorakh* often replaced by a correspondent polarity of the energy conduits, the male *piṅgalā* and female *iṛā*, which are found and operative in the subtle body.

discipline of yoga. I suggest that the ideology of the yogis is esoteric, among other reasons, because it is mostly concerned with lineages and gurus, whose importance in esotericism is quintessential. Their ethics is, similarly, related to the requirements of yoga and differs from exoteric morality, exemplified by the *varṇāśramadharmā*. The ideal achievement of the mind developed through the practice of yoga is wisdom, gnosis; it must be pointed out that this is an experiential and not erudite wisdom. And functionally, the mind is employed in the practice of meditation, which is analogous to what Western esotericism understands as the work of imagination.

In the *concluding chapter*, I argue that the ‘translation of cultures’ is feasible and that the conceptual assets of esotericism enrich our understanding of yoga. Seen through the lenses of magic, the Nāths gain in legibility. I also suggest, with Peter Lamborn Wilson, that esotericism should be seen as a means of cultural transfer. The commensurability between Indian and Western esoteric tradition is explained, in addition to possible historical contacts, through the proposal, advanced by Ioan Couliano, that the unity of humankind lies in the operations of the human mind.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE ESOTERIC CULTURE THE NĀTH YOGIS: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I thought it possible to oppose a typological comparison between historically independent phenomena, on one hand, and a more strictly historical analogy on the other ... I have permitted myself to be guided by chance and curiosity, not by a conscious strategy.

Carlo Ginzburg, *Myths, Emblems, Clues*

Let us also now note that a historical survey cannot be contemplated here, both because there is no relevant material for a history of ideas in India and because the Indians themselves - even though they may have disputed against each other - have always been inclined to expound their various systems *sub speciae aeternitatis*, and not according to their historical unfolding.

André Padoux,

*Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*

#### YOGA OF THE NĀTH SIDDHAS: MAJOR FEATURES

The Nāth Yogis or the Nāths Siddhas, which name can be translated as the ‘Master Adepts’, and whose other appellations include the *Gorakhnātīs*, the ‘split-ear (*kānpḥaṭa*) yogis,’ or colloquially the *jogīs*, appear as an organized order (*saṃpradāy*) in North India somewhere between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.<sup>1</sup> Indian tradition recognizes the Nine Nāths and Eighty-Four Siddhas, the two groups being occasionally confused. The originator of the order of the Nāth yogis is believed to be the great god Śiva, wherefrom his designation as Ādi Nāth, or the ‘Original Master.’ His immediate human disciple was the controversial figure Matsyendranāth, whose most important disciple, the great guru Gorakhnāth, is often deified. The primary characteristic of this group of yogis

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<sup>1</sup> See the admirable feat of sorting out the history of the order in White, *Alchemical Body*, especially pp. 78-122.

consists in their insistence that the ultimate spiritual goal, which in this case entails the acquisition of immortality and the assumption of the status of a ‘second Śiva’, is attainable through the manipulation of the body, bodily fluids, and currents of energy, through the regime of the ‘intense’ i.e. *haṭha* yoga. Generally speaking, the practice consists of yogic postures (*āsanas*), breathing exercises (*prāṇāyāma*), mantra chanting, visualizations, and, in certain cases, ritual sex. David Gordon White summarizes the yogic system of the Nāths as follows:

This system projected upon the gross human body a remarkably intricate physiology of the yogic or subtle body, which was composed of a series of energy centers, networks of channels, and an array of male and female divine forces. It was upon this subtle body that the yogic practitioner, through an elaborate combination of postures, breathing techniques, meditative states, and acoustic devices, came to channel forcibly all of his internalized divine energies, breaths, bodily fluids, and mental states into a single point, at which he realized, once and for all time, bodily perfection and immortality.<sup>1</sup>

Devoid of strict requirements for sanskritic learning and brahminical culture, unconfined by a formal hieratic mediation and temple worship, this yoga is, therefore, and in contradistinction to the Patañjali-associated *aṣṭāṅga*, primarily a form of *praxis*, *sādhana*, and not a philosophical system, *darśana*. Although by all accounts a difficult enterprise to carry out, it is conceptually and methodologically simple. Its success is not dependent on ideological constraints and it is occasionally practiced outside the ‘Hindu’ fold, by Buddhists,<sup>2</sup> Jains,<sup>3</sup> and even Muslims.<sup>4</sup> In addition to its practical

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<sup>1</sup> David Gordon White, “Wonders of Śrī Maṣṭnāth,” in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 399-400.

<sup>2</sup> The theory and practice of the early medieval Buddhist Sahajiyās bears close resemblance to the general outlook of the Nāth Siddhas. See, for example, Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 1-109; Per Kvaerne, *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs: A Study of Caryāgīti* (Bangkok: White Orchid Press, 1986 [1977]). Closely related are also the Buddhist Siddhācāryas, or Mahāsiddhas; see, *inter alia*, *Masters of Mahāmudrā: Songs and Histories of the Eighty-Four Buddhist Siddhas*, trans. and commentary by Keith Dowman (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> “Matsyendra was ... the father and guru of the two Jain *tīrtha* karas Nīmnāth and Pārasnāth.” White, *Alchemical Body*, 93. See also Paul Dundas, “The Jain Monk Jinapati Sūri Gets Better of a Nāth Yogī,” in *Tantra in Practice*, 231-8.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Cashin, *Ocean of Love*. Two sixteenth century Indian Sufi romances abound in the Nāth lore motifs; see Malik Muhammad Jaisi, *Padmavati*, trans. A. G. Shireff (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society, 1944), and Manjhan, *Madhumālātī: An Indian Sufi Romance*, trans. with Introduction and Notes by Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman with Shyam Manohar Pandey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). On the agonic elements in the encounters between Sufis and the Nāths, see Simon Digby, “To Ride a Tiger or a Wall? Strategies of Prestige in Indian Sufi Legend,” in *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*,

orientation, the message of the Nāth Siddhas, as recorded in *The Sayings of Gorakh*, contains a moral aspect – a call to a simple life and sexual continence – and a voice of social critique, mostly addressed to the pundits, whose bookish learning is ridiculed and whose authority is rejected. Since success in the form of yoga as envisioned by the Nāths depends primarily on the knowledge and mastery of one's body and its subtle aspects and not on the brahminical presuppositions of the correct mode of behaviour based on the social class and one's stage in life (*varṇāśramadharmā*) it is potentially subversive to the same and as a consequence it is at times criticized and often marginalized. As already stated, the order is often (although not unanimously) considered to be tantric in character.

According to the Nāth Siddhas, the key to becoming a 'second Śiva' lies in the reversal of a certain process, which under ordinary conditions inevitably leads to enslavement in illusion, and ultimately to death. This process is intimately related to human sexuality, or more specifically, to the issue of the preservation or waste of semen (*bindu*).<sup>1</sup> The released semen is the gross form of a subtle substance that has a potential value – if not wasted – as the elixir of immortality, the *amṛt*. In this respect, the Nāth Siddhas, as White, following Dasgupta and others,<sup>2</sup> has argued, are most closely related to the school of Indian alchemy, the *rasāyana*.<sup>3</sup>

Alchemy as a science<sup>4</sup> of transformations is, in a nutshell, an attempt to transform base metals into gold and to find the elixir of immortality, or at least the

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eds. Winand M. Callewaert and Rupert Snell (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 99-129. On the relationship between Nāths and Indian Ismailis, see Dominique-Sila Khan, "Conversation between Guru Hasan Kabīruddīn and Jogī Kāniphā: Tantra Revisited by the Ismā'ili Preachers," in *Tantra in Practice*, 285-95.

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the yogic lore assumes a male viewpoint and discusses human body from such a perspective. In practice, however, this sexist attitude is counterbalanced by the fact that women are admitted into the Order as initiates. According to Briggs, "Women who have been initiated into the sect are numerous. Those who are wives of Yogīs are of two classes, those who are themselves Yogīnīs and those who are not. Both classes are common." *Gorakhnāth*, 48. In addition, a Sanskrit text attributed to Gorakhnāth and translated by Briggs, the *Gorakṣa Śataka*, talks of the *bindu* as being present in both male and female sexual fluids: "Further, the bindu (is) of two kinds, pale-white and blood-red: The pale-white they call *semen virile*, the blood-red menstrual fluid." *Gorakṣa Śataka*, 72, in *ibid.*, 298.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Stephen Corrin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978 [1962]) esp. 127-41.

<sup>3</sup> "The Siddha alchemists were, by and large, Nāth Siddhas; and because the Nāth Siddhas were itinerant, they made Siddha alchemy a pan-Indian phenomenon. ... [T]he language of the Nāth Siddhas' ... is often nothing other than a projection of alchemical discourse upon the human body." White, *Alchemical Body*, 56-7. See also Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 192-4.

<sup>4</sup> It should be obvious that I am using the word science in its pre-modern sense.

means of longevity. The Nāth Siddhas correlated the methodology of alchemy with yoga, and performed their practice in the laboratory of their bodies. Indian alchemy takes mercury as the basic substance to be transformed; with the Nāth Siddhas, the mercury is replaced by semen (*bindu*). Thus we find the following precept: “*Bindu* in the mouth of the vagina is [like] mercury in the mouth of fire. / Whosoever preserves it, he is my guru.”<sup>1</sup> As a consequence of this position, the Nāth Siddhas habitually embrace an anti-sexual and misogynist stance (with some modifications addressed in due course).

My position, however, is that the sexuality as understood and approached by the Siddhas is a complex phenomenon and that it is not straightforwardly rejected. On the contrary, they approach a form of power over which they are asserting their mastery, their ‘care of the self’ in Foucault’s sense of the phrase.<sup>2</sup> Through mastery over desire and control of the flow of semen, an aspirant becomes an adept. But sexuality has not been discarded: it has been internalized and transformed into the energy of the ‘coiled snake’ (*kuṇḍalinī*), or ‘the fire of *brahman*’ (*brahmāgni*), and thus it has made possible the attainment of mystical states. As David Kinsley remarks, “It is not sublimated or curbed sexual activity that awakens the *kuṇḍalinī* but sexual activity properly understood or perhaps properly appreciated.”<sup>3</sup> Sexuality is an instrument for the acquisition of occult powers and an occult power in itself. In alchemical terms, it is a *materia prima*, a raw energy with a material correlate (the sperm, the menstrual blood) that may and should be transformed into elixir. Fundamentally, the sexuality here is the *potency* of power: the power of transmutation, the power of transubstantiation, the power of deification. In other words, with these yogis the exoteric approach to sexuality is supplemented by an esoteric one. Nevertheless: without the engagement with the powers of *eros* there is no scope for the acquisition of the miraculous powers, there are no *siddhis*, and thus there are no Siddhas.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gorakh-Bānī, *sabad* 142. “bhag mukhi byad agani mukhi pārā / jo rakhai so guru hamārā.” (The subsequent references to the *sabads* will be abbreviated as GBS.)

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahāvidyās* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 243.

<sup>4</sup> It will be apparent in a due course that sexuality has not been given a prominent place in the accounts of the Western Esoteric Tradition. It might appear at the first glance that this is one of the elements that separates the two traditions. My contention, however, is that the exclusion of sexuality from the academic discourse of the Western Esoteric Tradition is an oversight. Thus, it follows that a closer



The esotericism and power of the Siddhas are also inextricably linked in the social sphere. To acknowledge this fact one needs to remember that Nāth yogis occupy the central position in their own ideological universe, which I suggest is the universe of the occult, or of the esoteric. What may be interpreted as a *nāthist* parallel to the *varṇāśramadharma* system, the sense of belonging to a community based on (and possessing the secrets of) esotericism, places the members of the fraternity on top of the social and spiritual hierarchy. Because they are adepts of miraculous powers, because they were established by the Great God Śiva Himself, because their most important human teacher was also an avatar of the Great God, because they know the secrets of immortality, the Nāths consider themselves higher and better, and certainly more powerful, than priests and princes. Their aspirations and claims of accomplishment are aimed at divinity, and at least Gorakhnāth is actually deified.<sup>1</sup> As C. J. Fuller reminds us, “This reflects a supremely important fact about Hinduism: unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it postulates no absolute distinction between divine and human beings. In many contexts, human beings are seen as actually divine in one way or another.”<sup>2</sup>

In this way, we have a cluster of notions that are mutually related: internalized sexuality, appropriation of alchemical techniques, search for occult powers that lead to deification and immortality, social power inherently present in a basically secret society,<sup>3</sup> the widely perceived involvement of *jogīs* in magic. All these elements converge in the unifying category of esotericism that subsumes them into a meaningful whole. The model of esotericism therefore seems a suitable methodological category through which to conceptualize the phenomenon of the Nāth yogis. But before elaborating on that model, I feel the need to restate and emphasize one more time

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investigation of the esoteric approaches to sexuality in the West is a desideratum. A welcome sign of the changing attitudes in this regard is the recent publication of an important study by Urban. See Hugh Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> “It is noticeable that not only is there the tradition of Mahādeva or Śiva being the original instructor of the cult, but that Gorakh-nāth, the most renowned and most important yogin of the sect, has frequently been identified with Śiva or deified as such.” Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 197.

<sup>2</sup> Fuller, *Camphor Flame*, 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> For the relationship between secrecy and power, see Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism.”

several crucial elements that I believe have been neglected in the previous scholarship on these matters. Allow me therefore to scrutinize the issue one more time, from a more polemical angle:

My principal claim is that esoteric notions and magical practices are fundamental and central to tantra and to the Nāth Siddhas as a tantric phenomenon, just as the Tantric and *haṭha*-yogic *sādhana* is ultimately not a quest for salvation but for power. The mutual interrelation between esotericism and power is perhaps most obviously recognized in the nature of the ultimate ideals the Nāths are striving to achieve: divine body (*divya deh*), perfection of body (*kāyā siddhi*), liberation while in life (*jīvanmukti*), obtainment of the elixir of immortality (*amṛt*), becoming a perfect adept (*siddha*), being a wizard (*vidyādhara*). What these ideals and goals signify is explicitly the attainment of infinite occult power in an immortal body. This is the will to power and a dedication to a lifestyle committed to its acquisition. The image of this human ideal with superhuman powers (of immortality, *amṛtatva*, omnipotence, *parāśakti*, and absolute liberty, *svecchācār*) is a Siddha or a Nāth such as Matsyendra or Gorakh - and ultimately the great god Śiva, a yogi *par excellence* - whose defining characteristic is the ability to do things at will. A Siddha is an immortal, with a diamond body, who can fly through the air and create or destroy according to his own free will. How much of this ideal is manifested in an individual yogi might be irrelevant, but the yogi is feared, admired, or ridiculed on the basis of his or her degree of association with power (*siddhis*), which for them represents the sacred (*vide infra*).

This issue of the centrality of power in the phenomenon of the Nāth Siddhas, although not contradictory to the general picture presented by Western scholarship, is nonetheless insufficiently articulated. By the same token, practically everyone who wrote about these yogis clearly understood that they were steeped in esoteric culture but the issue is insufficiently interrogated in its wider implications. Magic (the occult, the esoteric) is not clearly defined, it is not distinctly brought into relationship with power, nor is it explored in its social ramifications. As a consequence, previous scholarship, despite excellent work done on many important issues, is incomplete to the extent that the theoretical elaboration of the occult was neglected by the tacit assumption that the category of 'religion' is hermeneutically sufficient.

In order to arrive at an understanding that is more accurate and sensitive to our 'subject', it seems advantageous that we should *qualify* the normative and universalizing concept of religion and my suggestion, already advanced, is to approach the Siddhas as an esoteric or occult phenomenon. This is not a novelty in and of itself: I have remarked that scholars have regularly noticed the connection between the Siddhas and the occult. For example, Dasgupta makes the pertinent remarks: "The general religious nature of Nāthism is characterised by a wide-spread belief in occult power attained through the practice of yoga. ... Occultism is an inseparable ingredient of popular religious consciousness, - nay, it is often the salt of popular religious belief."<sup>1</sup> What is missing from scholarly accounts, however, is a deliberate and consistent attempt to take the categories of the occult, esoteric, and magic seriously, to situate them within their particular epistemic universe, and to relate them to broader ideological and social concerns.

What are, again, generally speaking, the elements of the esoteric culture among the Nāths? Sociologically, they include the strategies of secrecy; initiation as a means of participation in their community; public employment, through poetry and song, of a 'private' discourse, by which a minor group – at least in quantitative terms – distances itself from the larger environment (and generates its own subjectivity) by the employment of a special vocabulary and special hermeneutics, through which process their knowledge-as-power gains in importance, being opaque and closed to those who are 'not in the know' – which is another instance of the close relationship between esotericism and power. Ideologically, esotericism is displayed as the belief in hidden potencies of the human psycho-physical complex that may and should be accessed and manipulated for one's spiritual and material ends; the belief in correspondences (between metallic and organic levels, between body (*piṇḍ*) and universe (*brahmāṇḍ*), in the possibility of transmutations, in immortality, in deification, in liberation. Practically (that is, experientially), esotericism consists of magical ceremonies, yogic practices, divination, manipulation of *kuṇḍalinī*, production and consummation of the elixir (*amṛt*). The Siddhas also serve a role of cultural symbols for an alternative way of life that stands apart from the ideals and constraints of the *varṇāśramadharma*. But what

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<sup>1</sup> Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 211.

is fundamentally important is that all these ideas and practices presuppose a belief in and knowledge of the *occult* properties of macrocosm and microcosm that may be accessed and manipulated by the adepts of yoga, which activity gives them *power* over their environment and their destiny.

The principle underlying the regime of yoga as practiced by the Siddhas may be justifiably defined as esoteric or magical because it is based on the assumption that the manipulation of the body, breath, and mind will have effect on their spiritual, or occult, correlates. The sperm (and the menstrual blood, in those cases where it is employed) is not the elixir in and of itself (otherwise, every celibate person who preserves his semen would be a Siddha). The sexual fluids and the elixir, are *correspondent* to each other, however, and the belief in correspondences is a major characteristic of esoteric thinking. Alternatively, we may state that the Siddhas share an occult worldview if we put emphasis on their insistence that material things (such as sexual secretion) have *hidden*, occult properties and powers (such as elixir of immortality and its associated potentials).

At this point, I would like to address the issue of esotericism in more detail. The model I intend to use is developed in reference to Western tradition. My contention is, however, that its implications are *to a varying extent* applicable cross-culturally. In order to demonstrate my argument in this context, I will draw a formal correlation between the Faivrian model of Western esotericism and the theory and practice of the Nāth Siddhas. In addition, I will also suggest a correspondence between the yoga of the Siddhas and the more inclusive, and more relevant, category of magic. I will refrain from considering the links between *haṭha* yoga and alchemy as an esoteric discipline, being convinced that this relation has already been confirmed by previous scholarship.

#### COMPONENTS OF ESOTERICISM

Antoine Faivre has enumerated the following elements as the ‘components of esotericism as a form of thought’.<sup>1</sup> The four main elements are, 1: Correspondences, 2: Living Nature, 3: Imaginations and Mediations, and 4: Experience of Transmutation.

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<sup>1</sup> See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10.

The additional two elements are 5: The Praxis of Concordance, and 6: Transmission.<sup>1</sup> Arthur Versluis has amplified the list adding the element of 7: Gnosis as the *sine qua non* of esotericism.<sup>2</sup> It is relatively easy to demonstrate that all seven of these characteristics pertain also to the metaphysical outlook of the Nāths. I will provide a point-by-point correlation between the constitutive elements of esotericism and the theory and practice of the *jogīs* subsequently. At this juncture, I would like to present a basic explanation of what the principles of esotericism stand for<sup>3</sup> and to suggest in broad outlines what might be their Indian parallels.

1. *Correspondences* refer to the complex and subtle links that unite otherwise apparently discontinuous elements of reality, matching like with like according to the principle of ‘as above, so below.’ A prominent feature of this Weltanschauung is represented by the concept of the human being as a microcosm that stands in an analogical relation of similarity, or even identity, with the universal plenum, the macrocosm. Similarly, material things correspond to spiritual realities and vice versa. In India, the term for this relationship of mutual correspondence is *bandhu*. “The assumption then is,” as Patrick Olivelle explains, “that the universe constitutes a web of relations, that things that appear to stand alone and apart are, in fact, connected to other things.”<sup>4</sup> According to André Padoux, “one of the characteristics of Tantrism lies precisely in the constant establishment of correspondences between humans, rites, and the cosmos, and in the cosmic as well as human aspects of energy.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, here and throughout I am asserting the *similarity* of basic principles between Western and Indian esotericism, not their identity. In the practical application of these principles, the culture-specific difference between Indian and Western models is evident, for example, in the fact that “correspondences between ... history and revealed texts”<sup>6</sup> are of much lesser importance in the East.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 10-15.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Versluis, “What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism,” *Esoterica: Journal of Esoteric Studies* 4 (2002): 2.

<sup>3</sup> I am summarizing Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10-15. See also Faivre and Voss, “Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions,” 60-62.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads: Translated from the Original Sanskrit* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), lii.

<sup>5</sup> André Padoux, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, trans. Jacques Gontier (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992 [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990]), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 11.

2. *Living Nature* is a self-explanatory concept. Due to the paramount importance of the Holy Book in the Western cultural sphere, there is a prominent tendency in Western esotericism to approach nature as a book to be read. This tendency is, naturally, much less exhibited in the case of Indian esoteric traditions. However, the basic postulate, the idea that nature is alive and impregnated by spiritual force is common to both traditions. The prominent expression of this idea in Indian traditions is encountered in tantra, where the phenomenal universe is understood as the manifestation of the Goddess, who is energy and power, *śakti*. Without her, as the famous dictum has it, Śiva is just a corpse.

3. *Imaginations and Mediations* are mutually complementary. It is extremely important to realize that imagination here is understood in its specialized meaning, which has nothing to do with daydreaming and disorganized fantasizing. “But rather it is a kind of organ of the soul,” as Faivre explains, “thanks to which humanity can establish a cognitive and visionary relationship with an intermediary world, with a mesocosm – what Henry Corbin proposed calling a *mundus imaginalis*.”<sup>1</sup> I am convinced that imagination, as it is understood in the West, is comparable to yogic practice of visualization and meditation. Similarly, I consider the *mundus imaginalis*, the ‘imaginal world,’ to be the locus of yogic visions and encounters with mystical beings, such as *siddhas* and *vidyādhara*s. Also, I suggest that the subtle body, with its system of *cakras* and ‘serpent power’ or *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, is both generated by and accessed through the power of cultivated imagination. These points have been observed only tangentially by scholars such as Aghaṇanda Bharati and Mircea Eliade, and the correlation and comparison between Western and Indian models of imagination is virtually nonexistent.

4. *Experience of Transmutation* is, as Faivre writes, an expression borrowed from alchemy. It refers to “a cooperation between knowledge (in the sense of ‘gnosis’) and active imagination in order for lead to be changed into silver and silver into gold.”<sup>2</sup> The parallel with the Nāth Siddhas, whose practice represents the internalization of Indian alchemy, should be obvious. In their case, the process starts with the semen (*bindu*) that

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>2</sup> Faivre and Voss, “Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions,” 61.

is eventually transformed into elixir (*amṛt*). The yogi is similarly transformed from an ordinary being into an immortal adept. The experience of transmutation is the final of the four necessary components of esotericism. The following two are, according to Faivre, of relative importance. They consist of the praxis of concordance and transmission.

5. *The Praxis of Concordance* amounts to “a consistent tendency to attempt to establish common denominators among two or more different traditions, or even among all traditions, in hopes of obtaining a gnosis of superior quality.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, denominational and doctrinal constraints are much more flexible and relaxed in the case of individuals and groups engaged in esoteric quest. Let us just recall the fact that, for example, tantric ideas and practices are extant in Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and even some forms of unorthodox Islam. The fact that people and ideas migrate rather easily between various esoteric currents settled within their broader exoteric spiritual environments, leads to the proposal that esotericism should be seen as a means of cultural transfer.<sup>2</sup> This is an additional reason for a more serious engagement with the study of comparative esotericism.

6. *Transmission* of esoteric knowledge is often conducted in a ritual setting, involving one or several rites of initiation. This element is common to both Western and Indian esotericism. Initiation as *dīkṣā* or *abhiṣeka* is a *sine qua non* requirement in tantric and yogic practice. By extension, the importance and sanctity of initiation is transferred onto a human preceptor or guru as the person who conducts the ritual and transmits the occult knowledge and power onto the disciple. The veneration of the guru in tantric and yogic traditions is well known. In addition, the transmission of esoteric knowledge and occult practices from one cultural system into another renders additional weight to the thesis that esotericism is a means of cultural transfer.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>2</sup> I am borrowing this idea from Peter Lamborn Wilson. According to his proposal, “‘Heresies’ are often the means for transfer of ideas and art-forms from one culture to another. ... Medieval Europe might have absorbed much less Islamic/ Greek/ Oriental culture from Spain and elsewhere were it not for scholars of dubious orthodoxy such as Raimundo Lull, Roger Bacon, the alchemists and Ceremonial Magicians, the Kabbalists [sic.] and Renaissance Neoplatonists like Pico, Bruno, the Fidei d’Amore.” *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1988), 13-4. I find the term ‘heresy’ culturally limited (a fact acknowledged by Wilson) and derogatory and suggest esotericism as a more appropriate correlate.

7. Arthur Versluis emphasizes the concept of *gnosis* as a constitutive element and the goal of esotericism. I believe that this is a non-problematic proposal. The esoteric nature of *gnosis* is self-evident, for it is not a knowledge, or ‘wisdom,’ of an ordinary kind. The category of *gnosis* is comparable with, and even etymologically related to, Indian *jñāna* and / or *prajñā*. It thus seems meaningful to assert that the element of *gnosis* is relevant for, and present in, both Western and Indian esotericism.

I would now like to correlate the theory and practice of the Nāth Siddhas with the above model of esotericism. How do these seven elements connect to the theory and practice of the Nāth Siddhas? The purpose of this correlation is emphatically not to conflate what I designate as Indian and Western esoteric traditions but to argue that there is a ‘family resemblance’ between them, which translates into the proposal that esotericism as a conceptual category is useful in order to theorize about ideological and practical assumptions of yogic and tantric systems. Here then is my proposal:<sup>1</sup>

1. *Correspondences* are implicit practically everywhere, since one of the principal assumptions of yogic *sādhana* asserts that the gross, material forms are analogous to their more subtle correlatives. As Gorakh states, “Outside and inside are one.”<sup>2</sup> The most important chain of analogies, in addition to the fundamental notion of the similarity between *microcosm* and *macrocosm*, is the following: Śiva = mercury = semen (*bindu*) = elixir (*amṛt*). When Gorakh advises that “The lower Ganges should be brought up to the [top of the] Egg of Brahma,”<sup>3</sup> or when he claims that “At the summit of the sky, a child is speaking,”<sup>4</sup> he is not being simply metaphorical. He is expressing himself in the idiom that implies a belief in the correspondence between the ‘lower Ganges’ (*kuṇḍalini*) and its heavenly correlate, between the top of the subtle body (*sahasrār*

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<sup>1</sup> See also Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), esp. pp. 27-31, for a similarly construed model of comparison between Indian and Western esotericism. I was not aware of her work at the time of writing the bulk of this text, which was originally submitted to the Faculty of Graduate studies, University of British Columbia, in February 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Pañc Mātrā,” 4. “bāhar bhītar yeka kār.” This is almost literally identical to one of the foundational precepts of Western esotericism, the statement from the *Emerald Tablet* (*Tabula Smaragdina*), ‘As above, so below.’

<sup>3</sup> GBS 2. “pātāl kī gaṅgā brahmāṇḍ caṛhāibā.”

<sup>4</sup> GBS 1. “gagan sikhār mahim bālāk bolai.”



*cakra*) and the top or the summit of the universe (*brahmāṇḍ*). The basic assumption that performance of bodily feats, so characteristic of *haṭha* yoga, will have spiritual outcomes is equally based on the notion of correspondence.

2. *Living Nature* again quite literally refers to the semen as a natural substance that serves as the basis of immortal life. “Where the *bindu* dwells, there is life,”<sup>1</sup> claims Gorakh. In a deeper sense, the Nāth Siddhas share the general tantric assumption “that the universe we experience is nothing other than the *concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead* that creates and maintains the universe”.<sup>2</sup> This energy is most often conceptualized as *śakti*, which is also esoterically present within the body in the form of *kuṇḍalinī śakti*. The latter, often glossed as the ‘serpent power’ is a principal source of occult power and its ‘awakening’ is a major goal of yoga. We should also notice the tendency to correlate the divine pair of Śiva and Śakti with natural, i.e. bodily substances. When Gorakh says that “Śakti is in the form of blood, / Śiva is in the form of semen,”<sup>3</sup> he is in effect asserting that the natural components which engender the human body are in their essence divine, that is to say, alive. This is an implicit allusion that for the Nāths, as for the esotericists in general, nature (paradigmatically symbolized by female menstrual blood and male semen) is in fact a living force.<sup>4</sup>

3. *Imaginations and Mediations* are at the heart of the yogic imagining of the subtle body (*sūkṣm śarīr*) and the network of channels (*nāṛī*, Skt. *nāḍī*) and lotuses or circles of powers (*padma*, *cakra*). The subtle body and its energies are not a given: one has to ‘build’ this body through a regime of elaborate practices that often imply the exercise of visualization and mental concentration. Without the engagement of the powers of imagination, work with the *cakras* and other elements of the subtle body would be impossible. In that sense, imagination is analogous to yogic meditation (*dhyān*).

4. *Experience of Transmutation* pertains to both the transmutation of the gross elements into subtle ones and the transmutation of semen into elixir, as well as the

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 57. “bind basai tahā jyanda.”

<sup>2</sup> White, “Mapping a Tradition,” in *Tantra in Practice*, 9; emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> GBP 12: 5. “sakti rūpī raj āchai siv rūpī byand.”

<sup>4</sup> De Michelis suggest *prāṇa* and *Brahman* as “‘spiritual force’ ... of living nature.” *History of Modern Yoga*, 28.

transmutation of a yogi from ‘unripe’ or ‘uncooked’ (*apakva*) into ‘ripe’ or ‘cooked’ (*pakva*).<sup>1</sup> According to Dasgupta, “The Sādhana of the Nāth Siddhas is essentially a Sādhana of *transubstantiation* and *transfiguration*.”<sup>2</sup> The culmination of this process is the transformation of the mortal human being into an immortal adept or even a god.

5. *The Practice of Concordance*, that is to say, “the will not only to eliminate some differences or to uncover harmonies among diverse religious traditions, but to acquire above all a *gnosis* embracing diverse traditions and melding them in a single crucible”<sup>3</sup> explains, to a significant degree, the ease with which Siddhas commingled with the Islamic mystics, the Sufis. David Gordon White claims that “perhaps no Hindu religious sect has interacted on as profound and sustained a level as have the Nāth Siddhas with exponents of that mystic branch of Islam known as Sufism”.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Charlotte Vaudeville asserts that “[i]t is precisely among Jogīs that the Sufis claim to have made their first converts. ... The Jogīs ... too claim to have won over some distinguished Sufis to their own creed: even the prophet Muhammad became, according to them, a disciple of Gorakhnāth.”<sup>5</sup> Carl Ernst has also pointed out that “the yogis were perhaps the only Indian religious group with whom Sufis had much in common.”<sup>6</sup> A fine example of the practice of concordance, in addition to several verses that employ Islamic vocabulary,<sup>7</sup> is the closing line of the text *Pandrah Tithi*, which states: “To countless *siddhas*, Śrī Gorakh is the *pīr*.”<sup>8</sup> (The ‘pīr’ is a Muslim saint or a spiritual guide.<sup>9</sup>) Even more specific is the *sabad* that proclaims, “We are Hindus by birth; yogis by burning;<sup>10</sup> Muslims by wisdom.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 220.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 251; italics in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> White, “Wonders of Śrī Mastnāth,” 402.

<sup>5</sup> Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Ernst, “Situating Sufism and Yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 15, 1 (2005), 23.

<sup>7</sup> GBS 9, 10, 11, 118, 182, 225; GBP 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Pandrah Tithi,” 17. “anant siddhām śrī gorakh pīr.”

<sup>9</sup> “The similarity between yogis and Sufis extended to the point that the heads of Nath yogi establishments became known by the Persian term *pir*, the common designation for a Sufi master.” Ernst, “Situating Sufism,” 23.

<sup>10</sup> That is to say, by practice.

<sup>11</sup> GBS 14. “utpati hindū jaraṇām jogī akali pari [pīri] musalmāṇnīm.” utpati hindū jaraṇām jogī akali pari [pīri] musalmāṇnīm.”

6. *Transmission* of knowledge and the methods of practice through a set of initiations are naturally met in the lifestyle of *jogīs*. The Nāth Siddhas are an initiatic order, and only after this requirement has been met is a disciple given the *mantra* and other instructions of how to conduct the practice of yoga. The very knowledge of yoga was also obtained through the process of transmission, from the god Śiva to the first founders of the Order.

7. *Gnosis*, a mystical knowledge acquired through first-hand experience (*paricay*) which surpasses all the bookish and intellectual learning and which sets the Siddhas apart and above those who lack such an experience is one of the key elements of their identity as it is a prominent *leitmotif* in *The Sayings of Gorakh*.<sup>1</sup> “There is no experience above self-discovery,”<sup>2</sup> proclaims Gorakhnāth. “Those who know intimately their self (*ātman*) do not die.”<sup>3</sup>

#### MAGIC: THE SACRED AS POWER

There is one element, nonetheless, that is not recognized in the above list of elements of esotericism. I am referring to a particular branch of the tradition that is due to its importance best treated separately and addressed by the term magic. The element without which magic is not properly and thoroughly understood is *power*. I would like to reaffirm the proposal that power is one of the central features of the magical quest, in India as in the West. It is the search for power that very frequently distinguishes magical activity from the way of life of an ‘ordinary’ believer.<sup>4</sup> While the latter directs his or her devotion to the omnipotent God/dess/es, the former undergoes a whole set of practices in order to obtain power and achieve desired results. These results may be related to the most basic quotidian concerns and they may include the loftiest spiritual aspirations. But a follower of an occult current usually knows the mode of practice, a *sādhana*, by which it is possible to achieve these results. The power to do so, the power

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<sup>1</sup> See also a relevant discussion on the value of experience in *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Sisṭ Purāṇ.” “āpā pākhai parcā nāhī.”

<sup>3</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Pandrah Tithi,” 1. “ātam parcai marai na koi.”

<sup>4</sup> Of course, there is no clear-cut division between the two. A certain person may be an ‘orthodox believer’ and still engage in occasional esoteric activities. This is much more frequently met in India than in the Christian West, due to the restrictive influence of the Church in the latter case.

to raise oneself above from the ordinary, non-initiated believers (considered in tantra as nothing but mere animals, *paśu*), the power to achieve wisdom<sup>1</sup> and immortality – these are the central concerns of magical practice. Consequently, the Faivrian list of the key elements of esotericism has to be amplified by the inclusion of the category of power, at least insofar as the subject is magic. In this context, it is appropriate to call to mind the general observation made by Karl Potter, “that Indian philosophy *does* in fact elevate power, control, or freedom to a supereminent position above rational morality...”<sup>2</sup> The yogic quest is, then, just a specific instance of this orientation within a general trend in Indian spiritual landscape.

My principle thesis is that the *sādhana* of the Nāth yogis may be understood as a form of occult practice and that their ‘theory’ may be understood as a mode of esoteric thought. I have to emphasize again that it is not possible to draw a clear demarcation line between the concepts of magic and the occult, and the usage varies with different authors. As a general principle, magic is to be understood as a more exclusive category, as a *particular* occult discipline (the others being alchemy, astrology, and divination - to name the most important).

It is in fact rather difficult to define with taxonomic certainty what magic really is. Individual, theological, and, until recently, scholarly bias is responsible for this confusion to a great extent, for the word magic has a long history of pejorative use,<sup>3</sup> and its application is often but a declaration of the dismissal of something as a mere superstition.<sup>4</sup> Richard King, following Grace Jantzen, has argued that a definition is also a “conceptual site of a historical struggle for power and authority”<sup>5</sup> and this is

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<sup>1</sup> Sanskrit term for a magician, *vidyādhara*, literally means ‘possessor of knowledge.’

<sup>2</sup> Karl H. Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 3. Emphasis in the original. I am grateful to Ken Bryant for drawing my attention to this reference.

<sup>3</sup> Naomi Janowitz, in her study of magical practices in late antiquity, asserts: “This study build on the growing consensus that such labels as ‘magic’ are inseparable from their pejorative use in the past.” *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), xiv. She consequently discards the label, which is one of the possible ways to look at the issue from a novel and respectful perspective (and obviously, not the methodological choice I follow in this study).

<sup>4</sup> Janowitz reminds us of the fact that “In addition to the negative associations, the practice of magic was a criminal offence under Roman law (Iulius Paulus *Excerpts* 5.23.14-18). To be accused of practicing magic had all the drama of modern charges of high treason and could have lethal results.” *Icons of Power*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘the Mystic East’* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 9 and *passim*. King is referencing Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

evidently true in the case of magic, especially in the Western hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> One can generalize that the authority and power of the Church, for example, put the sign of equation between magic and heresy, while for Science, magic meant but a domain of the irrational.<sup>2</sup> At this particular moment in history, magic is undergoing a phase of renewed scholarly interest. Instead of being treated in evolutionary terms (James Frazer), or as an outdated forerunner of science (Lynn Thorndike), it is now becoming increasingly evident that magic represents a genuine mode of religious life that is both historically enduring and cross-culturally ubiquitous. But the precise definition of the term is still problematic, and the category remains marginal. As Michael D. Swartz explains,

Contemporary students of religion have questioned the applicability of the term magic, and a satisfactory definition has not been formulated. Much of the controversy surrounding the term magic has focused on how the notion of magic is applied to traditional, non-Western societies. Bound up with this issue is the question of whether there is something intrinsic called 'magic' that can

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<sup>1</sup> Olof Petersson's comment addresses the issue eloquently: "the debate over the relationship between magic and religion is a discussion of an artificial problem created by defining religion on the pattern of Christianity. The elements of man's beliefs and ceremonies which did not coincide with the ideal type of religion were - and are - called magic. Magic became - and still becomes - a refuse heap for the elements which are not sufficiently 'valuable' to get a place within religion." Peterson, "Magic-Religion: Some Marginal Notes to an Old Problem," *Ethnos* 22 (1957), 109. Qtd. in John G. Gager, "Moses the Magician: Hero of an Ancient Counter-Culture?" *Helios*, Vol. 21, 2 (Autumn 1994), 183.

<sup>2</sup> Several authors have opined that Western Church, science, and magic definitely separated in the course of seventeenth century. For the thesis that magic, understood as an integral part of Renaissance culture, becomes marginalized by the advent of Protestant culture, Catholic Counter-Reformation, and secular science, see Couliano, *Eros and Magic*. According to him, this process is effected through the censorship and "rejection of the *imaginary* on the ground of principle" (222). Stanley Tambiah also claims that there is a link between the rise of Protestantism and science on the one hand, and the rejection of magic on the other. This fact had a direct influence on the development of anthropology and the study of religion. He writes, "It is my submission that this emphasis on religion as a system of beliefs, and the distinction between prayer and spell, the former being associated with 'religious' behaviour and the latter with 'magical' acts, was a Protestant legacy which was automatically taken over by later Victorian theorists like Tylor and Frazer, and given a universal significance as both historical and analytical categories useful in tracing the intellectual development from savagery to civilization." Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 19.

For the long history of the relationship between science and magic see, for example, Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and the Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923-58). Thorndike's study is monumental in its scope, but dated in its approach and conclusions. In this connection, it is interesting to note that even such quintessential representatives of the scientific thought as René Descartes and Isaac Newton cultivated interest in the occult. For the latter, see Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *The Foundation's of Newton's Alchemy or "The Hunting of the Greene Lyon"* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Divorce between science and magic is also a subject of Tambiah's *Magic, Science, Religion*.

be separated from 'religion,' and whether this dichotomy presupposes an evolutionary view that sees those societies that employ 'magic' as inferior.<sup>1</sup>

My proposal is that, in order to distinguish magic from other occult disciplines, we have to take into consideration three elements.

1. First of all, as already suggested, magic is characterized by its orientation toward power. Georg Luck, a scholar of Greek and Roman magic, defines it as "a technique grounded in a belief in powers located in the human soul and in the universe outside ourselves, a technique that aims at imposing the human will on nature or on human beings by using supersensual powers. Ultimately, it may be a belief in the unlimited powers of the soul."<sup>2</sup> The key words here are 'power' and 'will'. It is a common perception that magic has an active quality and this is most often the element that distinguishes it from mysticism or conventional religion, which are perceived to be more passive. In simplified terms, the magician imposes his will for the purpose of expected change, while a mystic or a faithful surrenders himself or herself to the will of God. As Richard Kieckhefer comments, "According to this approach, the central feature of religion is that it *supplicates* God or the gods, and the main characteristic of magic is that it *coerces* spiritual beings or forces."<sup>3</sup>

Teun Goudriaan, who wrote the only major scholarly monograph on Indian magic, equally asserts that "The essence of magic is a grasp for power."<sup>4</sup> As soon as this is realized, the comparison between the principles of magic and the yoga of the Nāth Siddhas, whose whole practice is defined by the search for power (the *siddhis*), should emerge as obvious and meaningful. Power is related to action, to agency, to doing things, and this practical orientation is congenial to magic. In a similar spirit, Goudriaan and Gupta define magic as "the performance of certain ritual acts - and the belief in the efficacy of such acts - with a view of making use of certain natural laws of cause and effect which are supposed to exist, in order to enforce some result(s) in the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19-20.

<sup>2</sup> Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1989]), 15; emphases in the original. I should add that Kieckhefer doubts the usefulness of this division.

<sup>4</sup> Teun Goudriaan, *Māyā Divine and Human: A Study of Magic and Its Religious Foundations in Sanskrit Texts, with Particular Attention to a Fragment on Viṣṇu's Māyā Preserved in Bali* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), 58.

mundane sphere<sup>1</sup> desired by the performer or his instructor."<sup>2</sup> Let us also recall that, in Sanskrit, one of the words for magic is *karman*. Magic is therefore a way of action based on the theoretical assumptions of esotericism that is directed toward acquisition of power.

What I have in mind when referring to the concept of power is in basic agreement with a definition of the term provided by Robert Thurman. According to him, "The term *power* here refers to the energy or ability that enables an individual to cause a desired effect."<sup>3</sup> The essence of magic is that it utilizes techniques that are mysterious to its beholders and commonplace to its masters."<sup>4</sup> In addition, the power discussed here is also the power over oneself, the ability of a person to conquer his or her 'lower' drives and instinctual nature and to acquire spiritual freedom and liberty. As Thurman points out, in India it was traditionally assumed that mastering one's subjective self was "the most practical method of mastery over world."<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, this power also has social repercussions and it is often perpetuated by the mechanisms of common belief.

It is of fundamental importance to realize that power, as the goal of the magic quest to which I am relating the *sādhana* of the *jogīs*, possesses *sacral* quality. By sacred, I mean that which is an intentional object of religious attention and action. From the point of view of magic, *the sacred manifests itself as power*. In Eliadean terms, in magic, power has the quality of *hierophany*, or even of *theophany*. Marcel Mauss advances this view in his classical study of magic, where he designates the magical power by the Melanesian word *mana*:<sup>6</sup> "Our analysis brings out the fact that *mana* is an idea of the

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<sup>1</sup> This point is debatable.

<sup>2</sup> Teun Goudriaan and Sanjukta Gupta, *Hindu Tantric and Śākta Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1981), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Thurman seems to be in agreement here with Aleister Crowley's definition of magic (or magick, in Crowley's spelling) as "the Science and Art of *causing Change to occur in conformity with Will*." Aleister Crowley, *Book Four: Liber ABA: Magick*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. ed., ed. Hymenaeus Beta (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1997), 126; emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Thurman, "Magico-Religious Powers," in *Hidden Truths*, 224.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 3, mentions that "The Greek equivalents [of *mana*], found in Hellenistic texts, are *dynamis* 'power', *charis* 'grace', and *aretē* 'effectiveness'." The closest Indian equivalents are *śakti* and *siddhi*.

same order as the idea of the sacred.”<sup>1</sup> A believer may *worship* the divine as a personification and source of power, but, within this context, the divine is essentially viewed as transcendental and requiring supplication. A magician differs from such a believer by insisting, through his or her actions, that there is a link, a correspondence, that establishes the possibility of appropriating this power. And by participating in the exercise of power, the magician also shares in its nature as the sacred, with which he or she identifies. When a Nāth yogi wants to acquire the *siddhis* and become ‘a second Śiva,’ he or she wants to have a share in these powers because they are the prerogatives of the Great Lord. In this sense, magic may be defined as a religion of power, and magicians as devotees of power.

In so far as the sacred is understood as power and not as love or being-consciousness-bliss, the difference between a *siddha* on the one hand and a *bhakta* or a *vedāntin* on the other is, in the ultimate analysis, only doctrinal. But, and this is a crucial distinction, as far as the (esoteric) theory of correspondences establishes the link between the sacred as power and a human who is thus able to participate in this power, a magician’s status resembles God’s and this is potentially problematic and sometimes seen as a sacrilege. This situation is, by the way, more likely to occur within a monotheistic culture. In India, however, it is not uncommon to see human saints as divine. Here the problem is not so much related to the ‘hubris’ apropos the assumption of divine status. It has more to do with the fact that ‘non-esoteric’ saints will tend to emphasize the spiritual aspects of the divine, while a magician (or a *siddha* yogi), who believes in ‘as above, so below’ will often treat the material and bodily as links in the chain that leads to the source of power, and for that reason sacred.<sup>2</sup>

Why would, for example, a Kabīr or a Nānak be critical of the *jogīs*? Because for the *sants*,<sup>3</sup> the sacred is experienced as a *name* requiring devotion; from their perspective, the *jogīs* are deluded in their attention to the ‘miracles’ of yoga, the *siddhis*, and the concentration on the body. “If by withholding your seed, / you could be saved,

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Since the practice of the Siddhas represents appropriation of alchemical principles, and since the alchemy is about the treatment of material substances, the qualification of the material as potentially sacred seems justified.

<sup>3</sup> On this important tradition see, for example, *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, eds. Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987).



O my Brother, / Then surely the eunuchs / would get to the highest heaven? / Says Kabīr, / O brother, listen: / Without the name of Rām / none ever achieved salvation!”<sup>1</sup> It appears as if the yogis are obsessed with the self-empowerment. But for the yogis, to obtain and experience the *siddhis* means to gain access to the sacred as power. To become a powerful *siddha* is for them equivalent to the *bhaktas*’ participation in Kṛṣṇa’s paradise. By the same token, the body is the focus of attention because it *corresponds* to metaphysical realities, and this attention is, in the ultimate analysis, an act of devotion.

The *saguṇ bhaktas* criticize *vedāntins* for their conception of the ultimate religious goal as the merging into attributeless *brahman*, claiming that the Absolute is a personal God, the appropriate practice a loving devotion, and the goal proximity to God (in one form or another). In a similar manner, the *siddhas* are criticized and even ridiculed for the obsession with (‘personal’) power. But once it is understood that for the *yogīs* power is the sacred and a manifestation of the sacred, the problem appears to be not more than a conceptual misunderstanding or a doctrinal disagreement.

The sacral character of power in the system of the Nāth yogis is principally reflected in their orientation towards *siddhis*, which are on one hand miraculous powers pursued as such, while on the other hand they reveal that their possessor, the *siddha*, resembles the Great Lord through his omnipotence. Śiva himself is revered as the master of yogic powers. Finally, the sacred nature of power in tantric traditions in general is related to the concept of *śakti*, which is understood both as the manifest universe outwardly, and as the *kuṇḍalinī śakti* esoterically present within the human body.

2. The second major constitutive element of magic, its basic operative force, is imagination. According to Couliano’s definition, “The magic that concerns us here is theoretically *a science of the imaginary*, which it explores through its own methods and seeks to manipulate at will.”<sup>2</sup> If the system of correspondences represents the theoretical foundation of magic, its working mechanism – the faculty that makes the desired change effective – is the power of imagination. According to Faivre, “It is the

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<sup>1</sup> Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 230-1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii. Emphasis added.

imagination that allows the use of these intermediaries, symbols, and images to develop a gnosis, to penetrate the hieroglyphs of Nature, to *put the theory of correspondences into active practice* and to uncover, to see, and to know the mediating entities between Nature and the divine world.”<sup>1</sup>

The work of Henry Corbin<sup>2</sup> is of vital importance for understanding the principles of the theory of imagination (his context is mainly, but not exclusively, Islamic mysticism). He is also credited with the introduction of the term *mundus imaginalis*. In very simplified terms, the basic postulate of the theory of imagination (as understood esoterically) is that it is the *medium*, the link that connects spiritual and human realms. (Accordingly, the *mundus imaginalis* represents a ‘middle earth’ between these two, what Paul Mus calls *mesocosm*). The system of correspondences is static in itself; it is only through the medium of active, or creative, imagination that the mechanism begins to operate, to work.

Couliano’s study of magic, as already mentioned, also gives a prominent place to the concept of the imaginary. According to his research, ancient authors (Aristotle being, as usual, the great systematizer and authority) conceived of the imagination as a faculty that makes possible communication (or mediation) between spiritual and corporeal realities. “For the soul has no ontological aperture through which it can look down, while the body is only a form of organization of natural elements ... On the other hand, the body opens up to the soul a window to the world through the five sensory organs...”<sup>3</sup> In other words, imagination is a link between two distinct worlds that would otherwise be inaudible to each other and as such it was the root and medium “of all the phantasmic<sup>4</sup> processes of Renaissance: Eros, the Art of Memory,<sup>1</sup> theoretical magic, alchemy and practical magic.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 12; emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī*. With a New Preface by Harold Bloom. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997 (1969); *Spiritual Body and Terrestrial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shī‘ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977); *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy*, trans. Joseph Rowe (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1998); *et al.*

<sup>3</sup> Couliano, *Eros and Magic*, 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> The *phantasms* are images, which the inner sense, or *phantasia*, presents to the soul. In this sense, this is just an alternative expression for *imagination*. The important thing to remember is that both terms, fantasy and imagination, are in this context meant to be understood as image making faculties and

In magic, therefore, the power of imagination is that which makes possible the desired change. In the systems of tantra and the yoga of the Nāth Siddhas, imagination is, I suggest, operational as a force that builds the subtle body (*sūkṣm śarīr*) and establishes connections with the *cakras* and other occult energies that exist not on the physical plane but on the level of *mundus imaginalis*. Needless to say, the yogic terminology does not, in this context, employ the word imagination. Instead, the process is designated as meditation, *dhyān*,<sup>3</sup> as practice, *sādhana*, as cultivation, *bhāvanā*, and some other appropriate terms. Closest to imagination in its phrasing is the tantric concept of 'mental worship,' or *mānasapūjā*. Goudriaan writes, "[The] 'mind' is considered here an important source of power able to effect the same results, or even more, as an external ritual. It is scarcely necessary to repeat that Tantric and other texts often attach great value to the execution of 'mental worship' (*mānasapūjā* which is sometimes said to far to exceed in effectivity the external worship with lamps, flowers, grains and other articles."<sup>4</sup> I will treat this matter at greater length in following chapters; at this point, let it suffice as a working hypothesis the following assertion: the role that *mānasapūjā* plays in tantra corresponds to the role that *imagination* plays in magic, as the latter is understood in the West.

3. The third major fact that defines magic is that its nature is comparable to eros - "Eros itself being a form of magic"<sup>5</sup> - in the sense that both magical and erotic activities are aimed at union.<sup>6</sup> Starting from the belief in universal correspondence, i.e.

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intermediaries between material and spiritual realities. The terms do not have the connotation of the 'unreal' within this frame of reference. See *ibid.*, 1-27 and throughout.

<sup>1</sup> On this subject see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Padoux remarks on the usage of term 'visualization' in this connection that, "These are the two meanings of the word *dhyāna*: both meditation - notably of a deity - and a clear-cut mental picture created by meditation of the deity's form, according to its scriptural description (in *dhyāna-śloka*)." Padoux, *Vāc*: 47, n.37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>5</sup> Couliano, *Eros and Magic*, 221. "[Marsilio] Ficino is father of the equation Eros = magic, whose terms can doubtless be reversed." *Ibid.*, 87. On Bruno, see also Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. London, 1964]) and Karen Silvia de Leon-Jones, *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah: Prophets, Magicians and Rabbis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Agrippa, perhaps the most influential Renaissance writer on the subject of magic, defines it at the beginning of his *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, in the following manner: "Magic ... produceth its wonderful effects, by uniting the virtues of things through the application of them one to the other ... joining

sympathy and connection between things, it was but a short step to another important conclusion: what binds the world together is attraction, love, *eros*. Neoplatonic speculations on the power of *eros* were correlated with magic in the Renaissance period by Marsilio Ficino and especially by Giordano Bruno. His ideas, as Couliano reminds us, “carry to an extreme end Ficinian theory of love as a form of natural magic.”<sup>1</sup>

Yoga may also be conceived as a science of unions, and the complementary pairs that need to be united are very often, especially in tantra, given sexual signifiers. Gopinath Kaviraj has observed that “when Śiva and Śakti are united this phantasm [of the phenomenal world where Śiva and Śakti appear to be divided] vanishes into nothing. We shall see that the aim of Yoga is the establishment of this Union. This will also explain the existence of so much erotic imagery in connection with an account of this matter in the Tantric and Nāthic literature, both Hindu and Buddhistic, in the mediaeval ages.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, it is evident that both magic and yoga are related to the power of *eros*, provided that the latter is understood as a drive toward union.

I would accordingly define magic as an occult science oriented toward power (understood as a manifestation of the sacred), made operational through the power of imagination, by its nature erotic (driven by a desire toward union). In all three elements, magic is comparable and analogous to the discipline of tantra and *haṭha* yoga, as has already been indicated and as I will continue to suggest and hopefully demonstrate throughout this work.

It needs to be recalled and emphasized that magical power also has a social dimension insofar as society assigns this particular qualification to certain persons and aspects of reality, through the complex mechanisms of belief.<sup>3</sup> A yogi is powerful, among other reasons, because people believe in his power. The source of magical power can be related to metaphysical notions as well as to this world. In the latter case, it is

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and knitting them together ...” Qtd. in Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels: Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 44; emphases added. And in a similar vein, in his *De Incertitudine et Vanitate Scientiarum atque Artium*, Agrippa asserts that “Natural magic ... [works by] coupling the inferior things with the qualities of the superior, as it were by certain *enticements*, to cause a natural joining of them together...” Qtd. in *ibid.* 64; emphases added.

<sup>1</sup> Couliano, in *Hidden Truths*, 114.

<sup>2</sup> Kaviraj, “History and Doctrine of the Nāthas,” 73.

<sup>3</sup> See Mauss, *Theory of Magic*, 91-7.

closely linked to the liminal, forbidden, and extraordinary: cemeteries, dead people, menstruating women, polluting substances, outsiders, and so on.<sup>1</sup> It is also related to psychological states of intense character, such as dreams, visions, states of fear, excitement, intoxication, and the like. “The quality of mana –and of the sacred – appertains to things which are given a very definite position in society, often to the extent of their being considered to exist *outside the normal world and normal practices*. These things play a very considerable role in magic; they provide, in fact, its living forces.”<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the marginality, or liminality, of the *jogīs* and their dealing with forbidden and polluting substances, their engagement with non-ordinary sexuality, their association with and supposed mastery over snakes, and the display of death-symbolic ashes on their bodies, all of these elements serve as the source of power associated with them.<sup>3</sup>

#### ALCHEMY

Alchemy is another occult discipline that requires theoretical clarification if the Nāth Siddhas are to be properly understood. As already mentioned, scholars such as Dasgupta, Eliade, and White have emphasized the fact that nāthist *sādhana* represents a translation of alchemical procedures into yogic practice. However, alchemy is a discipline of such bewildering complexity and its rhetoric idiosyncrasies are so opaque that they ask for, and deserve, a much more comprehensive and detailed study than the scope of this work admits. I will therefore have to be selective and will limit myself to presentation of the bare essentials.

At the outset, it needs to be understood that alchemy should not be treated as the ‘precursor of chemistry.’ “The alchemists were not interested – or only subsidiarily

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<sup>1</sup> This subject is treated in the classic study by Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970 [1966]).

<sup>2</sup> Mauss, *Theory of Magic*, 119, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Alexis Sanderson contrasts ‘the path of purity’ associated with the brahminical culture with the ‘path of power’ typical of tantra. Important aspect of the latter is related to the acquisition of ‘power through impurity.’ “It was precisely because these [‘impure’] forces threatened the Hindu’s ‘impotent purity’ that they [the tantrikas] invited a visionary mysticism of fearless omnipotence, of unfettered super-agency through the controlled assimilation of their lawless power in *occult manipulations of impurity*.” Sanderson, “Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir,” in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, eds. Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 200–1; emphasis added. In a similar spirit, Jeffrey Kripal asserts that tantra ‘consciously uses decadence as a spiritual technique’. Kripal, *Kālī’s Child*, 29; emphasis in the original.

- in the scientific study of nature. ... As we shall see presently, the alchemist's quest was not scientific but spiritual. ... In brief, all alchemists have proclaimed their art to be an esoteric technique pursuing a goal similar or comparable to that of the major esoteric and 'mystical' traditions. "<sup>1</sup> In India, alchemy is most closely correlated with tantric and yogic traditions, as already mentioned on several occasions. Being an occult discipline, alchemy is also closely related to issues of initiations and secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

The most important alchemical concept is, arguably, the notion of transmutation. In a hierarchically imagined universe, gold, divinity, and immortality are assigned the uppermost position, and they are seen as mutually correspondent. "In ancient India, a text from the eighth century BCE (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 3.8.2.27) proclaims that 'gold is immortality'. "<sup>3</sup> Alchemy rests on the claim that it is possible to transform the lower rings of the 'great chain of being' into their superior correlates, a process that is habitually referred to as the 'transmutation of the base metals into gold.' (The original substance that is the subject of projected transformation is, in Western alchemy, usually designated by the term *materia prima*.) If this principle is projected onto the human body, the expected result may be conceptualized in the following manner: "Just as gold neither corrodes nor loses its brilliance with time, so too the human body may realize a perfect and immutable state."<sup>4</sup> The goal of alchemical practice is not necessarily imagined as gold; often, it is conceived of in the form of the elixir or nectar of immortality (or longevity).<sup>5</sup>

As already stated, the idiosyncrasy of the Nāth Siddhas lies in their insistence that the basis of transmutations, the '*materia prima*,' is to be found in the semen, the *bindu* or *bīja*. Originating from the uppermost *cakra* in the head (esoterically correlated to Śiva's dwelling place), its waste is tantamount to bodily deterioration, disease and death. By the same token, its preservation and eventual return to the top *cakra* is equivalent to the attainment of both adepthood and immortality. This latter process is the major concern of *kuṇḍalinī* yoga, summarized by White as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade, "What is Alchemy?" in *Hidden Truths*, 243.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>4</sup> David Gordon White, "Indian Alchemy," in *Hidden Truths*, 261.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Allison Coudert, "Elixirs," in *ibid.*, 248-52.

In *kuṇḍalinī* yoga, the yogin, through his austerities, causes his own seed (*bīja*) to mount the six *cakras* through the agency of the internal (female) *kuṇḍalinī* serpent. As the *kuṇḍalinī* pierces each of the *cakras*, the heat thus generated transmutes the seed until it becomes pure ambrosia (*amṛta*) in the highest *cakra*, the *sahasrāra*, located in the skull. ... The *kuṇḍalinī* then unites with the (male) 'full moon' of the *sahasrāra*, such that the *amṛta* built up there rushes down through the body, rejuvenating it and rendering it immortal.<sup>1</sup>

The reader will notice that alchemy shares the general principle of esotericism, that is to say the belief in correspondences (between metals and bodily fluids and spiritual states), while its own particularity consist in the claim that it is possible to transmute the selected element(s) of nature at the disposal of the alchemist. This comprises the minimum amount of information needed to appreciate the yogic application of alchemical principles. Before leaving the subject of alchemy, however, one more crucial element needs further elucidation. In order to express their ideas, alchemists have elaborated a highly complex mode of discourse, their secret or 'code' language. The opacity of their rhetoric is to a large degree involved with the issue of initiatic secrecy; on the other hand, it reflects in its own appropriate form the nature of metaphysical realities that it attempts to portray. "The stages of the alchemical opus constitute an initiation, a series of specific experiences aimed at the radical transformation of the human condition. But the successful initiate cannot adequately express his new mode of being in a profane language. He is compelled to use a 'secret language.'"<sup>2</sup> It is quite conceivable that a similar situation is at the root of the fact that the poetry of *The Sayings of Gorakh*, especially the *pad* section, abounds in 'upside-down' or 'twilight' language. I intend to treat the matter more fully in the chapter on the esoteric uses of language.

## CONCLUSIONS

David Gordon White defines tantra as the "body of belief 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

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<sup>1</sup> White, "Indian Alchemy," 263.

<sup>2</sup> Eliade, "Alchemy," 244.

microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.”<sup>1</sup> Besides the general agreement with the principles of esotericism, this definition is important in that it explains that divine energy, which is power, is present within the human body. It therefore explains that yogic practices, which intend to access that energy, may be understood as actions that strive to embrace the sacred. In that sense, again, yoga is devotion to the sacred understood as power. To access the energy within the body is equivalent to accessing the sacred as Kṛṣṇa, or Rām. This also explains that the tantric and yogic focus on the body is meaningful, as a religious and devotional practice, insofar as its foundation is based on the esoteric principle of correspondence. Without this element, yoga is - as its critics claim it to be - narcissism and self-aggrandizement. Again, this means that the yoga of the *siddhas* and *tāntrikas* is an esoteric (correspondences at the root of their theory) and magical (the sacred approached as power) discipline.

To summarize: the Nāth Siddhas acquire their particularity through several, mutually related modes of relationship with power. This power is at one level exoteric,<sup>2</sup> generated through the control of body and sexuality and asserted over and against those who lack the ability for such a discipline. On the other, and more important level, this power is esoteric, based upon knowledge of occult forces and energies of transmuted sexuality, based upon the possession of the elixir of immortality, based upon the knowledge of secret methods of how to change one’s spiritual and material predicament, expressed in a coded language and the ‘upside-down’ metaphors of their poetry. In a sociological sense, the power of the Siddhas is at home with the popular culture of the common people, and is critical of the established norms of the caste society and the supremacy of *brahmins* and pundits. But fundamentally, what the *jogīs* do and what they believe in is, in its core, meaningfully subsumed within the category of esotericism. The next chapter will explore and focus on esoteric elements in the Nāth Siddhas’ approach to the body and sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> David Gordon White, “Mapping a Tradition,” in *Tantra in Practice*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Exoteric in a sense that it is commonly met in other form of *askesis* in India.



## CHAPTER 2

### ESOTERICISM AND POWER OF THE NĀTH YOGIS

#### RELATED TO BODY AND SEXUALITY

In the fortress of the body are the gods, the temples, and Benares.  
There I have naturally met the Indestructible.

*Gorakh-Bānī* (GBP 23: 2.)

For one drop of semen, men and women exhaust themselves to death.  
But the yogi who controls it thereby achieves success.

*Gorakh-Bānī* (GBP 44: 2.)

At the physical level, *bindu* manifests as a material substance, the sexual secretion. Within the human body, its location is within the *mūlādhār cakra* at the base of the spine. Yogis attempt to raise the *bindu* along the subtle conduit known as the *suṣumṇā nāḍī*, the final destination being the *sahasrār cakra* on the top of the head. This process is alternatively expressed as the ‘waking up’ of *kuṇḍaliṇī śakti*. Since at the beginning of this process the *bindu* has corporeal and sexual aspects, I suggest that the theme of this chapter be the yogic understanding of body and sex.

How do the Nāth Siddhas approach the human body? What are the esoteric components of that approach? In what manner do they understand human sexuality? How is the issue of power relevant for these considerations? These are the main question I will be asking and attempting to answer in this section. As I have already indicated, to separate these issues into discrete thematic units is but an analytic move. I have decided to treat the body and sexuality separately for strategic reasons and not because I propose an actual dichotomy between the two. In my exposition, I will continue to look at the phenomenon of the Nāth yogis through the conceptual model of esotericism. In doing so, I have a twofold purpose in mind. On the one hand, my intention will be to demonstrate the applicability of the model onto its chosen ‘subject.’ More importantly, I want to stress the benefits resulting from this methodological

approach. In other words, my concern will be to answer the question: what do we gain by applying the model of esotericism onto the *jogīs*? I suggest the following as the most important insights:

*Yogic work with the subtle body is based on the disciplined use of imagination and this body is itself imaginal.* The reader is already familiar with the fact that Faivre considers imagination to be one of the four necessary elements of esotericism. In my understanding, imagination is the tool that builds the subtle body (*sūkṣm śarīr*) and its centres and conduits of energy (*cakras* and *nāṛīs*) that are of fundamental importance for the practice of yoga. Imagination is the power that - in addition to breathing exercises, bodily postures, and mantric utterances - 'wakes up' the occult centres of energy within the body and reverses the flow of semen upwards, turning it into elixir. Imagination breathes life into the *microcosm* within the body of a yogi and populates it with metaphysical powers and entities. It makes operative the correspondences between semen, breath and mind. Without the employment of the powers of imagination the practice of yoga would lack deeper results. An important part of yogic work is focused on the meditation on and manipulation of the subtle body that is 'created' through a process that may be thought of as the disciplined imagination, and this body may be thus defined as 'imaginal.' Paying attention to the principles of esotericism, such as imagination, helps us therefore to understand more fully a vital component in the practice of yoga. It also provides us with a link between yoga and magic, which Couliano defines as "a science of the imaginary."<sup>1</sup>

*Based on the principle of correspondence, yogic work with cakras and the kuṇḍaliṇī may be understood as a practice of devotion.* This is a statement that contradicts the general image of the Nāths as a group that "left nearly no place for devotionism in their religious practice."<sup>2</sup> The Indian critics of the Nāth *panth*, by the way, also hold this view. It appears as if the *jogīs* are narcissistic in their 'obsession' with bodily exercises and powers, meditating on the *cakras* instead of praying to the gods. But, once it is remembered that the *cakras* correspond to the gods (Śiva is in the *sahāsrar*, Śakti in the

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<sup>1</sup> Couliano, *Eros and Magic*, xviii.

<sup>2</sup> White, "Wonders of Śrī Maṣṭnāth," 401. Charlotte Vaudeville similarly contrasts yoga with *bhakti*: "Contrary to Yoga, which is essentially technique, Bhakti is essentially faith, the adoration of a personal God, who is generally 'manifested' in an anthropomorphic form, that of an *avatāra* or 'descent.'" Vaudeville, "Kabīr and the Interior Religion," *History of Religions*, 3 (1964), 194.

*mūlādhār*), it becomes obvious that to meditate on the subtle 'lotuses' within the body is tantamount to meditating on the deities that dwell within them. In this sense, concentration on the *cakras* is devotion. This fact is occluded unless the esoteric principle of correspondences is taken into account. Similarly, interest in power, so typical of the Nāth yogis, may also be read as a devotional act, once we recall that in magic power represents the manifestation of the sacred. It is my contention that by taking seriously the general principles of esotericism and magic we are able to better understand the practice of the Nāth yogis and to reconceptualize the category of devotion.

*Starting from the postulate that eros, magic and yoga are all intentional activities that aim towards union, we may both problematize the sexuality of the Nāths and advance the thesis of the comparability and compatibility between yoga and magic.* By problematizing the sexuality of the Nāth yogis I have in mind the fact that it is neither rejected (as in the case of *saṃnyāsīs*) nor is its role emphasized (as in the case of 'orthodox' *tāntrikas*). It is in fact internalized and consists in the esoteric 'coupling' of occult energies of the body that are given sexual and gender-specific signifiers. What is more, the inner experience of the ascent of the *kuṇḍaliṇī* and of the piercing of the *cakras*, aside from the obvious erotic symbolism, is (at least occasionally and by some yogis) felt as an experience of orgasm. The principle of correspondence is again at work here, for the subtle centres of energy that are often represented by non-sexual signifiers nevertheless ultimately correspond to Śiva and Śakti, whose union is then attempted and, if achieved, experienced as bliss. And it is the power of imagination that turns the subtle 'lotuses' - often iconographically represented as mere geometric designs, *yantras* - into erotic couples. In this way, the major components of esotericism are discernable in the yogic practice of inner unions that result in the acquisition of occult powers and altered states of being. Yoga is thus union, that is to say eros. Couliano also claims, with Ficino and Bruno, that magic and eros are one. It follows, *cum grano salis*, that yoga and magic are compatible, for both are based on the principle of union, which is eros.

I will now elaborate on these points. To begin with, I will look at the human body as understood by the Nāth yogis through the conceptual grid of esotericism. Does the model fit? What are the advantages of observing the *jogīs* through these particular

lenses? Following that, I will turn to the question of sexuality and treat it similarly. So then, how do the Gorakhnāthīs understand the esoteric aspects of the human body?

## THE ESOTERIC BODY: MICROCOSMIC AND IMAGINAL

### *Correspondences*

That the human body as a *microcosm* represents an analogue of the *macrocosm* is an instance of the esoteric mode of thought, since the link that connects the two is based on the notion of *correspondence*. In Indian tradition, the human body has been homologized with the universe since at least Vedic times. The famous cosmogonic hymn (Ṛg Veda, X, 90) about the sacrifice of the *puruṣa* has the limbs of this primordial man correlated with social classes and cosmic divisions. The correspondence between the human body and the universe is, also, of crucial importance in the medical system of Āyur Veda. Indian astrology recognizes correlation between the human body and the zodiac.<sup>1</sup> A Hindu temple is built upon a layout that translates the form and proportions of the human body into architectural design.<sup>2</sup> In yogic and tantric traditions, this correspondence between the body and the cosmos is emphasized. A typical example of this view is offered in a Sanskrit text that is related to the system of *haṭha yoga*, which is the form of yoga most closely associated with the Nāth Siddhas. This is what the text, the *Śiva Saṃhitā*, states on the subject:

In this body, the mount *Meru* ... is surrounded by seven islands; there are rivers, seas, mountains, fields; and lords of the fields too.

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<sup>1</sup> “The twelve sign of the Zodiac respectively represent, the head, face, breast, heart, belly, navel, abdomen, genital organ, tooth, eyes, two knees, two ankles and the two feet of Kalapurusha.” *Kalaprakasika: The Standard Book on the Election (Mahoortha) System*, trans. N. P. Subramania Iyer (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982), xiii. Indian astrology also connects the flow of breath through either of the two nostrils to the phases of the Moon and the position of planets in the orbits. The correspondent practice called “Svarodaya” implies that, among other things, those who know the movement of the Sun, the Moon and the other planets can use this knowledge to predict the nature of the movement of the breath in their bodies, or in other bodies. Likewise the movement of the breath in the microcosm can be used to determine the position of the planets in the macrocosm.” Hart Defouw and Robert Svoboda, *Light on Life: An Introduction to the Astrology of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1996 [1992]), 177.

<sup>2</sup> “Mention must also be made here of the reminiscence of Puruṣa, the Vastu figure who, his body exactly filling a square place, is considered to be lying face downwards in the earth as the substratum on which all temples are built.” David Smith, “Aspects of the Interrelationship of Divine and Human Bodies in Hinduism,” *Religion*, 19 (1989), 212. Smith is referencing a classic study by Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta, 1946).

There are in it seers and sages; all the stars and planets as well. There are sacred pilgrimages, shrines. And presiding deities of the shrines.

The sun and moon, agents of creation and destruction, also move in it. Ether, air, fire, water and earth are also there.

All the beings that exist in the three worlds are also to be found in the body; surrounding the *Meru* they are engaged in their respective functions.

... He who knows this is a Yogī; there is no doubt about it.<sup>1</sup>

It should be evident that the notion of the body as the replica of the *macrocosm* is in its nature esoteric, being based on the principle of correspondence. The fact that this idea is widely attested to cross-culturally and in several historical epochs does not contradict its inclusion within the field of esotericism. Nevertheless, in a certain sense, this is not a ‘secret;’ in a sense, ‘*microcosm* equals *macrocosm*’ is not in and by itself an exclusively esoteric notion.<sup>2</sup> The important distinction is, however, *how* does one know this; what *manner* of knowing are we assuming here? In other words, the quality of knowledge is the issue, not necessarily its content.<sup>3</sup> In this important sense, esoteric knowledge is a special – and thus elite, and therefore powerful – kind of knowledge. “He who knows this is a Yogī; there is no doubt about it.”<sup>4</sup> For the yogi knows the details of this correspondence (and these details may be then qualified as esoteric knowledge proper);<sup>5</sup> what is more to the point, he or she knows how to put this knowledge into practice, and thereby, knowing and acting *thus*, he or she may attain the power to accomplish specific and desired goals.

On a deeper level, a certain notion or a mode of practice should or could be more precisely labeled as esoteric (or occult) on the basis of the *attitude* involved in its conception or execution. Discussing the notion of secrecy, Faivre maintains that “if we

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<sup>1</sup> The *Śiva Saṃhitā*, trans. Rai Bahadur Srisa Chandra Vasu (Allahabad: Panini Office, 1914), 16. This passage is also quoted in *Gorakṣa-Vacana-Sangraha*, verses 43-7.

<sup>2</sup> Similar ideas “are found present also in many a philosophical and religious current... This principle is equally at work in the procedures of divination, poetry and sorcery, but the latter, nonetheless, are not synonymous.” Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. this with the following view: “Specifically, the sacred is not to be conceived independent of experience, rather sensory perception is the locus in which the sacred is originally perceived, but the sacred is constituted by the mode of perception rather than the contents of perception.” Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996), 217.

<sup>4</sup> *Śiva Saṃhitā*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Faivre argues that “generally it is not a doctrine that an initiate is supposed to keep hidden, but at most the details of the ritual.” *Access to Western Esotericism*, 32.

take the sacred seriously, we must always put up a slight partition, simply theoretical really, between the sacred and the profane, precisely in order not to profane what is held dear [that is, the secret], what has been obtained with difficulty in undergoing diverse trials.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, esotericism is intimately related with – it is impossible without – the notion of the sacred. Many may approach the man-equals-universe analogy exoterically<sup>2</sup> – in a scientific spirit, for example – but the ‘real’ esotericist approaches it as a dimension of the sacred. Esotericism is not only what is secret<sup>3</sup>, but even more importantly, what is held *sacred*. I cannot overstate the importance of this distinction.

To return to the notion of the human body as a *microcosm*: The Nāth Siddhas ascribe a paramount importance to this idea; it is a central assumption of their practice, which is the corporeal practice, or ‘the culture of the body,’ *kāyā sādhanā*. They insist, in fact, that to know and master the human body – especially in its esoteric aspects – amounts to the mastery of yoga, which leads to liberation and immortality. It leads to the attainment of the *siddhis*, which is to say, to the acquisition of power. The esoteric aspect of the human body is, on closer analysis, twofold. It consists of the greater world, the cosmos, which is esoterically present within an individual body; and it consists of esoteric aspects of the individual body, that are otherwise unknown to ordinary people, or inaccessible to ordinary sensory perception. The esoteric individual body, in a sense, mirrors the secret and invisible aspects of the natural body, while at the same time it mirrors the totality of the universe. As Gorakhnāth says, “Within the one there is the infinite, and within the infinite there is the one. / By the one the infinite is produced. / When the one is experienced within, / The infinite is contained within the one.”<sup>4</sup> What is more, the cosmos is present within the body in both physical

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 32-3.

<sup>2</sup> “We must remember that there exists an esotericism of exotericism and an exotericism of esotericism, as if each of them were understood only as a function of the other or represented the other side of the same medal.” Ibid., 33.

<sup>3</sup> “Esotericism is not simply a *disciplina arcani*, a discipline of the arcane.” Faivre, “Esotericism,” in *Hidden Truths*, 42.

<sup>4</sup> GBP 14: 1. “ek maiṃ anant anant maiṃ ekai, ekai anant upāyā / antari ek saum parcā hūvā, tab anant ek maiṃ samāyā.”

and metaphysical aspects.<sup>1</sup> An elaborate example of this notion is found in a portion of an important Sanskrit text of the Nāth yogis, the *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* (3. 1-14):

Let us examine now the science of the body. He who experiences within one's body everything that is movable and immovable [that is to say, everything that exists] becomes a yogin gifted with the knowledge of the body. [1]

The tortoise is situated in the soles of the feet [and the seven lower worlds (*tala*) are placed above it]: Pātala in the big toes, Talātala above the big toes, Mahātala in the heels, Rasātala in the ankles, Sutala in the calves, Vītala in the knees and Atala in the thighs. These seven lower worlds are under the dominion of Rudra, the lord of the gods. Within the body, he [Rudra] is Bhāva, the incarnation of anger, or indeed Rudra, the Destroyer of the Fire of Time [*kālāgnirudra*]. [2]

The earth is [situated] in the anus, the atmosphere in the genital region, the sky in the region of the navel. Thus, the god Indra resides in the triple world inside the body. He who controls all the senses (*indriya*), he alone is Indra. [3]

Maharloka, the 'Great World' is at the base of the spine, Janaloka, the 'World of Generation' in the spinal cavity, Tapaloka, the 'World of Austerities' in the marrow of the spine [and] Satyaloka, the 'World of Truth' is in the flower of the lotus of the root-*[cakra]*. Thus, the primordial god, Brahmā, resides in the fourfold world inside the body as the personification of the pride and self-confidence. [4]<sup>2</sup>

In *The Sayings of Gorakh*, the esoteric correlation between the individual and cosmic body represents an underlying theoretical assumption as much as it provides a background for yogic practice. "[The one who] investigates the body and finds the indestructible [God] / Attains the unreachable immortal rank,"<sup>3</sup> claims Gorakhnāth. The presence of macrocosmic and spiritual realities within the human body is also made explicit in the following verses, which employ a recurring stylistic device, the metaphor of the body as a fortress to be conquered:

In the fortress of the body  
There are 900,000 canals.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Banerjea, *Philosophy of Gorakhnāth*, 195-205.

<sup>2</sup> The *Siddhasiddhāntapaddhati* 3. 1-4. I have translated David Gordon White's French translation of the original Sanskrit, which is included in his essay "Le monde dans le corps du Siddha: Microcosmologie dans les traditions médiévales indiennes," in *Images du corps dans le monde hindou*, eds. Véronique Boullier and Gilles Tarabout, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2002), 193-5.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 252. "khojai tan milai avināsī agah amar pad pāy."

At the tenth door<sup>1</sup>  
The Avadhūt has undone the lock.

In the fortress of the body  
There are gods, temples, and Kāśī.<sup>2</sup>  
There I naturally met  
The Indestructible.

Says Gorakhnāth,  
Listen O people:  
Only a few can conquer  
The fortress of the body.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of esoteric thought related to the world-view of the Nāth Siddhas lies in the occasional symbolic understanding of the founding adepts of the school and their internal projection onto the subtle body of a yogi. Matsyendranāth and Gorakhnāth, aside from their historical identities, sometimes also stand as symbols for spiritual achievements and ranks within the Nāth hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, a yogi may *become* a Gorakh if he reaches adequate spiritual level and attains appropriate powers. For example, a *sabad* consisting of a set of yogic riddles, ends with the statement, “Whoever can answer what has been asked, he is Gorakh.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, another *sabad* declares, “Whosoever is beyond desires and plays without tricks, / Call him a Gorakh.”<sup>6</sup> At another level, Matsyendranāth and Gorakhnāth are also esoterically

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<sup>1</sup> The tenth door, as Barthwal glosses, refers to the ‘opening’ at the top of the skull, called *brahmarandhra*. John Grimes defines it as a “[s]ubtle aperture in the crown of the head. Said to be the gateway to the Absolute (Brahman) in the thousand-petaled lotus in the crown of the head (*sahasrāra*). Liberated beings are said to exit the physical body through this aperture.” John Grimes, *A Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy: Sanskrit Terms Defined in English* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996), s.v. “Brahma-randhra.”

<sup>2</sup> Kāśī, meaning ‘shiny,’ is Benares, the holiest city of India.

<sup>3</sup> GBP 23: 1-3. “kāyā gaṛh bhīṃtari nav lakh khāī / dasvaiṃ dvāri avadhū tālī lāī /1/ kāyā gaṛh bhīṃtari dev dehurā kāśī / sahaj subhāī mile abināsī /2/ badant gorakhnāth suṇao nar loī / kāyā gaṛh jītaigā birlā koī.” See also GBP39.

<sup>4</sup> “In the Nāth literature the word *Nātha* (which originally means ‘the lord’) has sometimes been used with an ontological significance and there is sometimes a tendency to interpret the names of the Nāths, particularly of Matsyendra and Gorakṣa, as some transcendental states of mind or soul attainable through the practice of yoga.” Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 382-3. See also Debabrata Sensharma, ed., *Matsyendra SaMhita: Ascribed to Matsyendran tha*, Pt. 1 (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1994), 34: “hence Macchanda, Matsyendra were not personal name but an appellative of some *siddhas* who reached a particular stage in the mystic realisations.”

<sup>5</sup> GBS 86. “pūchaim kahai to gorakh soi.”

<sup>6</sup> GBS 195. “nisprehī nirdāvai khelai gorakh kahīyai soi.”



present within the subtle bodies of their disciples and they may be accessed, as mediators of gnostic insights, through the practice of yoga. The very first *sabad* in the *Sayings of Gorakh* makes reference to this teacher as an eternal child engaged in the spiritual discourse at the level of topmost *cakra*: “At the summit of the sky, a child is speaking. / What kind of a name could it be given?”<sup>1</sup> Similar in their purport are the following two *sabads*:

Gorakh ploughs the field in everybody's heart.  
Those born out of it belong to us.  
To everybody's heart Gorakh tells the sermon:  
An unbaked pot does not hold water.

In everybody's heart Gorakh moves silently:  
In some, he is awake; in some, he sleeps.  
In everybody's heart is Gorakh, in everybody's heart is Mīna.<sup>2</sup>  
The knowledge of the self [*ātman*] is experienced in *guru*'s mouth.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, the process of internalization seems to be taken to its logical conclusion, establishing the esoteric identity between Śiva and Matsyendra or Gorakh and an individual yogi, in whose subtle body all of these are present, in addition to Śakti (in the form of *kuṇḍaliṇī*). Esoteric thought actualizes several instances of mirroring, where the individual identities are fluid. Gorakh is then, in a certain sense, a human disciple of Matsyendra who lived somewhere in the early medieval period in North India. At another level, he is an immortal Siddha, living either in the Himalayas or in the *mundus imaginalis*: the exact nature of the location depends on the mode of discourse and exegetical intentions. At yet another level, Gorakh is Śiva, the identity based either on the fact of human perfectibility or on the divine descent. And finally, Gorakhnāth is present in one of the *cakras* of the subtle body. All these various levels of identification are made possible on the basis of the system of correspondences that relates them to

<sup>1</sup> GBS 1. “gagan-sikhar mahim bālak bolai tākā nām̐v dharhuge kaisā.” See also White, *Alchemical Body*, 202 where these verses are related to the birth of a ‘child of yoga,’ *yoginībhu*, which interpretation enriches, without contradicting it, my understanding of the text.

<sup>2</sup> Mīna is Matsyendra.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 37-8. “ghaṭi ghaṭi gorakh bāhī kyārī / jo nipajai so hoi hamārī / ghaṭi ghaṭi gorakh kahai kahām̐m̐ / kācai bhāṇḍai rahe na pāṇīm̐ // ghaṭi ghaṭi gorakh phirai nirūtā / ko ghaṭ jāge ko ghaṭ sūtā / ghaṭi ghaṭi gorakh ghaṭi ghaṭi mīm̐nā / āpā parcai gur mukhi cīm̐nha.” According to Dr. Shukdev Singh, the expression ‘guru’s mouth’ is a code term denoting initiation. Oral communication, Benares, India, November 2002.

each other. And, last but not least, yogic work with the *cakras* and other elements of the subtle body, due to the esoteric presence of gods and teachers, may be understood as the *yogic* way of devotion, driven by the desire towards union with these divine figures as objects of reverence. If the practice of yoga is understood in these terms, the usual statements about the lack of devotion in the case of *jogīs* appear problematic and not entirely correct.

In a more narrow sense, in a sense more specific to the concerns and techniques of yoga, the esoteric aspect of the human body consists of the concentrated energy represented by *kuṇḍaliṇī śakti* (or ‘the fire of *brahman*, *brahmāgni*) ‘asleep’ at the base of the spine; it consists of the ‘lotus’ centres of latent energy, the *cakras*, and of the channels, the *nāṛīs*, through which the energy flows; and it consists of the nectar, the *amṛt*, that oozes from the ‘Moon’ at the top of the head, at which place Śiva Himself is also metaphysically present. A yogi typically attempts to ‘wake up’ *kuṇḍaliṇī*, to have her rise along *suṣumṇā*, the most important channel situated in the hollow of the spinal column, during which process the *cakras* also ‘open’ and confer gnoseological insights and occult powers onto the yogi. This subject matter is given sufficient treatment in the works of other scholars and I consequently do not intend to dwell on the elaboration of general principles involved in this practice. What I propose, instead, is to look for the reflection of these concepts in *The Sayings of Gorakh*, and to advance the thesis that yogic work with the subtle body, as described above, may be compared to the workings of the imagination, as this concept is understood in its technical meaning in the studies of Western Esotericism.

An important characteristic of esoteric thought is its flexibility. Since the various aspects of the phenomenal universe are interconnected, they are also in a certain sense interchangeable. In this way, identities are not rigid. For example, Śiva and Śakti, aside from their macrocosmic ontological aspects, are also ‘present’ in mercury and sulfur<sup>1</sup> (a notion of immense importance for Indian alchemy), in man’s

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<sup>1</sup> “The most concrete point of intersection between the yogic and alchemical traditions in India lies in the identification of mercury (*rasa*, *pārada*, *sūta*) with the semen of Śiva, and of sulfur (*gandhaka*), red arsenic (*maṇḥsilā*) or mica (*abhraka*) with the menstrual blood (*khapu pa*, *rajas*, *śoṇita*, *ārtava*) or sexual emission (*vīrya*) of the Goddess.” White, *Alchemical Body*, 188-9. “Just as mercury is the particular element which stands for the essence of Śiva, so there is a particular element which signifies the essence of Śakti, which is sulfur.” David Gordon White, “Why Gurus Are Heavy” 47.

sperm and woman's menstrual blood,<sup>1</sup> and in the two main *cakras* in the human body. Accordingly, in order to establish union between Śiva and Śakti – which is a desired goal of practice – one can engage in work with metals and other chemical elements, which would be the approach of alchemy; alternatively, this goal may be attempted by mixing sexual fluids, as is done in some tantric rituals; and finally, the union may be accomplished within an individual body, by making Śiva and Śakti meet esoterically, which would be the approach of yoga.

The following is one of the most explicit references to the presence of Śiva and Śakti, within their respective *cakras* in the body, as found in *The Sayings of Gorakh*:

Gorakh says, through the tenth door  
I reached heaven and Śiva.<sup>2</sup>  
From the summit of twenty-one worlds  
I proclaimed self-knowledge.

Śakti is inside the twelve petals of the Sun,  
And Śiva's place is inside the sixteen [petals] of the Moon.  
Mūla[dhar]<sup>3</sup> and Sahasrār<sup>4</sup> are the house of *jīva* and Śiva.  
*Unmani*<sup>5</sup> lies [in] steady meditation.

I searched in *īṛā*,<sup>6</sup> I filled the *piṅgalā* <sup>7</sup>  
And through *suṣumṇā*<sup>8</sup> I reached the sky.

<sup>1</sup> “Śakti is in the form of blood, Śiva is in the form of semen.” GBP 12: 5: “Śakti rūpī raj āchai siv rūpī byand.”

<sup>2</sup> In the original, Śiva's name is given as Kedār.

<sup>3</sup> The lowest *cakra*. “The wheel (*cakra*) at the base of the spine where *Kuṇḍalinī* lies coiled like a snake. From Her seat at *mūlādhara*, *Kuṇḍalinī* controls all the activities of the physiological system through its network of 72,000 nerves.” Grimes, *Dictionary*, s.v. “Mūlādhara, 2.”

<sup>4</sup> The uppermost *cakra*. “The topmost spiritual center or thousand-petaled lotus located in the crown of the head. It is the seat of iva, the supreme *guru*. When *Kuṇḍalinī* Śakti unites with Śiva in the *sahasrāra*, the *yogi* achieves the state of Self-realization.” Ibid., s.v. “Sahasrāra.”

<sup>5</sup> “*Unmani* or *unmanā* is a transcendent state of consciousness, located at the highest level of the subtle body. It is also a term which connotes equanimity, a pure level of thought which is sometimes taken to be the homologue of *samarasa*.” White, *Alchemical Body*, 506-7, n. 186.

<sup>6</sup> One of the three main channels of energy in the subtle body. “The channel (*nāḍī*) which originates at the base of the spine and terminates at the left nostril. It is called the moon *nāḍī* because of its cooling effect.” Grimes, *Dictionary*, s.v. “*īḍā* .”

<sup>7</sup> *Piṅgalā* is a “channel (*nāḍī*) that originates at the base of the spine and terminates at the right nostril; called the sun *nāḍī* because of its heating effect.” Ibid., s.v. “*Piṅgalā*.”

<sup>8</sup> *Suṣumṇā* is the “central and most important of all 72,000 nerve channels (*nāḍī*) located in the center of the spinal column extending from the base of the spine to the top of the head. The six vortices (*cakra*) are situated in the central channel (*suṣumṇā*), and it is through the *suṣumṇā* channel that *Kuṇḍalinī* rises.” Ibid., s.v. “*Suṣumṇā*.”

Ascetic Gorakh spoke through the mercy of Machindra<sup>1</sup>  
About the location of the *nirañjan* <sup>2</sup>*siddhi*.<sup>3</sup>

The above verses represent typical poetic rendering of yogic practice related to the *cakras* as recorded in *The Sayings of Gorakh*.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the poems on this subject recurrently portray the necessity of directing upwards the mutually correspondent semen, breath, and mind. The analogical chain between these three is of extreme importance.<sup>5</sup> Typically, a yogi would attempt to push the semen and air upward by performing *bandhas*<sup>6</sup> and *mudrās*<sup>7</sup> in addition to manipulation of breath, the *prāṇāyām*. The application of mind to this process is achieved through the effort of visualization and concentration. What I would like to re-emphasize is the fact that the practice rests on the principle of correlation between physical efforts and spiritual goals.<sup>8</sup> The reader will remember that Faivre defines this principle as “the homo-analogical principle matching like to like, and this means one of the two can act on the other. This occurs by virtue of ‘correspondences’ that unite all visible things and likewise unite the latter

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<sup>1</sup> Machindra is an alternative spelling of the Matsyendranāth’s name.

<sup>2</sup> Nirañjan, ‘without blemish,’ or ‘without embellishment’ is a typical Nāth appellation for the supreme being.

<sup>3</sup> GBP 19: Refrain, 1, 5. “badant gorakhnāth dasvīm dvārī surg naim kedār caṛhiyā / ikbīs brahmaṇḍ nā sikhar ūpari sasamved ūcariyā / tek / dvādas dal bhīmtari ravi śakti, sasi ṣoḍas siv thāṁnam / mūl sahaṁsar jīb sīmb ghari unmanī acal dhiyā yana / 1/ ilī sodhi dhari pya gulī pūrī, suṣumnī caṛh asmāṁnam / machindr prasādai jatī gorakh bolyā, nirañjan sidhi naim thānam / 5/.”

<sup>4</sup> See also the *sabads* 53, 93, 94, 98, 105, 113, 133, 176, and the *pads* 19, 21, 30, as the most representative examples of the poetic verses dealing with the subject of *cakras*.

<sup>5</sup> See Mircea Eliade’s “Spirit, Light, and Seed,” an interesting essay that deals with some aspects of this issue. In *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 93-119.

<sup>6</sup> “A class of exercises in *Haṭha Yoga*, which when practiced along with *prāṇāyāma* (breathing exercises) aids in uniting the *prāṇa* and *apāna* (the ingoing and outgoing breath). They also help to seal the vital breath (*prāṇa*) in the body during the practice of locks (*mudrā*). The three main locks are *jālandhara bandha* (in which the head is bent forward and the chin is pressed against the chest), *uddiyāna bandha* (in which the stomach muscles are pulled inward toward the spine), and *mūla bandha* (in which the anus is pulled inward).” Grimes, *Dictionary*, s.v. “Bandha, 1.”

<sup>7</sup> “It is a *Haṭha Yoga* posture and manipulation of different organs of the body as an aid in concentration. Various advanced *Haṭha Yoga* techniques practiced to hold the *prāṇa* within the body, forcing the *Kuṇḍalinī* to flow into the *suṣumnā*.” Ibid., s.v. “Mudrā, 2.”

<sup>8</sup> This holds true even if the desired result of the practice is the attainment of a power, *siddhi*, since here power means sacred.

with invisible realities.”<sup>1</sup> The following two *sabads* explore this correlation within the context of the practice that is expressed under the metaphor of ‘cooking’:<sup>2</sup>

O *svāmī*, the breath is uncooked, life-energy is uncooked,  
Uncooked is body, the *bindu* is uncooked.  
How to cook it? How to perfect it?  
If the fire is insufficient, water will not boil.

O *devi*: If the breath is cooked and life-energy is cooked,  
If body is cooked and the *bindu* is cooked,  
Then the fire of *brahman*<sup>3</sup> burns continuously.  
If the fire is sufficient, water will boil.<sup>4</sup>

The goal of practice is often symbolically described as a merger of the Sun and the Moon; and the successful completion of it is proclaimed in jubilant language, abounding with metaphors of light: “O *avadhūt*, breath should go through the *sahasra nārī*. / Then, the myriad sounds will ring. / The breath will drink seventy-two Moons, / When the primal light shines.”<sup>5</sup> The practice itself is usually referred to either in terms of the reversal of semen, breath and mind, or in terms of the raising of *kuṇḍalinī*: “The lower Ganges has to rise up to [the top of] the Egg of Brahma, / Where the pure drinks the water pure.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, it is possible to advance the thesis that the ascent of the *kuṇḍalinī* is in itself esoterically correspondent to the ascent of semen, breath and mind. Similarly, to make the semen, *bindu*, immobile or fixed is an operation made possible by the effort to concentrate and fix the mind, which practice is facilitated by the appropriate rhythm of breathing and performance of bodily *bandhas* and *mudras*. In this way, the ‘gross body’ (*sthūl śarīr*) is engaged through the practice of posture (*āsan*),

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<sup>1</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 34.

<sup>2</sup> The yogic body is either *pakva* (ripe, but literally ‘cooked’) or *apakva* (unripe, i.e. ‘uncooked’). “The unripe body is the body not disciplined by yoga, and the ripe body is the body disciplined by yoga.” Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 220. See also Charles Malamoud, *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, trans. David Gordon White (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. Paris, 1989]).

<sup>3</sup> “In the ‘desexualized’ context of the Nāth tradition, it is the fire of Brahma (*Brahmāgni*), rather than the Kuṇḍalinī that mounts the cakras.” White, “Why Gurus Are Heavy” 71, n.59.

<sup>4</sup> GBS 156-7. “*svāmmī kēcī bāī kēcā jind / kēcī kāyā kēcā bind / kyaṅkari pākai kyū kari sījhai / kēcī agnī nīr na khījai // tau debī pākī bāī pākā jind / pākī kāyā pākā bind / brahma agni akhaṇḍit balai / pākā agnīm nīr parjalai.*”

<sup>5</sup> GBS 53. “*abadhū sahaṁsra nārī pavan calaigā, koṭī jhamamkai nāda / bahatari candā bāī sokhyā kiranī pragaṭī jab ādaṁ.*”

<sup>6</sup> GBS 2. “*pātāl kī gaṅgā brahmaṇḍ caṛhāibā, tahām bimal bimal jal pīyā.*” As Barthwal glosses, the ‘lower (or infernal) Ganges’ refers to *kuṇḍalinī*, while *brahmāṇḍ* (universe, lit. ‘the Egg of Brahma’) stands for *brahmarandhra*.

aided by muscular contractions (*bandhas* and *mudrās*); the respiratory system is engaged in the *prāṇāyāṁ*; the mind is employed in the practice of visualization of and concentration on the *cakras*; and the end result lies in the awakening of the energy of the *kuṇḍalinī* and the mystical union of Śiva and Śakti within the body of the yogi. The physical, physiological, and mental aspects of the practitioner engaged in yogic practice are correlated within a chain of causes and effects made operational on the basis of their mutual correspondence. Thus, to give another example of this principle, we read in *The Sayings of Gorakh*: “The subtle wind remains continuous. / Inside the body, the *mahāras* [the elixir] is perfected. / Gorakh says, ‘I have caught the unstable. / Joining Śiva and Śakti, I have remained within my own house.’”<sup>1</sup> The correspondence between breath (subtle wind), elixir, and microcosmical reflection of the divine pair (Śiva and Śakti) is evident.

#### *Imagination And The Yogic Body*

The understanding of the human body in terms of the analogy between *microcosm* and *macrocosm*, and in terms of the correlation between semen, breath, and mind is evidently an instance of a thought that operates with the concept of correspondence, one of the central features of esotericism. The question remains, how to understand the concept of the subtle body (*sūkṣm śarīr*), consisting of the *cakras*, *nāṛīs*, and *kuṇḍalinī*, to name its most important components. Here, it is important to recall the simple and obvious truth that these do not exist *materially*, in the physical body. These are in fact occult dimensions of reality that may be accessed through meditation and similar practices, but they do not lie within the realm of ‘ordinary’ reality. Agehananda Bharati explains this notion clearly, with his usual brusqueness:

All yoga discipline postulates in theory the existence of a secondary somatic system consisting of *mandala* [centers], *cakra* [circles], or *kendra* [lotuses], located along an *imagined* spinal column in that secondary body. It is important to realize – a thing which Occidental critics and Occidental phoney [sic] esotericists alike have misunderstood – that this yogic body is not supposed to

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 130. “khartar pavanāṁ rahai nirantari / mahāras sījhai kāyā abhiantari / gorakh kahai amhe cañcal grahiyā / siv saktī le nij ghari rahiā.”

have any ontological status in the sense the physical body has. It is a heuristic device aiding meditation, not an objective system. Benevolent psychologists under the inspiration of the late C. G. Jung have attempted to allocate the various nervous plexuses and ganglia to the centers of this yoga body. They may be right, but Tantrists take some pain to explain that this body and its organs have no *actual* existence.<sup>1</sup>

The subtle body with its centres of energy is, therefore, not a tangible or substantive object. It is *imagined*, created through the power of concentration, accessed in altered states of consciousness. Expressed in a technical term that has acquired a specific meaning through the work of Henry Corbin, it is *imaginal*. Its creation is related to workings of *imagination*, which is one of the four major components of esotericism according to Faivre's model. And, in light of Couliano's definition of magic as the 'science of the imaginary,' the practice of yoga that centers on this imaginal body and its energies may be understood or 'translated' as the practice of magic.

The Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman also recognizes the imaginal nature of the subtle body and its close relationship with the issues of power and magic. He writes, "The Hindu and Buddhist Tantras provide the most complete explanation of magical powers and the psychophysical causality underlying their manifestations. *Key to Tantric analyses of powers are notions of the subtle body and mind.*"<sup>2</sup> These notions are related to power because they stand in causal relationship with the material and spiritual effects, the seeds of which are planted by the practice of willed and disciplined visualization and meditation, or imagination. What Thurman designates (following Indian terminology) 'subtle body and mind' is, I argue, what the Western esotericism designates as the realm of the imaginary, the *mundus imaginalis* (and what the Western occultist call *astral* world and body; *vide infra*). This is evident from the following: "It [that is to say, the final nature of reality, the cosmos] is pure energy that can be reached and controlled most effectively by the human nervous system while focused on precise and subtle *imagery*."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Agehananda Bharati, "Techniques of Control in the Esoteric Traditions of India and Tibet" in *The Realm of the Extra-Human: Ideas and Actions*, ed. Agehananda Bharati (The Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1976), 93-4; emphases added.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. F. Thurman, "Magico-Religious Powers," in *Hidden Truths*, 225; emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 226; emphasis added.

The activity of the mind (or the 'nervous system') that focuses on precise and subtle imagery is, I suggest, what in the Indian cultural sphere is usually designated as meditation (*dhyān*), and in the West as imagination (*imaginatio vera*). These two stand in analogical relation to each other, in other words, they correspond to each other (which is not to say that they are identical). In a similar vein, the 'subtle body' (*sūkṣm śarīr*) spoken of in tantric and yogic traditions corresponds to what is in Western esotericism usually designated by the term 'astral body'.<sup>1</sup> This subject is insufficiently explored and it needs a great deal of further comparative investigation in order to arrive at a clearer conceptualization.

### *Transmutation*

The ultimate goal of yogic practice, according to the Nāths, lies in the attainment of the immortal or diamond body. This is sometimes referred to as the 'divine body,' *divya deh*. It is important to realize, first of all, that this goal is in its ultimate nature spiritual. "Immortality is recognized to be the quintessence of the ultimate nature of the Lord [Śiva]. ... It is for this reason that in common belief we find great Nāth Siddhas like Matsyendra and Gorakh often identified with Śiva or Maheśvara. ... The real significance of the attainment of immortality is the attainment of the state of the Great Lord."<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the yogic aspiration to acquire an immortal body is *comparable* to an effort towards mystical union with the Divine. For to attain 'the state of the Great Lord' is tantamount to the attainment of identity with Him, and the identity is but an aspect of union. In this sense, Gorakhnāth is Śiva. Similarly, to attain the *siddhis* means to become like the Lord who is the natural possessor of powers. What from the position of their detractors appears to be a near-obsession with the body and power, from the perspective of the Nāths is an aspiration towards the sacred understood as power.

Immortality is a mark of the Divine. To aspire towards it means to strive to become 'a second Śiva.' Quest for immortality therefore entails a spiritual dimension: its aim is deification. The yogic practice is consequently based on the assumption of the

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<sup>1</sup> Some insights into Western conceptions of the 'subtle body' may be gathered from a fine discussion in D. P. Walker, "The Astral Body in Renaissance Medicine," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 21 (1958), 119-33.

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 221.



possibility of perfectibility. In other words, the yogic practice is about the *transmutation* of a death-bound human being into immortal god, and in this sense it again fits with the Faivrian model of esotericism, just as the rhetoric of the absolute achievement (immortality) and the means to attain it (*haṭha* yoga) are consistent with Stuckrad's definition of what is *esoteric*.<sup>1</sup> The prerogatives of a god are free will, power, and life eternal. An accomplished adept of yoga, a *siddha*, exhibits these same qualities as his own. The attainment of the divine body, once the physical body has been 'cooked' in the fire of yoga, establishes a mark of difference between a *siddha* and the ordinary human being:

Through the fire of yoga the body becomes supra-material and above all sorrows and sufferings. Such a yoga body (*yogo-deha*) is rare even to gods; it is a body bereft of all limitations and bondage and at the same time possessing great powers; it is limitless like the sky but purer even than the sky. The great yogin with his perfect body moves in the world according to his own will, - and as this perfect body is produced through the burning away of his physical body through the fire of yoga there is no further death for him.<sup>2</sup>

In the light of the above considerations, it follows that a display of power and free behaviour on the part of the yogis represents a sign of their sharing in the nature of the Divine. In the words of Gorakhnāth, "Those who are immortal and pure are beyond sin and virtue./ They are beyond *sattva* and *rajas* [and *tamas*] and are empty. / They remember the *sabad* of *soham* and *haṃsa*.<sup>3</sup> / Theirs is the highest goal and the endless *siddhis*."<sup>4</sup> Immortality, transcendence of ethical concerns, purity from the *guṇas*, emptiness, yogic remembrance (gnosis?), and powers are all combined together as descriptive marks of this new state of being.

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<sup>1</sup> Experience of transmutation is one of the four main constitutive elements of esotericism. See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 13-4. See also Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 10 and passim.

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 220.

<sup>3</sup> In Sanskrit, *ha sa* literally means both 'swan' and 'I am He'; *so'ham* means 'I am He.' Both words are related to the sound internally heard during the process of breathing. The spiritual connotation of *haṃsa* is described by Grimes as the "natural vibration of the Self, which occurs spontaneously with each incoming and outgoing breath. By becoming aware of *haṃsa*, a seeker experiences the identity between the individual self and the supreme Self. Also repeated as *So'ham*." Grimes, *Dictionary*, s.v. "haṃsa."

<sup>4</sup> GBS 46. "amarā nirmal pāp na puṇni / sat raj bibarjit suṇni / sohaṃ haṃsā sumirai sabad / tihim paramārtha anant sidhi."

To summarize the main points related to the understanding of the human body according to the Nāth Siddhas (and the Hindu tantric teachings in general) and to correlate them to Faivre's model of esotericism: The body is fundamentally a *microcosmic* replica of the *macrocosm*; in yogic terminology, the individual body, *piṇḍa*, is analogous to cosmos, *brahmāṇḍa*. Śiva and Śakti are also present within the human body, having their respective places at the top of the head and at the base of the spine. The human body in its material aspect *corresponds* to the universe and spiritual realities. The notion of correspondence is extended by the analogy between semen, breath, and mind, and their spiritual correlates and it also represents the theoretical foundation of yogic practice. This practice would be impossible without the exercise of *imagination*, which projects the images of the *cakras* and the whole superstructure of the subtle body over the empirical grid of the physical body. The yogic practice is oriented toward *transmutation* of the mortal body into an immortal body that is in its infinite powers identical with the body of the Great Lord Śiva. And finally, the practice of the Nāth yogis represents an internalization of the methods of Indian alchemy. Alchemical practice focuses on the work with mercury, replaced by the semen in the practice of yoga, whose attributes and powers are ultimately those of a *living* thing.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, all the four major elements of esotericism are intimately interwoven in the yogic understanding of the human body. Does the same hold true for their approach to and understanding of sexuality?

## SEXUALITY: ESOTERICISM AND POWER

### *Celibacy As The Care Of The Self*

The Nāth *panth* yogis are customarily described in literature as a group of celibate ascetics, as those who have renounced sex. "As early as Patañjali's time (c. 500. B.C.) 'Yogī' meant a man who practices religious austerities; and these were much valued, and asceticism and the vow of celibacy and life-long study were regarded as high

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<sup>1</sup> See White, "Why Gurus Are Heavy."

virtues and as being productive of the highest powers.”<sup>1</sup> “This ascetic ideal is emphasized by wandering Jogī minstrels, singing legends in which the link between indulgence of the senses and death is constantly emphasized.”<sup>2</sup> The poems recorded in *The Sayings of Gorakh* also abound with admonitions for sexual continence. A verse such as “People who rub skin against skin / Waste the body day by day”<sup>3</sup> is a typical instance of this attitude. However, while there is no reason to doubt that celibacy constitutes an important element in the career of the yogis, it is nevertheless possible to assert that sexuality, considered in its wider scope, represents a *sine qua non* of the phenomenon of the Nāth Siddhas. To a large degree, this sexuality is non-ordinary: it is internalized, modified, and hidden (‘occult’), sublimated and supplemented by a network of apparently non-sexual signifiers. But it is there, ubiquitous and quintessential. I propose, consequently, to devote this section to a reading of the phenomenon of the Gorakhnāth yogis with the particular intent to extrapolate and emphasize the erotic subtext related to the theory and practice of the group. It will hopefully become manifest, in the course of my argument, that the sexuality among the Siddhas constitutes a crucial factor of their identity and a clue to their power.

Michel Foucault has shown in *The History of Sexuality* and other writings that, despite many outward similarities, there is an important difference in nature, orientation and meaning, between Greco-Roman and Christian sexual asceticism in Late Antiquity. The practice of (a small number, usually patrician) pagans centered around the idea of ‘the care of the self’ (Gk. *epimeleia heautou*; Lat. *cara sui*). The principal aim of the sexual moderation and abstinence was to demonstrate that a person undergoing these practices was able to control and govern oneself and be the master of oneself (an important qualification in a society of masters and slaves). “The great difference in sexual ethics for the Greeks was not between people who prefer women or boys or have sex in this way or another, but was a question of quantity and of activity and passivity. *Are you a slave of your own desires or their master?* ... You have to

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<sup>1</sup> Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 260.

<sup>2</sup> Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 96-7.

<sup>3</sup> GBP 48: 3. “cāṃmaiṃ cāṃm ghasaṃtā loī, din din chijai kāyā, āpā parcai gur mukhi na cinhaiṃ, phāṛi phāṛi bāghnīṃ khāyā.”

become completely master of yourself”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, early Christian asceticism was informed by the struggle against flesh and desire, which were considered negative, even demonic, and sexuality was renounced for religious reasons (an attitude most forcibly expressed with reference to the Augustinian notion of the ‘original sin’). “Consequently, between paganism and Christianity, the opposition is not between tolerance and austerity, but between a form of austerity which is linked to an esthetics of existence [as in paganism] and other forms of austerity [as in Christianity] which are linked to the necessity of renouncing the self and deciphering its truth.”<sup>2</sup>

My understanding is that the asceticism of the Nāth Siddhas resembles, in its nature and orientation, the Greco-Roman type of *askesis* and that it represents a particular technique of the care-of-the-self where the self in question in its ultimate aim aspires towards divinity. The sexual abstinence and the retention of sperm are approached as the pathways toward a positive goal, which is power, *siddhi*. A yogi resorts to the ascetic methods because he, “by conserving his semen, is believed to build up an internal store of magical power.”<sup>3</sup> Making a reference to the practice of the semen preservation, Gorakh says: “In so doing, you are the creator, you are god.”<sup>4</sup> We have to keep in mind the fact that the religious goal of the Siddhas was neither the impersonal *nirvāṇa* of the Buddhists and Jains, nor the merging into the monist reality of *brahman* of the Advaitans, nor the loving union with the chosen deity of the Bhaktas. The Nāths were intent on deification and immortality, their aim was becoming ‘a second Śiva’ and a life eternal. “People involved in the practice of yoga / Are not devoured by Death,”<sup>5</sup> is their claim. And the crucial, unavoidable step on the road towards this goal consists in the yogis’ engagement with the powers of sexuality. Of course, this is a qualified sexuality, distinct from the ordinary kind, which in the case of non-initiates generally has its consummation with the men ejaculating their semen.

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 349; emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>3</sup> Audrey Cantlie, “Aspects of Hindu Asceticism,” in *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-cultural Studies in Symbolism*, ed. Ioan Lewis (London: Academic Press, 1977), 265. In her otherwise interesting essay, the author makes a claim that yogic asceticism resembles what Freud calls the death instinct or the death drive, with which assertion I don’t entirely agree.

<sup>4</sup> GBS 148. “so āpaim kartā, āpaim dev.”

<sup>5</sup> GBS 220. “log jugati maim rahai samāy / tā logī kūm kāl na khāy.”

The yogis attempt to reverse this process,<sup>1</sup> and to turn their semen upward ( *ūrdhvaretas*), resembling again in this aspect the great god Śiva whose erected *lingam* points to his head, indicating, it is assumed, the direction of the upward-moved sperm. The successful accomplishment of this seminal reversal signals the attainment of the divine status: “[I]t has been emphatically declared in all texts of yoga that he, who has been able to give an upward flow to the [seminal] fluid is a god, and not a man.”<sup>2</sup>

Sexual abstinence among the Nāths is functional and teleological, not moral, in its presuppositions. Sexuality, in its mundane forms, is not something that the yogis consider ethically problematic or sinful, since their pragmatic philosophy does not dwell upon these concepts. “The immortal and the pure are beyond sin and virtue,”<sup>3</sup> declares Gorakhnāth. The real negative effects of sexuality, as understood by the Siddhas, refer more to the health hazards; its dangers are somatic and physiological, rather than ethical: “The legs become shaky, the stomach loose / And the [hair on the] head [white] like a heron’s wings.”<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as already mentioned, the struggle against the demands of desire represents an occasion for the acquisition of power - a common theme in Indian spirituality. It is well known that humans most closely approach the condition of gods when they accumulate a store of energetic heat, *tapas*, through their ascetic and celibate exertions and it is at such occasions the gods usually send heavenly nymphs to seduce the ascetics and make them release accumulated semen and thus lose their godlike power. The important fact here is that sexual abstinence represents an avenue for the obtainment of power. This is clearly declared in the following verses from *The Sayings of Gorakh*: “The yogi who holds above what goes below, / Who burns sex, abandons desire, / Who cuts through *māyā* - / Even Viṣṇu washes his feet.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Practically every writer, who wrote on the subject of the Siddhas mentions and dwells upon this practice, technically called the *ulṭā sādhanā*. One of the best summaries is still Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 229-35.

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 246.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 46. “amrā nirmal pāp na puṁni.”

<sup>4</sup> GBP 43: 2. “goṛ bhae ḍagmag peṭ bhayā ḍhīlā, sir bagulām pankhiyā.”

<sup>5</sup> GBS 17. “aradhai jātā uradhai dharai, kāṁm dagadh je jogī karai / tajai alyangan kāṭai māyā, tākā bisnu pakhālai pāyā.”

In the case of yogis, the victory over *eros*, the victory most emphatically associated with Gorakhnāth himself<sup>1</sup>, constitutes a proof of self-mastery and justifies the assumption of the title of the ‘real’ yogi. “Renouncing riches and sex, / He is the lord of yoga, without fear.”<sup>2</sup> But this victory is not by any means an end in itself, for the main objective of the Siddhas is the transformation of the sexual substances into the elixir of immortality. On the basis of the centrality of this fact we may conclude that the asceticism of the Nāths is not simply an exercise in sexual continence (as with ‘orthodox’ renouncers) but an attempt at the *transformation* of mundane sexuality into mystical *eroticism*.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the sexual interplay of the polar energies of the Sun and the Moon (understood as being internally present within the body as the two main *cakras* and /or two main conduits of subtle energy), sexual symbolism related to the penetration of the *cakras* by the fiery snake *kuṇḍalinī*, and the erotic subtext of the dress and some other external paraphernalia of the yogis, all these elements are important additional indicators of the role of sexuality among the group.

Finally, it is virtually certain that abstinence from regular sexual activity represents only a preliminary stage in the career of (some) Nāth yogis. Those who have satisfied this requirement and proved to be masters of themselves, that is to say, those who have become adepts, the Siddhas, they in fact *may* resort to the ritual, *tantric* sex. This is made explicit, for example, in the references to the practice of the so-called *vajrolī mudra*, the main point of which lies in the ability of the yogi to suck back, through his penis, the sperm released during the sexual act. Keeping all these facts in mind, it is justifiable to assert that the power of the Nāth Siddhas relates intimately to, and is inseparable from, the topic of sexuality. Let us, therefore, continue with the investigation of the details of this relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the account of the Gorakh’s victory over the lures of the Goddess in Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 377-8: “All the Siddhas, excepting Gorakh, fell victims to the amorous charms of the goddess and every one except Gorakh felt within a desire to enjoy her, – and the desire of the Siddhas was all approved by her.”

<sup>2</sup> GBS 102. “kanak kāmṁnīm tyāgeṁ doi, so jogesvar nirbhai hoi.”

<sup>3</sup> See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kālī’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1995]). In a nutshell, Kripal understands eroticism as an interpenetration of the categories of sexual and religious.

### *Yoga as a Form of Eros*

Etymologically, *yoga* means “union, junction, combination”.<sup>1</sup> The aim of *yoga* is the union of opposites, *coincidentia* (or *coniunctio*) *oppositorum*, and this union is often represented under the imagery of sexual coupling - a common theme particularly, but not exclusively, in tantric teachings. “Indeed, the desired goal of *haṭhayoga* ascetic and spiritual practice could be conceived as a recognition or reintegration of the two cosmic principles formulated as Śakti and Śiva (or *yonī/ liṅga*, sun/ moon, *nāda/ bindu*, ovum/ semen, etc.) within the disciples own body, similar to the comparative Western notion of *conuinctio* [sic; *coniunctio* is meant] *oppositorum*.”<sup>2</sup> A *yogi* is the one who is engaged in the activity of joining opposites. This effect can be achieved in various ways: regulating the breathing and joining breaths within the body, chanting mantras, meditating, and so on. The point is that by this process the disparate elements of reality are coupled, joined, united. David Gordon White provides a short summary of the possible pairs to be joined: “*Yoga*, literally ‘union’ is, in the mystic parlance of the Nāth Siddhas, the union of sun and moon, fire and fluid, ovum and seed, that which is enjoyed (*upabhogya*) and that which enjoys (*bhoktā*), and ultimately, the commingling of the principles of creation and destruction...”<sup>3</sup> Gnoseological and soteriological aims are achieved through a process of union, through *yoga*.

At this point, I would like to advance one more time the idea that *yoga* (at least, the *haṭha* *yoga* of the Nāth Siddhas), as a form of thought and a mode of practice, may be seen as an analogy of Western magic and that magic corresponds to *eros*, “*Eros* itself being a form of magic.”<sup>4</sup> This analogical link is founded on the principle that *yoga*, magic, and *eros* all work on the basis of attractions, sympathies and unions. The justification for establishing the parallel between *yoga* and sexuality consequently lies in the fact that both of these are activities aiming at a particular kind of union. Even at the most fundamental level, the yogic quest shares certain erotic implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Vaman Shivaram Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Revised and Enlarged* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998 [1<sup>st</sup> ed.1890]), s.v. “*yoga*”.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Goldberg, *The Lord Who Is Half Woman: Ardhanārīśvara in Indian and Feminist Perspective* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2002), 67.

<sup>3</sup> White, *Alchemical Body*, 456, n. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 221. “[Marsilio] Ficino is father of the equation *Eros* = magic, whose terms can doubtless be reversed.” *Ibid.*, 87.

The followers of Gorakh are well known for elaborate esoteric mappings of the human body, which, in their view, represents an interior hierarchical universe, embracing both the infernal and celestial regions, peopled with deities and other spiritual beings, consisting of several centers of mystical energy.<sup>1</sup> These centers, the *cakras*, are numbered in various ways (four, six, seven, and more) but it is unanimously accepted as fact that the two main *cakras* are at the same time the dwelling places of Śiva and Śakti. The goal of yogic practice is to unite these two deities within one's body. We may argue that the purpose of yoga, as envisioned by the Siddhas, lies in achieving an internal erotic coupling of the deified principles of universal polarity. In a very real sense, the religious result of yogic practice, its mystical consummation, is an orgasmic (or, at least, orgasm-like) experience.

In making the claim that yogic mystical states resemble (or represent a variety of) sexual experiences I am taking side with those scholars and interpreters of tantra (and related phenomena) who are emphasizing the possibility of mutual penetration between the categories of 'sexual' and 'religious or mystical'. In contradistinction to this attitude, "numerous scholars have attempted all sorts of mental gymnastics in a desperate effort to rescue the tradition from its stubbornly 'impure' ways. So, for example, we are asked to believe that the word *penis* (*liṅgam*) in the texts does not mean penis ..., and that scholars who privilege the sexual connotations of the word *yoni* (vagina) are being imperialistic."<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Kripal has shown in his study of Ramakrishna that sexuality played a major role in the teaching of this adept, otherwise associated with the popularization of neo-Hindu *advaita*. In an important vision, for example, Ramakrishna sees himself performing cunnilingus on the *cakras* along the spine, "erotically playing with the vagina-shaped lotuses with his tongue. ... *Ever since then I have been in this state.*"<sup>3</sup> One day, Ramakrishna is visited by a practitioner of tantra who explains to him that "the 'stem' and 'lotuses' of *kuṇḍalinī* yoga represent Śiva's phallus (*liṅgam*) and the goddess 'in the form of a vagina' (*yonirūpa*)."<sup>4</sup> On the basis of these and similar information from a variety of sources, it is possible to speculate on the sexual

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, White, "Le monde dans le corps du Siddha," especially pp. 193-5.

<sup>2</sup> Kripal, *Kālī's Child*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. Italics in the original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.



content of mystical and yogic states. (I will refrain from a discussion as to whether the sexual and mystical are best viewed as the varieties of the same or as the two distinct phenomena.)

Yoga is an attempt at the union of opposites. Śiva and Śakti represent these opposites cosmologically and theologically. “Śakti manifests the expansion, Śiva manifests the contraction. / If one would make *yoga* [union] of these two, he would be a king of the perfect yogis.”<sup>1</sup> There are two ways according to which a yogi may attempt to bring about the union of these two. As a solitary practitioner, the yogi may approach his or her own body (and mind) as a dwelling place of these two divinities and then try to unite them. “Take Śiva and Śakti and make them meet,”<sup>2</sup> urges Gorakhnāth. To raise the *kuṇḍalinī*, or ‘the fire of *brahman*,’ from the lowest *cakra* through application of various yogic techniques and to bring her up to the head would be an example of such an internal marriage of the opposites. Another method would be one of exteriorization: in this case a male yogi, identifying himself with Śiva, would have a ritual intercourse with a woman, as Śakti, and they would establish the union in this way.

There are two points of interest here. A yogi, as a single person, is ideally, or rather virtually, a hermaphrodite.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, as Ellen Goldberg has shown, the image and model of the ideal yogi is Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara, the god who is half woman and half man. This is a very important insight for it acknowledges the presence of an archetype that transcends the normative supremacy of masculinity. The yogic androgyny is established through the presence of both masculine and feminine currents of energy within the body. The Sun and the Moon, Śiva and Śakti, they are all found and need to be joined within the body of a yogi. “The Moon and the Sun have to be fixed facing each other,”<sup>4</sup> advises Gorakhnāth. At the same time, a yogi may retain the original gender identity according to the demands of situation, for example, during ritual sex. In any case, whether the essential polarity is telescoped inside or projected

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<sup>1</sup> Gorak Vācāna-Saṃgrahaḥ, 9: “prasaraṃ bhāsayet śaktiḥ saṃkocaṃ bhāsayet śivaḥ / tayoryogasya kartā yaḥ sa bhavet siddhayogirāt.” In Banerjea, *Philosophy of Gorakhnāth*, 333. (The translations from this Sanskrit texts are by Narayan Mishra, throughout. See Bibliography, s.v. Mishra.)

<sup>2</sup> GBS 84. “siv saktī le kari jorau.”

<sup>3</sup> See Goldberg, *The Lord Who Is Half Woman*.

<sup>4</sup> GBS 113. “cand sūraj dōḥ sanmukhī rākhilā [rakhibā].” One of the meanings of the verb *rakhnā* is “to have sexual intercourse...” See R.S. McGregor, ed., *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* (Oxford and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1993]), s.v. “rakhnā”.

externally, the main operative principle of yoga remains the union of opposites and in that sense it is analogically related to eroticism. Yoga, being union, is a form of eros.

### *Eros On The Sleeves: Sexual Symbolism Of Yogis' Dress And Sectarian Marks*

As far as the outward appearance of the yogis is concerned, the robe they wear is usually reddish-ochre in colour and here again we may notice the presence of an erotic subtext. Hazariprasad Dvivedi provides in this connection the following information: “[William] Crooke has given an account of an interesting tale, according to which it was Pārvatī, who originally gave to Gorakhnāth one robe that she coloured with her own blood. It has been said that from that time the red (or ochre) colour became the colour of the yogis.”<sup>1</sup> As Briggs comments, “Yellow (and red) is a symbol of fertility and is the marriage colour. ... The corpse is anointed with [yellow] turmeric, since death is looked upon as marriage.”<sup>2</sup> By the same token, the colour of the yogi's dress signifies both death – for the yogi has ‘died’ for the world – and marriage. The underlying idea here is that both death and marriage are the symbols of the final state of ecstatic union or *samādhi* (let us keep in mind the fact that yogi's grave is also called *samādhi*). The erotic component is embraced by the idea of union present in both images: both Eros and Thanatos signify the sublime. As for the other main ornaments of the yogis that became distinctive marks of the sect, the earrings, the horn, and ashes smeared on the body, Matsyendra received these from Śiva. Even in outward appearance, a yogi wears symbols that indicate by their origin the presence, the union, of the god and the goddess on his body. This is made the most explicit by the practice of branding the *yonilingam* image on the right fore arm of the yogis.<sup>3</sup>

The main distinctive outward marks of the yogis, however, are the large earrings, called *mudrā*. “Rings are of two general shapes, flat and cylindrical; the former called *darsan* [‘vision’], the latter *kuṇḍal* [‘round’]. ... The ring is sometimes called *pāvitrī*, ‘holy,’ ‘sacred.’”<sup>4</sup> As already mentioned, the custom of wearing these earrings

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<sup>1</sup> Hazariprasad Dvivedi, *Nāth Sampradāy* (Allahabad: Lokbharat Prakashan, 1999 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1966]), 18. See also Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 18, n. 8. “Red is the colour of Love.” Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 277, n. 169.

<sup>3</sup> Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7.

originated with Śiva and his immediate disciple Matsyendranāth. An aspirant to the Order is called an *aughar* ; after the initiation ceremony, during which the ears are slit and earrings inserted, he (or she<sup>1</sup>) becomes a Nāth yogi.<sup>2</sup>

In the final stage of their ceremony of initiation a specially chosen *guru*, or teacher, splits the central hollows of both ears with a two-edged knife (or razor). The slits are plugged with sticks of *nīm*-wood; and, after the wound are healed, large rings (*mudrā*) are inserted. These are a symbol of the Yogī's faith. Some explain that in splitting the ear a *nāḍī* (mystic channel) in the cartilage [sic] is cut, thus assisting in the acquirement of the yogic power. The Yogī wearing the *mudrā* becomes immortal.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to draw attention to several important elements in the above account. There is the erotic symbolism of penetration: the phallic knife opens a hole in the yogi's body. In a certain sense, after this ceremony the yogi ceases to be a virgin. His body is not closed anymore, there is an opening, which at the same time makes the passage of energy through the body and the acquisition of power possible. Now, with ordinary men, whose sexuality is not sublimated and transformed, the opening that is the place of the drainage of energy (and the cause of mortality) is in the lower part of the body. The Nāths attempt to keep that lower aperture closed and instead, just like Śiva who was the first to wear the rings, they open a space in their heads (the abode of Śiva). Instead of the energy (the semen, the elixir) draining down from the head to and through the penis, the yogis are attempting to reverse the process by closing the lower hole and opening the one in the upper part of their body. This should facilitate the ascent of the powerful but latent energy of the 'fire of *brahman*' that is ordinarily situated in the lowest *cakra* and that yogis attempt to 'wake up' and send upward along the central channel (*suṣumṇā*) in the spinal cord. However, irrespective of the fact whether the semen goes up or down, both situations represent instances of an erotic process. The only difference between the two is the difference between the gross and the subtle forms of manifestation of the sexual power.

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<sup>1</sup> "Women who wear *mudrā* are numerous." Ibid., 10.

<sup>2</sup> Dvivedi, *Nāth Sampradāy*, 16

<sup>3</sup> Briggs, *Gorakhāth*, 6.

### *Sexual Powers Of Fertility Among Yogis*

A curious element in many legends and stories about the Nāth yogis is their ability to generate human beings out of ‘dead matter.’ “The Nāth Siddhas, and Gorakh in particular, are great yogic progenitors, fecundating women with their yogic ‘seed,’ which they carry in their wallets (*jholī*) in the form of rice grains, barleycorns, ashes, or water in which their loincloth has been washed. A number of Gorakh’s illustrious disciples, including Gūgā Pīr and Carpaṭī are conceived and born in this way.”<sup>1</sup> The story of the birth of Gorakhnāth himself is a typical example:

Once, during his travels, Matsyendranāth enjoyed the hospitality of a child-less couple. As a sign of his appreciation, while he was leaving he offered the woman some of the magical dust, *vibhūti*, from his sack, ordering her to eat of it and that as a result she will conceive a child. Persuaded by her friends, she decided not to eat it but threw the dust in a pit outside the village. Twelve years later, Matsyendra returned and asked about the child. The woman admitted her deed. Matsyendra went to the pit and call the child, “Come out!” “Greetings, guru!” replied the voice from the pit. When the curious villagers removed the soil, they found a divine, beautiful child sitting at the bottom in a yogic position. The child came out and took the dust from Matsyendra’s feet who gave him the name Gorakh and prophesized his future glory and fame.<sup>2</sup>

This same ability to produce living beings, without recourse to the usual means of achieving the same result, is also told of Gorakhnāth. “In the contest with Jalandarnāth (Gopicand legend), Gorakhnāth turned horse dung into locusts, or dung and a blanket, or a bundle of grass, and then into a human body and infused it with life.”<sup>3</sup> In the *Śrī Gorakhnāth Caritr* he makes a ‘driver’ for children’s chariot out of clay and infuses him with life using the *saṃjīvan mantra*.<sup>4</sup> Briggs reports that “Gorakhnāth had a magic bag, or wallet, of wonderful potency, from which he drew gifts of various kinds. He took out of it the barley grains, or the apple, or the flowers, or the ashes

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<sup>1</sup> White, *Alchemical Body*, 289.

<sup>2</sup> This famous story is summarized in Prakash Nath Tantresh, *Rājasthān kā Nāth Sampradāy* (Ajmer: Arya Brothers Bookseller, 1993), 29-31. Camanlal Gautam, *Śrī Gorakhnāth Caritra*, specifies that Gorakh is born as a result of a boon given to Matsyendra by the Sun god (see pp. 5-10). A variant recorded in the *Buddhapurāṇa* substitutes Matsyendra with Śiva while otherwise agreeing with the story. See *Matsyendra Saṃhitā*, 30-1. See also, White, *Alchemical Body*, 288 and Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 190.

<sup>4</sup> Camanlal Gautam, *Śrī Gorakhnāth Caritr* (Bareilly: Sanskriti Sansthan, 1998 [1981?]), 17-21.

which conferred the gift of sons...”<sup>1</sup> Briggs’ conclusion is that “like many other great ascetics he was able to grant children to barren women.”<sup>2</sup> It follows that an important element of Gorakh’s greatness lies in his powers of fecundity.

Other Nāth yogis were also believed able to perform this type of miraculous production of human beings. David Gordon White quotes the following story from the book *Śiva-Gorakṣa* by Pir Premnath, where Gorakh’s disciple Ratannāth creates a boy from the elements of his own body:

After eating the food from the first plate, Ratannāth then stood before the second plate. Having pronounced a *mantra*, he then caused ashes to flow from his body, after the fashion of Śiva. These he fashioned into a ball, which he placed before the second plate of food. He then announced that the ball of ashes would eat the food sitting in front of it. ... The ball then split and a laughing, fully formed boy emerged from it and set about eating the food on the plate before him.<sup>3</sup>

Stories of this kind are numerous in the Nāth lore. Here we find again all the main constituents of their make-up interwoven: eros, occult, power. Again, sexual symbols signify esoteric realities and occult powers refer to sexuality. For example, the story of the production of the divine child, through the incubation period of twelve years, may have as its referent the yogic trajectory, “the standard period of preparation of a yogin in the traditions under study here. Twelve years, the mystic homologue of a year of twelve months in which the seasons and the dance of sun and moon are brought full circle...”<sup>4</sup> The stories in question also contribute to the image of the yogis as powerful persons, miracle-workers, whose ability to produce (and sometime, revive) human beings places them into a god-like category. But the undertones of this generative ability are also sexual. After all, sexuality is the avenue for generation of living beings. It is only that with the Siddhas this ability is of a different sort. Here again we face that fact that where there are *jogīs* there is sexuality, but of a transmuted kind. While the ordinary men obtain children by releasing the semen through the lower parts of their body, the yogis, who have shut closed those nether openings, produce them through

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<sup>1</sup> Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 199.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in White, *Alchemical Body*, 287.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

their fingers. Their generative ability is in fact without location since it is freely in their possession, amiable to their wishes, filling their whole bodies with its potency. And what better image for an erotic ascetic (which every Nāth, on the model of Śiva, potentially is) than a renouncer who is able to make barren women give birth to sons?.

### *Sexuality At The Root Of The Tension Between Gorakhnāth And Matsyendranāth*

According to traditional accounts, Matsyendranāth was the first human disciple of the god Śiva and the first proponent of *haṭha* yoga.<sup>1</sup> The preeminent position within the hierarchy of the Nāth *panth* is, however, usually reserved for Matsyendra's disciple Gorakhnāth. The reason for this attitude lies in the fact that Matsyendranāth's career is less immaculate than his disciple's. Matsyendra is, in fact, a 'fallen yogi' who had forgotten and lost his way in the company of women and it was only through the efforts of his pupil that he was brought back to his senses and the path of yoga.<sup>2</sup> Gorakhnāth's greatness is established through the fact that he has proven to be a truer yogi than his own teacher. It is a telling sign of this state of affairs that in the visual representations Gorakh is usually depicted as a young man, an eternal youth, while Matsyendra is shown as an old man with the white hair, displaying thus outwardly the negative results of the loss of semen. As a *pad* from the *Sayings of Gorakh* puts it, "All the juice [*ras*] is gone, / Only refuse remains. / Oh dear devotee Macchindranāth, / Yoga is [thus] not possible!"<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of the situation seems to be a difference between what may be called a *tantric* versus *yogic* approach to sexuality, understood as an avenue of spiritual practice. What Gorakhnāth stands for is an internalization of sexual dynamics within

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<sup>1</sup> On Matsyendranāth, see *Matsyendra Saṃhitā*. "There is evidence to state that the secret Yoginī Kaula of Matsyendra, which he expounded in Kāmarūpa where every woman was a Yoginī, was named after them for in their company he could discover this new cult." V.W. Karambelkar, "Matsyendranātha and his Yoginī Cult," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 31 (1955), 365.

<sup>2</sup> On the subject of Gorakhnāth's victory over the forces of temptation that made his teacher lose his way in the midst of pleasures of the householder's lifestyle, see Vidyāpati's short play in Maithili with Hindi translation, *Gorakṣa Vijaya: Kavikokil Vidyāpati-kṛt*, ed. Harimohan Misra (Patna: Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad, 1974). The same subject is treated by medieval Bengali Muslim author Sheikh Faizulla. For a Russian translation of his work see *Pobeda Gorokho*, trans. I. A. Tovstih (Moscow: Nauka, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> GBP 2: 4. "ras-kus bahi gailā, rahi gaī choī / bhagat machindranāth pūtā, jog na hoī."

the body-mind complex of a celibate yogi.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Gorakh approaches eros esoterically. The sexual polarity is established between several elements of the subtle body, whose constituents are given appropriate gender and sexual significations. We have the relationship between the two main *cakras* that are the inner loci of the male (Śiva in the *sahasrār*) and female (Śakti in the *mūlādhār*) energies within the yogic body. The goal of practice is, it will be remembered, to make these two unite, which is a fact with obvious erotic reference. At another level, the sexual polarity is established through the relationship between the *kuṇḍalinī*, which, although otherwise glossed as female, assumes a male and phallic *function* during the ascent from the base of the spine towards head, during which process it penetrates the female lotuses within the subtle body. The reader will recall Ramakrishna's account of this process, where the experience is described in terms of its orgasmic quality.<sup>2</sup> And finally, the sexual polarity within the body of an individual yogi is established through the hermaphroditic nature of the subtle body,<sup>3</sup> whose divine prototype is Śiva in the *ardhanārīśvara* form.<sup>4</sup>

Of special interest in this regard are pertinent verses from a yogic text of Nāthist provenance, the *Viveka-mārtaṇḍa* ("The Sun of Discrimination"), traditionally attributed to Gorakhnāth, and composed in Sanskrit. According to this work, there are two types of *bindu*, one white and other red in colour. The white one is semen, associated with the Moon, while the red *bindu* is the menstrual blood, associated with the Sun and situated at the navel.<sup>5</sup> White *bindu* is Śiva, the red is Śakti. The highest achievement lies in the union between the two, and this makes the body divine.<sup>6</sup> The most interesting is the implication that both Śiva and Śakti, the semen (*bindu*) and menstrual blood (*rajas*), reside within the androgynous body of the yogi.

In her study of the Bāuls of Bengal, whose notions of the magical efficacy of semen resemble those of the Nāths but whose sexual practices involve the participation

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<sup>1</sup> As several authors have pointed out, Gorakh's solution against the temptation of sexuality in social encounters consists in treating every woman as either a mother or a sister. See esp. Cashin, *Ocean of Love*, and Gold, *Carnival of Parting*.

<sup>2</sup> See Kripal, *Kālī's Child*, 127-8 and passim.

<sup>3</sup> "According to Tāntric and Haṭha-yogic belief, ... the region of the body below the naval [sic.] is the region of Śakti, while the region above the navel is the region of Śiva ..." Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 230.

<sup>4</sup> See Goldberg, *Lord Who Is Half Woman*.

<sup>5</sup> *Vivekamārtaṇḍa*, vv. 75-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, vv. 78-9.

of women, Jeanne Openshaw comments on her impression “that, in certain contexts, ... [they] deliberately emphasise the role of prestigious ‘yogic’ practices such as *prāṇāyām* and total seminal retention. In others, they are more concerned to differentiate the path of *yoga* (associated for them with respiratory techniques and *esoteric practice without a woman*) from their own path – that of *ras* or *bastu* (fluids, substance).”<sup>1</sup> However, it is not correct to assume that the Nāth yogis never engage in the ritual practice of the physical sexual act.<sup>2</sup> The so-called *vajrolī mudrā* is one, and probably the most notorious, example to the contrary. The gist of this technique consists in the urethral suction of the commingled semen and vaginal blood. Interestingly enough, this practice is associated with Matsyendranāth<sup>3</sup> and, equally interesting, it was later “internalized in certain haṭhayogic sources, in which one internally drinks the ‘brilliant white-red nectar’.”<sup>4</sup>

It then appears that Matsyendranāth and Gorakhnāth represent two distinct, and often antagonistic, schools of thought and practice related to the use of sexuality as a spiritual technique. Matsyendra and his *Yoginī Kaula* stand for what may be designated as a ‘hard-core’ *tantric* path in which the sexual act is performed physically and which involve the participation of women. Gorakh represents a ‘hard-core’ *yogic* way of internalized sexuality within the body of a celibate ascetic.<sup>5</sup> The latter school has proven to be dominant – at least if judged by the overall tenor of the *Sayings of Gorakh* – and the sporadic instances of the Nāth yogis performing the physical sexual act, involving ejaculation and subsequent withdrawal of the semen, are the lingering

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 205; emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta writes that “in spite of this general attitude of aversion towards women, the Nāth Siddhas also practiced some well-known processes of *yoga* like *Vajraulī*, *Amaraulī*, *Sahajaulī*, etc. in the company of women. But these practices are *yogic* practices, pure and simple, in which women are neither philosophised upon, nor idealised.” Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 250. On these practices, see *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* 3: 82-96.

<sup>3</sup> “This was the basic doctrine of Matsyendranāth’s venerable *Yoginī Kaula*: women, because they are embodiment of the Goddess and because it is through their ‘wombs’ that the lineage is perpetuated, have something that men do not; it is therefore necessary for males to tap into the female in order that that boundless source of energy be activated within them. This fluid power substance (*dravya*) or lineage nectar (*kulāmṛta*), also simply known by the term ‘true being’ (*sadbhāva*) – the purest substance found in the human body – is unique to women in their multiple roles as sexual consorts, practitioners of *yoga*, and biological mothers.” White, *Alchemical Body*, 200.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> It should be understood that I am contrasting ‘*yoga*’ with ‘*tantra*’ within the limits imposed by my own conceptual model. It is a matter of fact that there are non-celibate yogis as there are celibate *tāntrikas*.



remnants of the practice once originated by, or at least associated with, Matsyendranāth.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Sayings of Gorakh*, there are several reflections of this situation. Gorakhnāth often uses very strong language in order to convey to his teacher the message of incompatibility between yoga and pleasure, *bhoga*, making problematic, it should be noted, the indiscriminate inclusion of the Nāths under the rubric of tantra.<sup>2</sup> “Listen Machindra, Gorakh is speaking! /.../ You have not performed *nirati* nor listened well./ .../ Straying down among women, there is no yoga!”<sup>3</sup> The principal danger of sexual activity on the part of the yogi lies, from the perspective of Gorakh, in the loss of semen that should have been transmuted into elixir: “Oh guru-ji, don’t do such a thing! / Because of that, you are wasting the *mahāras amṛt*.”<sup>4</sup> “Therefore I say, Oh guru, / Everything happened because of your naiveté. / You have lost all the juice, Oh guru / In the snare of the tigress.”<sup>5</sup> In order to persuade both his teacher and other yogis from the involvement with women, Gorakh does not hesitate to engage in rather strong misogynic<sup>6</sup> diatribes against what he calls the ‘tigresses’ and ‘vampires’ (*rākṣasīs*): “

The vagina is a vampire. The vagina is a vampire  
Without teeth, she devoured the whole world.  
The wise have saved their head with wisdom;  
The people have forgotten their own selves. [Refrain]

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to one such practice that obviously assumes the performance of the sexual act but advises against the ejaculation is given in the following precept: “Those who, in making love, preserve the *bindu*, / They are Gorakh’s brothers.” GBS 141. “bhog karamtām je byand rākhai te gorakh kā gurbhāi.”

<sup>2</sup> As already mentioned, some scholars and particularly White consider tantra and yoga to be distinct disciplines.

<sup>3</sup> GBP 3: refrain, 1. “suṇau ho machindra gorakh bolai ... / nirati karī naiṃ nīkāṃ suṇijyau ... / kāṃmnī bahtām jog na hoi.”

<sup>4</sup> GBP 43: refrain. “guruji aisā karam na kijai, tāthaiṃ amīm mahāras chījai.”

<sup>5</sup> GBP 2: 2. “etaiṃ kachū kathilāguru, sabai bhailā bholai / sarb ras khoilā guru bāghamni cai kholai.”

<sup>6</sup> Ann Grodzins Gold has advanced the view that the misogyny of the Nāth Siddhas is not a straightforward affair and that it is counterbalanced by the respect shown to women as natural possessors of magical power. Discussing this issue in the context of the Rajasthani folk songs about the famous Nāth yogi Gopi Chand, she writes: “As a whole the Rajasthani Gopi Chand transmits a world view in which gender is construed flexibly, the attributes of the different sexes are at times interchangeable, and misogyny coexists with a view of women as definitely the better half. Both in love and in magic, women command the power of *māyā*, and no ordinary male can overcome this – although the very best of yogis can outdo women by rejecting the former and co-opting the latter.” “Gender and Illusion in a Rajasthani Yogic Tradition,” in *Gender, Genre, and Power*, 126.

During the day, the tigress sleeps,  
And at night she sucks from the body.  
[Man] does not understand the nature of sexual lust,  
So he keeps and nurtures the tigress in his own house.

People who rub skin against skin  
Waste the body day by day.  
They are not introduced to the self-knowledge at the *guru*'s mouth,  
So the tigress devours them.

The tigress gives birth, the tigress kills,  
The tigress rears the body.  
The tigress roars at the side of the king of death:  
Gorakh Rāyā has seen [through] her.<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, Gorakhnāth and, by extension, the Nāth yogis in general approach sexuality in an esoteric manner by internalizing the sexual dynamics and erotic polarity within the single body of a celibate ascetic. In this way, sexuality remains structurally present and operative, although its performance is conducted in a non-ordinary way. Instead of a sexual act between two persons culminating in the man's ejaculation, a yogi conducts a psycho-physiological process of joining of the opposites, where the nature of the complementary poles to be united is also sexual and gender specific in at least some of its symbolic registers. That the yogic work with internal energies may result in orgasmic experiences is evident, for example, in the case of Ramakrishna, as Kripal has shown. There is no reason to doubt that the experience is a common one; as Frits Staal asserts, "connections between *kuṇḍalinī* and sex are undeniable."<sup>2</sup> One may speculate that it depends only on the type of a discourse preferred, whether the sexual connotations of the process will be emphasized or not. Of course, there are yogis that follow in the footsteps of Matsyendra, who perform the

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<sup>1</sup> GBP 48: refrain, 1, 3, 4. "bhag rākasi lo, bhag rākasi lo, biṃṇaṃ dantā jag khāyā lo / gyāmnī hutā su gyāmn mukh rahiyā, jīv lok āpai āp gaṃvāyā lo / ʔek/ din din bāghinī sīmā lāgī, rāti sarīrai sokhai / viṣai lubdhī tat na būjhai, ghari lai bāghnīm pokhai /1/ cāmmaiṃ cām ghasamtā loī, din din chījai kāyā / āpā parcai gur mukhi na cinhaiṃ, phāri phāri bāghnīm khāyā /3/ bāghnīm upāyā bāghnī nipāyā bāghnī pālī kāyā / bāghnī dākrāi jauriyom pākhrāi, anbhui gorakh rāyā /4/."

<sup>2</sup> Frits Staal, "The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion," in *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path: Esoteric Buddhist Art on the Trans-Himalayan Trade Routes*, ed. Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter (Los Angeles: UCLA Art Council, 1982), 49. He also notes, "The notion that *kuṇḍalinī* is related to orgasm is even supported by contemporary popular magazines." Ibid.

actual physical act of sex with women and who resort to the practices such as *vajrolī mudrā*, but they constitute a minority, and are thus exceptions to the above statements.

We may conclude, on the basis of analytical reflection, that Gorakhnāth carries the principle of esoteric internalization to its logical end. The body of a yogi, in addition to its being a *microcosmic* mirror of the universal plenum,<sup>1</sup> contains within its subtle dimensions the inner reflections of the Great Lord Śiva and his consort and complement, the goddess Śakti. The union between these two, the union that is also (according to *tāntrikas*) the ultimate nature of reality, is often represented in the form of sexual coupling, and the yogi through his practice makes this principle an experiential fact. As Jean Varenne observes, “Shiva’s paradise is a region of delight where the supreme being ... joys eternally in his union with his shakti: the final liberation is thus presented as being a sort of perpetual wedding feast, an orgasm without end.”<sup>2</sup> Yogic practice related to the ascent of *kuṇḍalinī* corresponds esoterically to the sexual play between the Great Lord and the Goddess. As already indicated, a more narrowly defined *tantric* approach would be to *maintain* the relationship of polarity between the two partners, identifying man with Śiva and woman with Śakti. Gorakhnāth’s approach incorporates important elements of sexuality but within the lifestyle of a celibate yogi. A dose of paradoxicality inherent in this situation is not so unusual if one keeps in mind the fact that the yogi is an earthly representative of the god whose nature is in general full of contradictions, the erotic ascetic lord of yoga, the Great Lord Śiva.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The body as a *pinḍ* mirrors the universe, *brahmāṇḍ*.

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. (with a corrected transliteration) in *ibid.* 48-9. See Jean Varenne, *Yoga and the Hindu Tradition*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 175.

<sup>3</sup> A classic study on this subject is Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973). Kripal’s *Kālī’s Child* explores aspects of this issue from a psychoanalytically informed perspective.

### CHAPTER 3

## THE NĀTH YOGIS AND ESOTERICISM OF SPEECH

I will ask one *sabad*, please answer, merciful teacher!  
How can an old one become a child?  
How can an open flower become a bud?  
Whoever can answer what has been asked, he is a Gorakh!

*Gorakh-Bānī* (GBS 86)

On its reverse journey, the *bindu* undergoes transformations. At the level of the heart, in the *anāhat cakṛa*, it assumes an intermediary aspect that corresponds to the subtle sound or speech. At this point, “the yogin perceives an inner spontaneous sound (*anāhatanāda*),”<sup>1</sup> or he hears the divine word (*śabda*).<sup>2</sup> In this chapter I consequently intend to investigate the relationships between esotericism, power, and various manifestations of linguistic and related phenomena to which I gave the common denominator of ‘speech’ in the title above. My purpose is to interrogate the presence of esoteric factors in the way the Nāth yogis approach and employ language, understood as a broad category that also includes acoustic and aural phenomena that are without semantic and syntactic attributes.

Thematically, my focus will be on the concepts of *mantra*, *sabad*, and *nād*. Starting from the assumption that the esoteric nature of these topics is evident,<sup>3</sup> and that they were already given solid treatment in the general scholarship on tantra, I will be less expository and more intent on evidencing their presence and role in the teaching of the *jogīs*, especially as attested in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. In addition, I want to explore the esoteric usage of rhetoric, which we encounter in the riddles of the ‘upside-down’ (*ulṭabāṃsī*) and ‘twilight’ or ‘intentional’ language (*sandhā-* or *sandhyābhāṣā*).

The esotericism of speech is related to the issue of power on several levels. The power of language is sometimes inherently magical (for example, *mantras* are believed

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<sup>1</sup> Silburn, *Kuṇḍalinī*, 122.

<sup>2</sup> See Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Mantras* are occult formulae, while both *sabad* and *nād* are experienced *internally* and represent results of successfully performed yogic practice.

to be infused with the occult potency), sometimes it relates to the elite nature of esoteric knowledge, while being simultaneously reinforced by the mechanisms of belief upheld by the social environment.<sup>1</sup> The rhetorical employment of esoteric language also serves as a powerful tool in the process of attracting new disciples, as much as it manifests itself as an enigmatic discourse that transcends the merely bookish learning associated with the pundits. In this way, it carries also the connotations of social critique: esoteric discourse as a source of power that denounces power based on exoteric knowledge.

In the concluding part of this chapter, I reflect critically on the lack of engagement with the power of language in the Faivrian model. I assert the conviction and proposal that esotericism in general may be understood as a particular mode of discourse.<sup>2</sup> To the degree that language and discursive practices create our reality, esoteric discourse *ipso facto* generates esotericism as such. From the point of view that privileges language as the foundation of reality – and this view is not uncommonly encountered in India – the importance lies not only in ‘esoteric discourse’ but even more so in a proposition that esotericism *is* a discourse.

I suggest opening this chapter with some general observations. I would like to advance the proposal that there is a subtext of power in the fact that the Nāth Siddhas often employ vernacular languages in order to transmit their teaching. Expressed succinctly, the knowledge as power based on the mastery of Sanskrit and associated with pundits is replaced by the power that has its source in the mastery of esoteric discourse expressed in vernaculars. Let me elaborate on this point.

#### VERNACULARS AND ESOTERICISM

According to both popular and scholarly consensus, the Nāth Siddhas were among the first religious groups in medieval North India to use vernacular language(s) in order to express and transmit their ideas and mode of practice. “Matsyendranāth ... was one of the first writers in Bengali,” asserts Kalyani Mallik, “and Gorakhnāth was probably the

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<sup>1</sup> See Mauss, *General Theory of Magic*, 91-7.

<sup>2</sup> This is also in basic agreement with von Stuckrad’s position.

first prose writer in Hindi.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, the content of their poetry, as exemplified by *The Sayings of Gorakh*, is often mediated by the employment of motifs and metaphors that refer to the quotidian tasks and occupations of the common people, artisans and peasants. What is the significance of this fact? A possible answer is that it represents a gesturing away from the orthodox and normative ordering of social and spiritual reality usually associated with the institution of the *varṇāśramadharma* and sanskritic culture. It seems that the use of vernacular by the Nāths indicates not so much a programmatic rejection of the medium of Sanskrit as it signifies a lack of serious interest in it. As a matter of fact, a number of works authored by the Siddhas do exist in Sanskrit, many of which are attributed to Gorakhnāth.<sup>2</sup> But there can be no doubt that the fame and the general image of the *jogīs* rest on their vernacular poetry and the stock of popular legends and stories about them, not on the content of their Sanskrit treatises. For Sanskrit implies and presupposes a distinct culture and intellectual complexity that is irrelevant for the purpose of control of the body and the attainment of occult powers, which is the main objective of the yogis. Sanskrit indicates a gesture of approval of the *varṇāśramadharma*, it conveys reverence toward Vedas and *brahmins*, it is relevant to the institution of the ‘Temple Hinduism’ – none of which is essential for the way of life advocated by the Nāths.

Instead of the elitism related to sanskritic culture, the Nāth Siddhas developed an elitism of, *inter alia*, the esoteric discourse. What are the elements of this discourse – particularly the ‘twilight’ and the ‘upside-down’ language – and what are the strategies of its deployment in the works of the Siddhas? What is the esoteric use of rhetoric? By what mechanisms of deployment does it translate into power? I will try to provide answer to these queries in due course. At this point, let it suffice to establish as a given that an important element in the make up of a Nāth yogi involves the mastery of a

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<sup>1</sup> Kalyani Mallik, *Siddha-Siddhānta-Paddhati and Other Works of the Nātha Yogīs* (Poona: Oriental Book House, 1954), 1. “... Gorakhnāth is claimed to have been an early writer of Hindi poetry and he is further claimed to have been the first known Hindi (or Punjabi) prose-writer.” Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 373. “From the early Middle Ages, perhaps as early as the eighth or ninth century, Siddhas and Yogīs, mostly low-cast people, had been preaching their Gospel in the common tongue, *bhāṣā*, in some form of Western Apabhramsha or old Bengali.” Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 110. The role of the Nāths in the spread of vernaculars is also discussed in Ronald Stuart McGregor, *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984), pp.21-4, *et passim*.

<sup>2</sup> See the lists of the works in Sanskrit and Hindi attributed to Gorakhnāth in Dvivedi, *Nāth Sampradāy*, 98-100.

certain mode of esoteric discourse. If knowledge is power, then a yogi is powerful, among other reasons, because he or she knows the meaning of the riddles and code words that abound, for example, in the poetry of *The Sayings of Gorakh*. Consequently, rhetoric, power, and esotericism inform and interpenetrate each other.

Let us continue our investigation of the esotericism of speech by moving from the general observations discussed so far to a more technical area, the concepts of *mantra*, *sabad*, and *nād*.

## MANTRAS

Indian tradition in general ascribes a paramount importance to the power of the word. The case of *mantras* is well known as is the wide range of their employment in Vedic, sacerdotal, domestic and tantric ritual. In the philosophical tradition of Sanskrit grammarians, the most sophisticated speculation on this topic is arguably represented by the Bhartṛhari's concept of *śabda brahman* as the ontological foundation of manifest universe.<sup>1</sup> Similarly in tantric traditions, Abhinavagupta and others have developed an intricate philosophy and meditative practice related to the concept of 'mother-phonemes' or *mātrkāś*.<sup>2</sup> In the disciplines of yoga, *mantras* and their 'seed' forms or *bījas* are most often used in conjunction with meditation on *cakras*. It will be remembered that initiation into the Order of the Nāth Siddhas entails the transmission of a *mantra* to the yogi.<sup>3</sup> All of this is a common knowledge<sup>4</sup> and I do not intend to elaborate on this issue, except to emphasize some elements that are relevant to the main thesis and subject matter of this work.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Harold G. Coward, *Bhartṛhari* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> "In Hindu Tantra, the *mātrkāś* are the phonemes of the Sanskrit language, acoustic matrices that are the ground for mantric utterances." "Glossary of Foreign Terms," in *Tantra in Practice*, s.v. "*mātrkā*."

<sup>3</sup> "The *mantra* should be given by the *guru* to disciple while performing initiatory site [sic]. The *mantra* uttered by *guru* is potent, when heard and used by the disciple leads to achievement of great powers." *Matsyendra Saṃhitā*, 55.

<sup>4</sup> Literature on the subject of *mantras* is extensive. Perhaps the most comprehensive single book is Harvey P. Alper, ed., *Understanding Mantras* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1991 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1988]). Of special interest is the essay by Harvey P. Alper, "A Working Bibliography for the Study of Mantras," *ibid.* 327-443, which is a gold mine of relevant information. See also Frits Staal, *Ritual and Mantras: Rules Without Meaning* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1990]). More popular is Harold G. Coward and David J. Goa, *Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1991). Padoux's *Vāc* remains unsurpassed masterpiece on the subject of *mantra* within Hindu tantrism.

First of all, the knowledge and possession of a *mantra* translates into knowledge and possession of power. On the one hand, this is the power of agency: by knowing the *mantra*, a yogi assumes that he can both change his inner condition and acquire access into the occult elements of his psycho-physical make-up *and* that he can apply the *mantra*, usually in a ritual setting, in such a way as to influence others and produce change in his environment. On the other hand, the power that a possessor of *mantra* wields over others has its source in the element of elitism and secrecy: not everybody knows the *mantra*, not everybody knows how to use it. The power of a *māntrika* depends also on the belief that other people have in his or her power.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the esoteric knowledge and the power that it generates are both individual and collective in their reverberations; they are, in other words, both potentially gnostic and political in their nature and function.

The worth and efficacy of a *mantra* is dependent on the network of correspondences that correlate it to both individual and cosmic occult forces. It is well known that *mantras* are believed to encapsulate in their phonetic form the essence of associated gods and goddesses. To meditate on the *mantra* is then equivalent to meditation on a particular divine figure associated with it. Similarly, *mantras* are correlated to the *cakras* in the subtle body of the yogi.<sup>2</sup> Meditation and mental or audible repetition of the *mantras* is supposed to lead to the ‘opening’ of inner centres of occult energy, which culminates in the experience of enlightenment, *samādhi*, and the acquisition of yogic powers, the *siddhis*. It follows that the principle that makes the work on *cakras* operative and meaningful is the esoteric *sine qua non*, the notion of correspondences.

The *mantras* are a particular *genus*, the focal (and vocal) elements in the chain of signification that ultimately leads to the ‘transcendental signified’ whose nature is believed to be divine, sacred. This means that chanting, concentration, and meditation on the *mantras* may be seen as a type of devotional activity, the purpose of which is

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<sup>1</sup> “Thus, what a magician believes and what the public believes are two sides of the same coin. ... Magic as a whole is, therefore, an object *a priori* of belief, a belief which is unanimous and collective.” Mauss, *Theory of Magic*, 96-7.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the list of *cakras* accompanied by the information on the number of petals, the presiding deities with their Śaktis, words, tunes, and colours for each of the *cakras*, in Pitambaradatta Barthwal, *Traditions of Indian Mysticism Based Upon Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1978), 164-5.



either contact with the divine as such, or an invocation of the sacred as power. From the perspective of its orientation towards power, work with *mantras* is magical activity; from the point of recognition of power as the sacred, the same practice may be viewed as devotional. We must not forget that power is also translated and exercised in the social sphere. This is the gist of the mutual reinforcement between devotional, magical, and social repercussions resulting from the power associated with *mantras*.

In light of the Faivrian model, *mantras* microcosmically *correspond* with the *cakras*, and macrocosmically with the gods and goddesses, whose nature they encapsulate in phonetic form. In this way, they *mediate* between physical and transcendental levels of reality, serving as a bridge between human, *imaginal*, and divine spheres. As the ontological ground of phenomenal manifestation, they are co-equal with the ultimate reality, and for that reason they may be understood as exemplars of the *living nature*. They have the power to *transmute* an ordinary human being into immortal adept. They are typically *transmitted* from the teacher to a disciple within the context of the ritual of initiation. And, to make an observation of a more general nature, the fact that same or similar *mantras* are often used in Vedic, domestic, Buddhist and Hindu tantric ritual, is a good example of an element that is shared by divers traditions through a practice of *concordance*.

#### SABAD

The term *sabad*, a vernacular form of the Sanskrit noun *śabda*, literally means ‘word.’ In the context of *The Sayings of Gorakh* it refers both to the poetic form (consisting, usually, of the rhymed couplet of verses) and to the inner ‘Word’ that becomes audible to the yogi as a result of his successful practice with the inner energies of the body. As W. H. McLeod explains, the concept of *sabad* associated with the Nāth Siddhas was also of great importance to the Sant movement and especially to Kabīr and Gurū Nānak, who nevertheless reconceptualized it creatively in order to suit their respective spiritual visions.<sup>1</sup> Given its similarity with certain Western concepts, several scholars, some of them missionaries, have tried to draw parallel between “the *śabda* doctrine of Kabīr and

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<sup>1</sup> See W. H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968]), 191-4.

the platonic *logos*,”<sup>1</sup> or to declare that “Kabīr’s doctrine of the Word (*śabda*) is a remarkable copy of the opening verses of St. John’s Gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The weakness of such proposals lies in the assumption that any similarity between two cultures must involve historical contacts and influences. Leaving that issue aside, as far as the *jogīs* are concerned, McLeod explains that

the word [*sabad*] is characteristically used in conjunction with *anahad*, or *anahat*, and refers to the mystical ‘sound’ which is ‘heard’ at the climax of the *haTha-yoga* technique. The *anahad śabad* is, according to such theories, a ‘soundless sound’, a mystical vibration audible only to the adept who has succeeded in awakening the *kuṇḍalinī* and caused it to ascend to the *suṣuṃṇā*.<sup>3</sup>

The esoteric nature of the experience of the *sabad*, and the synchronic connection between its emergence and the achievement of yogic goals, is reconfirmed in several verses from The Sayings of Gorakh. One of them declares the gnostic quality of encountering the *sabad*, which takes place at the level of the uppermost cakra: “At the summit of the sky, the word [*sabad*] emerges into light. / There the gnostic understands the Formless One.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, another verse proclaims that “Accepting the *sabad*, duality ends.”<sup>5</sup> Both of these statements place emphasis on the inner quality of the experience of the *sabad*, the fact that it denotes the attainment of wisdom (that is ‘unseen’ i.e. esoteric), and that this wisdom is the result of the yogic practice associated with the ascent of ‘the fire of *brahman*’ (which has reached the top cakra). The gesture conveyed is the one that draws the line of demarcation between the ‘unseen wisdom’ learned at the ‘summit of the sky’ and the ordinary, exoteric wisdom associated with the pundits: “O pundit, why do you die fighting for knowledge?” asks Gorakh. “Know the highest place in some other way!”<sup>6</sup>

I would like to underscore the esoteric nature of the yogic experience of the *sabad*. First of all, it is noticeable that the concepts referring to the content of the yogic

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<sup>1</sup> Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 24. This view was proposed by G. Grierson in his article “Modern Hinduism and its Debt to the Nestorians,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1907), 311.

<sup>3</sup> McLeod, *Gurū Nānak*, 191.

<sup>4</sup> GBS 4. “gagani sikhar mahi *sabad* prakāsyā / tahaṃ būjhai alakh bināṃṇīm.”

<sup>5</sup> GBS 15. “māṃnyāṃ *sabad* cukāyā dand.”

<sup>6</sup> GBS 134. “paṇḍit gyāṃn marau kyā jhūjhi / aurai lehu parampad būjhi.”

experience are fluid: they somehow merge and transform into each other. Let us picture a situation of a general sort: a yogi is trying to preserve the dissipation of the semen through the regime of celibacy. He is then attempting the process of reversal, striving to redirect the flow of semen upwards, through postures, muscular contractions and breathing exercises. So far, we are on the material level. Then, let us suppose that the yogi is bringing into practice the vocal recitation or the mental repetition of a *mantra*, in combination with some visual exercises. Corporeal, respiratory, aural and visual efforts and imaginings, let us suppose, finally ‘wake up’ the *kuṇḍalinī*. The energy is surging along the spine towards head, where it bursts into ‘word’ (*sabad*), which is experienced as light, with the quality of ‘unseen wisdom’ through which ‘duality ends.’ The whole process is a display of the transformation and interpenetration of phenomenal and experiential levels of existence into each other on the basis of certain affinities, or ‘sympathies,’ that are categorized in the theory of esotericism as correspondences.

In what manner does the understanding of the *sabad* differ between Gorakhnāth, Kabīr, and Gurū Nānak? As McLeod has argued, Kabīr’s understanding of the ‘Word’ is more mystical, whereas Nānak, while similarly acknowledging the importance of inward revelation, has in mind a more comprehensive engagement with the divine order (*hukam*).<sup>1</sup> They both agree on the sanctity of the inner revelation of the Word, but differ in their recommendation of the way of life and practice that lead to it. “For neither is the path to God regarded as accessible to all,” writes McLeod. “In Gurū Nānak’s works, however, one can distinguish with much greater clarity the means whereby this spiritual sight is acquired and the path to God followed”<sup>2</sup>

It appears safe to assume, therefore, that what sets apart the Nāth yogis is similarly not the content nor value of the mystical experience associated with the realization of the *sabad* but the understanding of the path that leads to its achievement. As far as Kabīr is concerned, “the experience which it [the *sabad*] expresses is, for him, in no way dependent upon the practice of *haṭha-yoga*.”<sup>3</sup> In the case of Gurū Nānak, even more emphatically ‘there is no *kuṇḍalinī*, no *idā*, *piṅgalā*, and *suṣumṇā*, no *chakra*, no

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<sup>1</sup> See McLeod, *Gurū Nānak*, 191-4, and 199-203.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

*prāṇāyām*.”<sup>1</sup> The crux of the matter lies in the following: for the Nāths, the realization of the *sabad* certainly *does* depend on the practice of yoga associated with the corporeal regime of exercises, which is dependent on the work with the *cakras* and the subtle, occult energies of the body. The yogic work starts with, and depends upon, the body but it does not end there, for the body is valuable as a *link* within the chain of significations that ultimately leads to the metaphysical realms and divine encounters. The yogic work focuses on the body understood as a *microcosm* – an esoteric notion – which is thus established as a self-sufficient and complete field of spiritual attention and endeavor. For a Nānak this is not sufficient, nor acceptable, because it does away with the larger issue of social and communal responsibility and welfare. It follows that there is a difference: the Nāths, as a celibate order of yogis, do disentangle themselves from the concerns of organized society.<sup>2</sup> But how problematic is this position at all, keeping in mind the long and established history of renunciation in India?<sup>3</sup>

The difference between a Gorakhnāth and a Kabīr, for example, also lies in the approach to the issue of agency in the context of spiritual quest. As McLeod reminds us, in the case of Kabīr, the Word is an arrow shot by the divine guru that pierces the heart of the man suddenly and unexpectedly.<sup>4</sup> The agency is on the side of the guru; the human subject can only wait, passively and patiently, for the experience. The situation is diametrically opposite in the case of the yogis: here, the experience is actively striven for. Gorakhnāth sings with confidence, “I have found it, listen, I have found this good! / With firmness [I have reached] the place of *sabad*. / I had a vision of it [embodied] in form. / Then I have reached complete faith.”<sup>5</sup> The agency is on the side of human subject, which is in conformity with the general trend of esotericism, and more specifically with the active attitude that is typical of magic.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> The yogi householders, of course, represent a different category. They are not, however, the focus of this study.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Olivelle suggests the following as the defining elements of ancient and medieval Indian asceticism: “1. Cutting social and kinship ties. 2. Living an itinerant life without a fixed home. 3. Mendicancy associated with the abandonment of socially recognized economic activities and the ownership of property, especially of food. 4. Abandoning ritual activities customary within society. 5. Celibacy.” *Rules and Regulations of Brahmanical Asceticism: Yatidharmasamuccaya of Yādava Prakāśa*, ed. and trans. Patrick Olivelle (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>4</sup> McLeod, *Gurū Nānak*, 194.

<sup>5</sup> GBS 80: “pāyā lo bhal pāyā lo sabad thāṁn sahetī thīti / rūp sahetī dīsaṅ lāgā, tab sarva bhai paratīti.”

The exceptional quality of the yogic encounter with the realm of reality associated with the experience of *sabad* is indubitable from many accounts in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. The language of the poetry sometimes reflects, in its very form, something of the extraordinary nature of the phenomenon. For example, the verses declare: “*Sabad* is the lock, *sabad* is the key, / *Sabad* wakes *sabad*. / When *sabad* meets *sabad*, *sabad* is contained in *sabad*.”<sup>1</sup> It appears as if the knowledge of the *sabad* represents the *fons et origo* of all the yogic *sādhana*.

It is also interesting to note that the power associated with the *sabad* was also ascribed by Gorakh to the Prophet Muhammad, which represents a fine example of what Faivre designates as ‘the practice of concordance:’ “By the *sabad* he killed, by the *sabad* he revived: / Such a *pīr* [teacher] was Muhammad. / O *qāzī* [priest, judge], stop pretending! / Such a power is not in your body.”<sup>2</sup> Again, it is obvious that the power of *sabad* originates from sources that are inaccessible to those who follow, and exercise authority in, the exoteric religion (such as Islamic judges). The rhetoric of the text claims Muhammad as one of those who have tapped into resources of esoteric spirituality, the fruit of which is the attainment of the *sabad*, otherwise referred to as the yogic experience. The doctrinal differences between Islam and the yoga of the Nāths are thus overlooked and the emphasis was placed on the mystical *experience* as the unifying factor between the two.

The notion of *sabad* is very similar in its nature to the concept of *nād*, and both are brought into sympathetic correlation with the inner experience of the *bindu*. I would like to stress the esoteric nature of this correlation, but before doing so, we have to take into consideration the essentials of the concept of *nād*.

## NĀD

For all practical purposes, there seems to be no difference between the concepts of the *nād* and the *sabad*. I am treating them separately only provisionally: the contextual

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 21. “*sabadhiṃ tālā sabadhiṃ kūñcī, sabadhi sabad jagāyā / sabadhiṃ sabad sūṃ parcā hūā, sabadhiṃ sabad samāyā.*”

<sup>2</sup> GBS 10. “*sabadaiṃ mārī sabadaiṃ jilāi aisā mahaṃmad pīraṃ / tākai bharami na bhūlau kājī so bhal nahīṃ sarīraṃ.*”

locus of my exposition being *The Sayings of Gorakh*, I am attempting to elucidate its meaning by making references to the concepts as they appear in the text: sometimes under one, at other times under another heading. Alternatively, one could theorize that the notion of the *nāḍ* is more abstract, being purely a sound, while the *sabad* carries a more conspicuous connotation of the semantic meaning: a ‘word’ is a message. But this is somewhat debatable. What is certain, however, is that the experience of the inner sound signals success in the practice of yoga. In a Sanskrit text attributed to Gorakhnāth, this fact is indicated by the following verses: “By cleansing the *nāḍis* the *prāṇa* (is) restrained as desired, the digestive fire (is) kindled, an *internal sound* is heard (becomes manifest), (and) one becomes diseaseless.”<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the *nāḍ* is given a noticeable place in the poetry of *The Sayings of Gorakh*. The word *nāḍ* means ‘sound;’ very often, it is used in the sense of the ‘unstruck sound’ (*anāḥat nāḍ*). It is a concept that is congenial to the practice of yoga and it is the sign of a successful practice, related to the opening of the *cakras* and the ascent of *kuṇḍalinī*. As Lilian Silburn explains,

Kuṇḍalinī, lower as she is in *mūlādhāra* (*adhahkuṇḍalinī*), converts into intermediate energy in the navel, then into subtle energy in the heart, in the *anāhata* center, and in the throat (*viśudhīcakra*), and finally into superior energy (*ūrdhvakūṇḍalinī*) when she reaches the *brahmarandhra*.<sup>2</sup>

The *anāḥat nāḍ* is thus related to the *anāḥat cakra*, which is supposed to be the locus of the emanation of the ‘unstruck sound.’ In the poetry of *The Sayings of Gorakh*, however, the experience of the *nāḍ* is primarily associated with the level of the uppermost *cakra*. For example, Gorakh asserts that “In the circle of the sky, the unstruck [sound] resounds.”<sup>3</sup> Or, similarly, “The unstruck sound thunders in the sky.”<sup>4</sup> In both of these examples, the ‘sky’ is a reference to the *sahasrār cakra*. Another verse specifies the ‘tenth door’ – also situated at the top of the head – as the spatial location of the

<sup>1</sup> The *Gorakṣa Śataka* 101. Trans. in Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 304. Parentheses in the original; emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Silburn, *Kuṇḍalinī*, 131.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 32. “gagan maṇḍal meṃ anahad bājai.”

<sup>4</sup> GBP 22. “anahad nāḍ gagan maiṃ gājai.” This is almost identical with GBS 177, “The unstruck word thunders in the sky” (“anahad sabad gagan meṃ gājai”).

‘meeting’ between the *bindu* and the *nād*: “The *unman*<sup>1</sup> yogi is in the tenth door. / Joining the *nād* and the *bindu* [he hears] the roaring sound.”<sup>2</sup> It seems safe to assume that Gorakhnāth associates the experience of the *nād* with the consummation of the yogic practice, characterized by the ascent of the *bindu* to the top of the head.

## CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE SABAD, NĀD, AND BINDU

There exists an important and interesting correlation between the yogic concepts of speech, sound, and semen. I designate these concepts with the adjective ‘yogic’ in order to stress their esoteric distinction as opposed to exoteric common usage and understanding. What Gorakhnāth calls ‘word,’ ‘sound,’ and ‘semen’ (*sabad*, *nād*, and *bindu*) are in fact the *inner* correlatives of these phenomena. They are important for the yogis only insofar as they are experienced internally, within the context and as a result of the successfully performed *sādhana*. In their outward manifestation - as a spoken word or spilt semen - they become vulgar, wasted, and useless. I suggest investigating this situation in some detail.

First of all, the general tendency in yoga is to re-direct upwards what naturally – and in this context, the ‘natural’ has the negative connotation of *saṃsāric* – tends to go downwards. The semen (*bindu*) has to rise up, as does the *kuṇḍalinī*, breath (or one of the bodily ‘winds’), word (*sabad*) and sound (*nād*). And while these phenomena are apparently distinct and separate in their external manifestations, in their inner aspects they become increasingly subtle, fluid, and inter-penetrating. At the level of perception of reality as witnessed by the yogi who has succeeded in the practice of reversal (*ulṭā-sādhana*),<sup>3</sup> at the level of the *sahasrār cakra*, the semen, breath, word, and mind are one. Let us see the reflection of these ideas in the poetry of *The Sayings of Gorakh*.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘unman’ refers to the transcendental state of the mind, the mind that is ‘beyond mind.’ This concept will be treated more fully in the next chapter.

<sup>2</sup> BGS 135. “unman jogī dasvaim dvār / nād byand le dhūmdhūmkār.”

<sup>3</sup> A useful treatment of the *ulṭā-sādhana* can be found in Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 229-35 *et passim*. White’s “Why Gurus Are Heavy” explores the alchemical and yogic practice of reversal on the model of the reabsorption (*pralaya*) of the created universe. A good deal of relevant information is also contained in White’s *Alchemical Body* and Eliade’s *Yoga*.

A good place to start our investigation is the *sabad* that claims, “In the house of the *nād*, the *bindu* thunders, / And sounds the silent horn.”<sup>1</sup> We have seen in several previous examples that the inner sound is often described as ‘thundering’ or ‘roaring.’ In this verse, however, the specification is that the *bindu* is *contained* within the *nād* and that it represents the agent that generates the yogic perception of sound. At the level of manifest reality, in the context of everyday speech, this statement, that ‘the semen thunders in the house of sound,’ would sound rbizarre. It is feasible then that the linguistic terms refer to the esoteric aspects of semen and sound, in the same manner that the phenomenal semen and sound ultimately correspond to their esoteric correlates. Even with this qualification in mind, the statement remains enigmatic: what is it really that Gorakhnāth is attempting to convey?

According to the theory of yoga, sounds arise as a result of union between the *bīj* (Skt. *bīja*) and the *bindu*. The *bīj* is a monosyllabic sound or word, and the *bindu* represents its nasalization. These two constitutive elements of speech are also related to their divine counterparts: “*Bindu* denotes *Śiva* and *Bīja* denotes *Śakti*. *Nāda* evolves from the mutual communion between them. This is well known to those who are versed in all the *Āgamas*.”<sup>2</sup> In writing, *bindu* is represented by a dot, which is also one of the meanings of the term. But *bindu* is also semen and, especially in yogic usage, the semen of *Śiva*,<sup>3</sup> who is himself associated with and represented by semen. In this way, we arrive at the complex situation where *Śiva* as semen represents a constitutive element of the sound that is heard (as ‘thundering’) by a yogi at the consummation of his practice. But this is not a mere instance of multi-layered connotations of the linguistic term. *Bindu* means so many things precisely because these things are in a certain important (esoteric!) manner mutually related and interconnected. Whether starting from the written dot, from the sound, or from the sexual secretion, one eventually arrives at the ultimate ‘transcendental signified’ which is here *Śiva* (united with *Śakti*).

<sup>1</sup> GBS 54. “*nād kai ghari byand garjai, bājant anahad tūraṃ.*”

<sup>2</sup> These Sanskrit verses are quoted (without reference to their source) in Banerjea, *Philosophy of Gorakhnāth*, 150. The italics as in the original. The Sanskrit text is given as “*Bindu Śivātmako Bīja Śaktir taylor mithah / Samavāya iti khyātaḥ sarvāgama-viśāradaih.*”

<sup>3</sup> See McGregor, ed., *Hindi-English Dictionary*, s.v. “bindu.”



The link that makes possible the interconnection of the semen, word, and sound is the esoteric notion of correspondence. The experiential interpenetration of these phenomena is actualized at the level of the subtle body, created and accessed through the power of disciplined imagination. I propose that the phenomena are distinct at the exoteric level of everyday reality. They become mutually interchangeable at the level of the *mundus imaginalis*: thus ‘the *bindu* thunders in the house of the *nād*’. Finally, they are ultimately one at their spiritual origin: at the level of the *sahasrār cakra*, the breath, semen, word, and sound are once again Śiva, united with his Śakti.

The analogy between the *nād* and the *bindu* is also stressed in the following *sabad* from *The Sayings of Gorakh*: “Everybody says ‘*nād, nād,*’ / But few remain immersed in the *nād*. / The *nād* and the *bindu* are like a dry stone. / Those who have mastered them have achieved success.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to the link between semen and sound, we witness in these verses an alchemical theme that is of significant cross-cultural importance. This is the notion that the original substance from which the work starts, what is in the West termed *materia prima*, in its ‘natural’ form represents something ubiquitous, ordinary, and base. One starts from the ordinary ‘stone’ in order to gain ‘the philosopher’s stone.’ With regards to this, alchemist George Ripley (c. 1415-90) writes, “The philosophers say that the birds and fishes bring the Stone to us, each man possesses it, it is everywhere, in you, in me, in all things, in time and in space. It presents itself *in base guise* (*vili figura*). And from it springs our *aqua permanens*.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the text from 1526, the *Gloria Mundi*, we read that the Stone “is familiar to all men, both young and old; it is found in the country, in the village and in the town, in all things created by God; yet *it is despised by all*. Rich and poor handle it every day. It is cast into the street by servant maids. Children play with it.”<sup>3</sup> And, to give just one more example relevant to this subject matter, the medieval writer Gerhard Dorn urges his

<sup>1</sup> GBS 181. “*nād nād sab koi kahai / nādhim le ko birlā rahai / nād bind hai phīkīsīlā / jihim sādhyā te sidhaiṃ milā.*”

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Stephen Corrin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1962), 163; emphasis added. The term ‘*aqua permanens*’ refers to the elixir, that is to say, to the philosopher’s stone.

<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 163-4; emphasis added.

fellow alchemists with the following precept: “Transform yourself from dead stones into living philosophic stones.”<sup>1</sup>

It is probably safe to assume that Gorakhnāth refers to the apparently ordinary nature of the *materia prima* when he says “The *nād* and the *bindu* are like a dry stone.” Sound and semen are easily accessible and due to their ubiquitous nature they do not provoke respect. But those who have really mastered them have become Siddhas, for both sound and semen are potential openings into the divine realm. We have just seen that Śiva is *esoterically* present in (or, represented by) semen, as well as being a constitutive element of sound. What is important to emphasize in this regard is the fact that the transmutation of the ‘base’ elements of reality into their divine counterparts makes full sense within the model of esotericism. The *nād* and the *bindu* correspond to each other just as they correspond to the Great Lord. They are open to transmutations and those who master them are themselves transmuted into the Siddhas (i.e., those ‘who have achieved success’). Due to the invisible divine presence and the fact that they are capable of change, the *nād* and the *bindu*, especially the latter, may be understood as specimens of living nature. And the alchemical and yogic work with them is accomplished through the powers of imagination. All the major characteristics of esotericism as defined by Faivre are present and observable in the yogic treatment of the *nād* and the *bindu*.

While still on the subject of the correlation between speech and semen, I would like to draw attention to the connection between the acts of ejaculation and locution. To utter a word and to eject semen are structurally and functionally similar actions. This notion is observable even in the semantic range of the English verb ‘to ejaculate,’ which may refer to either a sexual or a speech act. In the case of the Nāth Siddhas, it is significant that we come across precepts against (vain and useless) talking almost as often as against the spilling of semen. In order to gain access to the inner form of the *bindu*, the physical semen has to be contained within the hermetically closed body of a yogi. Similarly, in order to experience the inner *sabad*, the speech of the yogi has equally to be restrained. Those who do otherwise, those who boast of their knowledge – pundits and false yogis – talk too much and that is the reason why the Siddhas ridicule

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 158.

them: “A cat eats an educated parrot, / And in the pundit’s hands [only] a book remains.”<sup>1</sup>

The structural correspondence between the ejaculation of the word and the emission of the semen is, I believe, apparent. There are verses in *The Sayings of Gorakh* where this correspondence is not only tacitly assumed, but also explicitly stated. The following two *sabads* belong to the latter group:

The tongue and the penis are one channel;  
The one who keeps it closed is saved from death.<sup>2</sup>  
O learned scholars don’t be arrogant!  
The one who has conquered the tongue has conquered everything.

Gorakh says, Ours is a difficult path.  
Keep the tongue and the penis under control!  
People who spend time in the practice yoga,  
Are not eaten by Time.<sup>3</sup>

In another of the *sabads* from *The Sayings of Gorakh*, we find the following description of a Nāth yogi: “A sitting *avadhūt* is like an iron rod, / A moving *avadhūt* is like a fist of wind. / A sleeping *avadhūt* is a living corpse, / A talking *avadhūt* is a parrot in a cage.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar spirit, another *sabad* advises against talking as follows: “Gorakh says, ‘O *avadhūt*, listen: / Be like this in the world: / Look with your eyes, listen with your ears, / But don’t say anything with your mouth!’”<sup>5</sup> I would like to connect the attitude conveyed in these two *sabads* with what Faivre has called ‘the discipline of silence.’<sup>6</sup> This is not so much an issue of secrecy related to the knowledge obtained through the ritual of initiation but a more subtle requirement. One obtains esoteric knowledge in a special way, through inner work, and one’s dedication to it demands a certain sense of

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 119. “paṛhyā guṇyā sūbā bilāi khāyā paṇḍit ke hāthi rah gaī pothī.”

<sup>2</sup> Lit. ‘he tricks death,’ “bañcai kāl.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 219-20. “jibhyā indrī ekaiṃ nāl / jo rākhai so ba cai kāl / paṇḍit gyāṃnī na karasi garab / jibhyā jīṭī jin jīṭyā sarab // gorakh kahai hamārā khartar panth / jibhyā indrī dījai bandh / log jugatī maiṃ rahai samāy / tā logī kūṃ kāl na khāy.”

<sup>4</sup> GBS 71. “baīṭhā avadhū loh kī khūṇṭī, calṭā avadhū pavan kī mūṇṭhī / soṭā avadhū jīvtā mūvā, boltā avadhū pya jarai sūvā.”

<sup>5</sup> GBS 72. “gorakh kahai suṇhu re avadhū jag maiṃ aisaiṃ rahṇāṃ / āṅkhaiṃ dekhībā kāṃnaiṃ suṇibā mukh thaiṃ kachū na kahṇāṃ.”

<sup>6</sup> Faivre, “Esotericism,” 43.

tact and restraint. “Do not disclose the *nāḍ* to a careless person,”<sup>1</sup> urges Gorakhnāth. As Faivre writes, “The sacred, that which is set apart, requires a slender partition between itself and the secular world.”<sup>2</sup> This partition is often effectively established through the practice of silence. In this spirit we should understand constant admonitions to yogis against engagement in discussions. Others, those who speak without the necessary inner experience, are according to Gorakhnāth nothing but sinners: “The learned speak having studied, / The ignorant speak out of ignorance. / They do not understand the ultimate truth. / Gorakh says, They are great sinners.”<sup>3</sup>

## RHETORIC

I will treat the rhetorical strategies of the Nāth Siddhas mostly in relation to *The Sayings of Gorakh*. The fact that this poetry was composed in the vernacular makes it safe to assume that its targeted audience consisted primarily of those outside the pale of sanskritic culture. But the accessibility of the language is not the same as the hermeneutical transparency of the content. A good deal of the poetry of *The Sayings* is enigmatic. Those who are not initiated into the order of the Nāth Siddhas and who are not familiar with the technical jargon and code words are not equipped with the exegetical keys to unlock the opaqueness of the yogic discourse. The scholar who is not an initiate faces the same problem.

What was the intention behind this type of poetry? Let us, first of all, recall that this is an oral literature that is meant to be sung and that is traditionally performed, often accompanied by an instrument, by the traveling minstrel-yogis.<sup>4</sup> They would travel on foot from village to village, from temple to temple, performing the songs about the great Siddhas, Gorakh and Matsyendra, Gopicand and Bhartrhari in front of audiences. These songs glorified the life-style of the yogis, transmitted their teachings, and posed certain riddles, the solution to which transcends the knowledge of even the pundits. The line of social criticism addressed to pundits is prominent in *The Sayings of*

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 121. “helai na khoibā nāḍam.”

<sup>2</sup> Faivre, “Esotericism,” 42.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 223. “vidyā paṛhi ra kahāvai gyāṁnīm / binā avidyā kahai agyāṁnī / param tat kā hoy na marmī / gorakh kahai te mahā adharmī.”

<sup>4</sup> See Champion, “A Countre Courant,” Gold, *Carnival of Parting*, and Henry, *Chant the Names of God*, esp. 160-89.

*Gorakh*. Their authority, exoteric in its nature, is based on the knowledge of Sanskrit and what the yogis consider mere bookish learning. The Nāths reject the authority of that *episteme*, claiming that real knowledge is knowledge of the body in its occult aspects and that only this type of knowledge leads to real power and immortality.

The language of Gorakh is most hermetically closed on those occasions when he presents his message in the form of the ‘twilight’ and ‘upside-down’ language.<sup>1</sup> These two stylistic devices are often met in yogic and tantric texts, where the intended message (often consisting of technical instructions) is veiled in such a manner that its meaning is clear only to the initiates.<sup>2</sup> The ‘twilight language’ or the *sandhyābhāṣā* is sometimes understood as equivalent of the ‘upside-down’ language, or words, the *ulṭabāmsī*. I would agree with Pitambaradatta Barthwal, however, in emphasizing the distinction between the two. “The *ulṭabāmsī* is necessarily a paradox,” writes Barthwal, “while the *sandhyābhāṣā* is not.”<sup>3</sup> The main difference between the two, I suggest, lies in the following: ‘twilight language’ has as its referent certain esoteric content. The content is usually hinted at through the employment of vocabulary that signifies some ordinary sphere of activity. This is yet another allusion to the idea that in this poetry, as in alchemy, the sacred hides itself under the guise of the ordinary. For example, the manifest content of the poetry might consist of the description of some quotidian labor; the intended meaning would often refer to the work with the subtle body and *cakras*. “The small pot<sup>4</sup> at the confluence of three rivers got filled; / A sumptuous drink is prepared”<sup>5</sup> is only seemingly a description of the wine-making process; in fact, ‘the small pot’ refers to *ājñā cakra*; ‘the three rivers’ are the three main mystical conduits of energy; and the ‘sumptuous drink’ is the elixir (*amṛt*). ‘Upside-down’ language, on the other hand, intends to mirror, through its form, the *process* of the yogic work, consisting of the *reversal* of the ordinary human situation.

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<sup>1</sup> On ‘twilight’ or ‘intentional’ language and related issues see, among others, Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 413-24; Eliade, *Yoga*, 249-54; Linda Hess, *The Bījāk of Kabīr*, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdev Singh, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1983), 136-61; and Kværne, *Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs*.

<sup>2</sup> This parallels to a great deal discursive practices of Western alchemy.

<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 103. See Barthwal, *Traditions of Indian Mysticism*.

<sup>4</sup> Alternative reading: *kūpī* instead of *kṛpā*. See Barthwal, *Gorakh-Bānī*, 122, n. 18.

<sup>5</sup> GBP 28: 3. “tṛkuṭi saṅgam kūpī bhariyā, mad nīpajyā apāram.”

Let me provide several examples of these stylistic devices from *The Sayings of Gorakh*. I suggest exploring ‘twilight language’ under two headings: ‘Jargon’ and ‘Allegories and Riddles.’ The first type of poetry is one in which a certain yogic teaching is represented through the employment of the technical jargon, and this element in itself makes the meaning nontransparent. ‘Allegories and Riddles’ are self-explanatory as a category. Similarly, ‘upside-down’ poetry is that one in which the content is presented in a paradoxical manner.

### *Technical Jargon*

‘Twilight language’ is sometimes understood to mean ‘intentional language’ where the manifest content is intended to refer to something else. A good deal of the poetry in *The Sayings of Gorakh* belongs to this category. For example, the first *sabad* in the collection mentions that ‘At the summit of the sky, a child is speaking.’ The usual commentarial gloss is that ‘the summit of the sky’ refers to the uppermost *cakra* within the subtle body. In a literal sense, this would also be an example of ‘intentional speech’ but I will refrain from discussing instances of this sort, for the reason of their ubiquity. What I have in mind when making reference to the technical jargon of yoga as exemplified in *The Sayings of Gorakh* is very well represented by the following verses: “The twelve *kalās* [portions] dry, and the sixteen *kalās* nourish. / [Whoever] obtains the four *kalās* lives an endless life. / Light and fire are mixed together. / [The yogi] obtains the *siddhis* and drinks four *kalās*.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the editorial gloss of Pitambaradatta Barthwal, the phrase ‘twelve *kalās*’ refers to the number of petals of the *mūlādhār cakra*, associated with the Sun, which ‘dry.’ The ‘sixteen *kalās*’ stand for the Moon in the *sahasrār*, while the ‘four *kalās*’ (obtained by subtracting 12 from 16) refer to the nectar.<sup>2</sup> I suppose – Barthwal is silent on this point – that the ‘light and fire’ are also intended to stand for the Moon (‘light’) and the Sun (‘fire’). The poem seems to be referring to the yogic process of joining the

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 89. “bārā kalā sokhai solā kalā pokhai, cāri kalā sādhai anant kalā jīvai / ūram dhūram jotī jvālā sīdhi sādhan cāri kalā pīvai.”

<sup>2</sup> See Barthwal, *Gorakh-Bānī*, 31-2.

energies of the two main *cakras* in the body. It is difficult to arrive at this level of comprehension unless the technical jargon of yoga is familiar to the reader.

The following *sabad* is also representative of the poetical style that uses technical jargon in order to express the yogic message, although in part its style is straightforwardly metaphorical: “[When] the first and the second are joined with the third, / Check the breath at the western gate. / The oil is not spent, the flame is not extinguished, / Says the *nāth* who has become immortal.”<sup>1</sup> According to Barthwal, ‘the first and the second’ in these verses refer to two of the three main channels in the subtle body, the *iḍā* and the *piṅgalā*, which are joined with ‘the third,’ the central channel, *suṣumnā*.<sup>2</sup> This situation is the main objective of yogic practice. It follows that, if this condition is met, the yogi is supposed to acquire the immortal life: he has preserved ‘the oil,’ and the ‘light’ of his life is not going to be extinguished. And while the final part of this poem employs the metaphorical expressions for human life – the oil and the burning flame – that are arguably easily understood by the general audience, the opening part that deals with ‘the first, the second, and the third’ is an instance of technical jargon that is penetrated with much more difficulty.

Similar to the previously quoted *sabad* is the following, which also presents a string of unqualified numbers: “When sitting, twelve; when moving, eighteen; / When sleeping, thirty are broken. / When speaking, sixty-four are broken. / Why should I sing praises to God?”<sup>3</sup> Barthwal suggests that the numbers refer to various types of breath and that the whole poem points to a type of chanting which essentially consists of conscious breathing (*ajapajāp*) but the terms are technical and their purport is in general unfamiliar.

Poems in which the predominant vocabulary consists of technical jargon are most probably meant as instruction for the yogis, not the lay populace. Their natural environment is a manual of yoga, such as the Sanskrit *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*. And although their proper technical meaning escapes the interpretative abilities of ordinary persons, their public performance nevertheless achieves certain tangible results. This poetry

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 187. "ikṭī bikuṭī trikuṭī sandhi pachim dvāre pavanām bandhi / khūṭai tel na būjhai dīyā bolai nāth nirantari hūvā."

<sup>2</sup> Barthwal, *Gorakh-Bānī*, 63.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 274. "baiṭhām bārai calat aḥārai, sūtam tūṭai tīs / kaīthan karaṁtām causaṭi tūṭai, kyau bhajiv au jagdīs."

presents itself as a mode of discourse that although enigmatic in its content leaves no enigma as to the fact that *jogīs* do understand both the message and the methods of practice to which it alludes. In this sense, it serves the function of Bourdieu's 'symbolic capital' (*vide infra*). Poetry constructed in the form of allegories and riddles, on the other hand, probably has as its main addressees the laymen. The important subcategory, and the constant target of criticism and ridicule, consists of the pundits.

### *Allegories And Riddles*

The allegories and riddles in *The Sayings of Gorakh* are also enigmatic in their meaning, but unlike the poems, in which the narrowly defined technical jargon of yoga predominates, they utilize metaphors of a more generally comprehensible nature. As is the case with the majority of the poems in this collection, the subject matter is related to the concerns of yoga, as understood by the Nāths. The enigmatic aspect of this poetry is potentially attractive to the new recruits and enthusiasts of yoga, while at the same time it serves to underline the message that exoteric knowledge is not fit to understand the paradoxes of the yogic way of life. In order to contextualize these remarks, let us consider several examples. As far as the allegorical poems are concerned, I trust that the following *pad* will be representative:

Take hold of that vine, oh *avadhūt*, take hold of that vine,  
Gorkahnāth knows [how].  
It has no leaves or root, no flower and no shadow,  
And it grows without water. [Refrain]

The grove of the body is your garden, oh *avadhūt*,  
[Where] the true *guru* has planted a creeper.  
A man waters it often,  
And a nice vine flourished up to the house.

Its root is the Moon, oh *avadhūt*,  
And the leaves are the Sun.  
The fruit is the full Moon.  
Understand that [its] *jīva* is the knowledge of the *guru*.

The vine is on fire, oh *avadhūt*,  
The fire reaches the sky.



As soon as the creeper starts burning,  
New shoots emerge.

From the cut vine new shoots spring up;  
If watered, it dries up.  
Ascetic Gorakh spoke through the mercy of Machindra:  
It always remains new.<sup>1</sup>

What is this vine that Gorakh sings about in this *pad*? Does it refer to the human body<sup>2</sup> or to the knowledge of reality<sup>3</sup> or to the unruly nature of the human mind? It is anybody's guess and that is precisely the point: the language of the poem is potentially open to anybody who is willing to try to penetrate it. It employs a metaphor, rather than technical jargon (such as 'first and second are joined with the third,' which is too weak as a metaphor). If the meaning nevertheless escapes the reader (or, rather, the listener), the poem is in itself still sufficiently consistent and engaging to be able to generate a reasonable amount of attraction and provoke interest. Its enigmatic core is a captivating mystery. This is even truer of those poems that are best classified as riddles. The following *pad* belongs to the latter category:

Oh master *avadhūt*, guess what this is?  
Neither the sky nor the earth,  
Neither the moon nor the sun,  
Neither a day nor a night. [Refrain]

It is [neither] *omkār*, [nor] *nirākār* [formless].  
It is neither subtle nor gross.  
It is neither tree nor leaf,  
It does not flower, nor does it give fruit.

It is neither branches nor root,  
It is neither tree nor creeper,  
It is neither *sākhī* nor *sabad*,  
Neither guru nor disciple.

<sup>1</sup> GBP 17. "tat belī lo tat belī lo, avadhū gorakhnāth jāṃnī / ḍāl na mūl pahup nahīm chāyā, virādhi karai bin paṃṃī / ṭek/ kāyā kuṃjar terī bārī avadhū, sat gur belī rūpaṃṃī / puriṣ pāṃṃtī karai dhaniyāṃṃau nīkai bālī ghari āṃṃī / 1 / mūl edvā jedvā sasihar avadhū, pāṃṃn edva jadvā bhāṃṃṃaṃ / phal edvā jedvā pūnim candā. jīu jou jāṃṃ suṃṃāṃ / 2 / belḍiyāṃ dau lāgī avadhū, gagan pahūṃṃtī jhālā / jim jim belīm ḍājhbā lāgī, tab melhai kūṃṃpal ḍālā / 3 / kāṭat belī kūṃṃpal melhī sīṃcatṛāṃ kuthlāye / machindra prasādaṃṃ jāṭī gorakh bolyā, nit navelṛī thāye / 4 /."

<sup>2</sup> Thus Vaudeville when referring to the Kabīr's use of the metaphor, in *Weaver Named Kabir*, 182.

<sup>3</sup> Barthwal, in *Gorakh-Bānī*, 206.

It is neither in wisdom nor in meditation,  
It is neither in yoga nor in the yogi,  
Neither in sin nor in virtue,  
Neither in liberation nor in the liberated.

It is neither born nor destroyed,  
It neither comes nor goes,  
It does not get old or die,  
It has neither father nor mother.

Says Gorakhnāth,  
Devotee of Machindar:  
It is neither a state of devotion,  
Nor is it ensnared in hope.<sup>1</sup>

The enigmatic nature of the content in the poems belonging to this type is obvious. They are riddles and the riddles are interesting and attractive for the same reason that all things mysterious are attractive: they invite active participation in order to be penetrated and understood. And while the allegories and riddles are enigmatic, the poetry of the ‘upside-down’ category is nothing short of paradoxical. Let us investigate some examples.

### *The ‘Upside-Down’ Poems*

The *ulṭabāmsī* or the ‘upside-down’ poems occupy a significant portion of *The Sayings of Gorakh*, particularly the *pad* portion of the text. The reason for this is simple: the *sabads* are much shorter poems and consequently provide insufficient space for the elaboration of paradoxes that are at the heart of this particular poetic form. As I have already remarked, the content of the *ulṭabāmsī* poems mirrors formally the essentials of the yogic practice of reversal (*ulṭā sādhanā*). The world goes ‘down with the flow’

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<sup>1</sup> GBP 35. "kahā būjhai avadhū rāi gagan na dharnīm / cand na sūr divas nahīm raiṃnī / ṭek / omkār  
nirākār sūchīm na asthūlaṃ peṛ na patr phalai nahīm phūlaṃ / 1 / ḍāl na mūl na vṛkṣ na belā, sakhī na  
sabad gurū nahīm celā / 2 / gyāṃneṃ na dhyāneṃ joge na juktā, pāpe na puṃne mokhe na muktā / 3 /  
upajai na binasai āvai na jāi, jurā na maraṇ vāṃkai bāp na māi / 4 / bhaṇat gorakhnāth machīndra nām  
dāsā, bhāv bhagati aur ās na pāsā / 5 /."

(*saṃsār*) and the task of a yogi is to reverse the process, to bring back to the head the semen that otherwise dissipates through the lower opening, to return to the original state before the emanation of the universe.<sup>1</sup> As a part of this process of reversal, in addition to the use of pertinent yogic techniques, the language itself is rearranged and ‘deconstructed,’ reflecting the orientation of going ‘against the grain’ that is so typical of tantra.

According to Mircea Eliade, the purpose of ‘upside-down’ language is “to project the yogin into the ‘paradoxical situation’ indispensable to his training. The semantic polyvalence of words finally substitutes ambiguity for the usual system of reference inherent in every ordinary language. And this destruction of language contributes, in its way too, toward ‘breaking’ the profane universe and replacing it by a universe of convertible and integrable planes.”<sup>2</sup> The language thus loses its semantic solidity and the terms and concepts become interchangeable. Correspondences come into play and analogous ideas and situations detach from their usual signifiers. The ordinary world is, in this type of poetry, also turned upside-down. Or perhaps, the ordinary world is upside-down and this poetry forces us to recognize that fact. Whatever the reasons behind the employment of this kind of rhetoric may be, its effect is unmistakable. The following *pad* is a good example of the ‘upside-down’ category:

Nāth is saying immortal words:  
The blanket will rain, water will get wet! [Refrain]

The calf is fixed [in the ground]  
And the stick is tied to it.  
The big drum walks,  
The camel sounds.

The Pīpal tree sits  
On the branch of a crow,  
The cat runs away  
At the sound of a mouse.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See White, *Why Gurus Are Heavy*.

<sup>2</sup> Eliade, *Yoga*, 250.

<sup>3</sup> Barthwal’s text was emended by replacing ‘bhūsā’ with ‘mūsā.’

The traveler is walking,  
The road is tired;  
The bed is sleeping  
On the woman.

The dog is hiding,  
The thief is barking.  
The cowherd is coming,  
The cattle is calling.

In the middle of the city  
Is a deserted village;  
The pot is below,  
The pot-carrier above.

The stove burns  
Inside the wood,  
The bread is  
Eating the baker.

An amorous woman burns,  
The furnace gets warm.  
In the middle of the fire  
The fire shivers [from cold].

One barren woman  
Was barren, but  
The daughter-in law gave birth to a  
Mother-in-law.

The water from the pot<sup>1</sup>  
Goes to the well.  
Gorakh sings  
The upside-down song.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Gagrī' is substituted for Barthval's 'nagrī.'

<sup>2</sup> GBP 47. "nāth bolai amṛt bāmṇīm brikhaigī kambalī bhījaigā pāmṇī / ṭek / gāṛi paḍarvā bandhilai khūmtā, celeṃ damāṇmām bājilai ūmtā / 1 / kauvā kī ḍālī pīpal bāsai mūsā ke sabad biliyā nāsai / 2 / cale baṭāvā thākī bāṭ, sovai ḍukriyā ṭhaurai khāṭ / 3 / ḍhūkile kūkar bhūkile cor, kāṛhai dhanīm pukārai ḍhor / 4 / ūjar kheṛā nagar majhārī tali gāgrī ūpar panihārī / 5 / magrī pari cūlhā dhūmdhāi, povaṇhārā kau rorī khāi / 6 / kāmmini jalai agīṭhī tāpai, bici baisandar tharhar kām̐pai / 7 / ek ju raḍhiyā raḍhtī āi, bahū bivāi sāsū jāi / 8 / gagrī kau pāmṇīm kūi āvai, ulṭī carcā gorakh gāvai."

### *The Symbolic Capital Of The Nāth Rhetoric*

Let us now focus on the intentions behind the rhetoric of the Nāth Siddhas. What is the purpose of 'twilight language,' of the riddles and paradoxes that abound in *The Sayings of Gorakh*? As has been my practice throughout this study, on this occasion also my exegetical emphasis will center on the issues of esotericism and power. The language of the Siddhas is mysterious and secret because they are a secret order and full access to their knowledge requires participation through the ritual of initiation and guidance from a guru. Being secret this language is also elitist – only a few have mastery over this discourse – and in this sense it is socially powerful. This language, the esoteric discourse of the yogis, displays also a strong experiential quality: this *episteme* is a result of successfully accomplished yogic practice; it is not a product of bookish knowledge. Gorakh is very eager to emphasize this distinction. And finally, the purpose of the yogic discourse – especially as exemplified in its more enigmatic forms – is to serve as a sort of symbolic capital: the Nāths are displaying their knowledge and attainments in order to represent themselves as powerful adepts, their way of life as attractive to potential recruits, their wisdom as transcending the knowledge of scholars and priests. The social criticism is addressed not only to the pundits but in fact to all whose authority is confined to the doctrinal and denominational boundaries of the medieval North India.

Gorakhnāth makes repeated references to the fact that what he talks about is an experiential fact, obtained through the practice of yoga, unattainable through the study of books, however sacred they claim to be. "It can't be read in the *Vedas* or the *śāstras* / In the *kitābs*, the *Koran* or in the books."<sup>1</sup> The yogi, however, "Without a book, reads the *Purāṇas*. / The Goddess of Knowledge explains the wisdom of *brahman* to him."<sup>2</sup> The spiritual realities Gorakh is pointing out are accessed only through the mastery of the occult aspects of the human body. To paraphrase one of his *sabads*, one has to learn the unseen wisdom at 'the summit of the sky' (*sahasrār cakra*), the occult place where the word (*sabad*) emerges into light.<sup>3</sup> "Everything else is worldly affairs."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 6. "vede na sāstre katebe na kurāmṇe pustake na baṁcyā jāī."

<sup>2</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, "Ātma Bodh," 13. "bin pustak baṁcibā purāmṇ / sursvatī ucarai brahma giyāṁn."

<sup>3</sup> See GBS 4.

This being so, Gorakh rarely misses the chance to challenge the authority of scholars: “O pundit, understand the incomprehensible / And tell the story that can’t be told! / Having met the true guru, bow your head!”<sup>2</sup> And, in a similar spirit: “O pundit, enough of learned discussions! / He who does not talk, he is an *avadhūt*.”<sup>3</sup> For, “The immortal story lies not in arguments and discussions.”<sup>4</sup>

I suggest that the rhetoric of the Nāth Siddhas is best viewed in the sense of ‘symbolic capital.’ The notion of symbolic capital was developed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and recently applied by Hugh Urban in his study of the Kartābhajās, a Bengali tantric group. Urban suggests that the notion of secrecy – an element of great importance in esotericism – should be understood “as a strategy for concealing and revealing information. It is a tactic which functions to *transform certain knowledge into a rare and valuable commodity*, a scarce resource, which in turn enhances the status and prestige – in Bourdieu’s terms the ‘symbolic capital’ – of its possessor.”<sup>5</sup> I would like to propose that not only secrecy, but equally so the rhetoric, the discourse, of the Nāth yogis serves the function of symbolic capital. In fact, the three elements, the secrecy, rhetoric, and power are mutually related and reinforcing. The *jogīs* appear the most powerful in those moments when they glorify the fruits of yogic practice in a language that presents itself as a ‘rare and valuable commodity,’ alluding to the secrets of immortality and the divine life. “Those who accomplish the impossible, who thunder in the [clear] sky, / Who unlock the [state of] *unmanī*, / Those who reverse the breath, say reverse things, / Who drink the undrinkable: they are the ones who know *brahman*.”<sup>6</sup>

## ESOTERICISM AS A MODE OF DISCOURSE

The Faivrian model of esotericism does not incorporate language among its four major and two minor characteristics. It is my conviction, however, that the role of language,

<sup>1</sup> GBS 6. “dunī sab dandhai lāi.”

<sup>2</sup> GBS 222. “abūjhi būjhilai ho paṇḍitā akath kathilai kahāṇṇī / sīs navāṇvat satgur milīyā jāgat raiṇṇ bihāṇṇī.”

<sup>3</sup> GBP 38, refrain. “paṇḍit jaṇ jaṇ bād na hoī aṇbolyā avadhū soī.”

<sup>4</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Sikhyā Darsan.” “ajar kathā nahīm bād bivādaṁ.”

<sup>5</sup> Hugh B. Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12; emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> GBS 90. “asādh sādhan gagan gājant, unmanī lāgant tālī / ulaṭant palaṭant bāṇṇīm, apīv pīvat te brahmagyāṇṇī.”

in addition to the categories of sexuality and power, needs to be given significant emphasis when considering esotericism ‘as a mode of thought,’ to use Faivre’s own phrase. Esoteric thought is generated and exercised through the language that is employed in a particular manner, which differs from everyday usage. More serious engagement with this issue surpasses the scope of this study, but I feel the need to address it nevertheless, before leaving the subject of the esotericism of speech.

Esotericism cannot be reduced to language, but to the degree that it manifests itself as a discursive phenomenon, its distinction from other modes of speech needs to be acknowledged. Taking *The Sayings of Gorakh* as our contextual focus, we notice that language tends to be hermeneutically opaque. This language is sensitive to the underlying notion of correspondence between various aspects of reality, it is often metaphorical, and it makes little sense when taken literally. The way Gorakh uses language to construct the imagery of some of his poems resembles by its very structure something of the reality that is exemplified in the yogic way of life: its process of reversal (*ulṭā sādhanā*) and its going against the grain of what is considered ordinary and normative. The language of *The Sayings of Gorakh*, especially in its performative aspect, functions also as symbolic capital, the value of which rises in proportion to the degree of secrecy displayed.

Esoteric language – one might say, language as a communicating medium in general – represents a functional parallel to the notions and practices of *imagination and mediation*, considered in accordance with the Faivrian model of esotericism. Language stands between the reality of the material plane, exemplified by the human body, and the level of spiritual (intangible) reality. The Nāth Siddhas, generally speaking, share a view, also common to Kabīr and the Sants, according to which the ultimate reality is *nirguṇ*, ‘without [describable] qualities.’ Between this ultimate but unutterable realm of unity and the everyday reality of the material plane, language serves the function of mediation to the same (or similar) degree that esoteric theory assumes imagination to stand as a mediator between the aforesaid two realms. Speech is related to the breath, which is also a mediating force, neither completely material, nor completely spiritual. And just as within the realm of imagination identities are not fixed and rigid, but flexible and interchangeable, so esoteric language allows for many signifiers to stand

for one and same intended signified. A curious consequence of this fact is a form of social critique:

What is the main underlying principle behind the rhetoric of the Siddhas? What is the reason behind the usage of their metaphors and similes, what is it that justifies the employment of the ‘upside-down’ language? What do they mean by all of this? The reasons are certainly many, but if one is to be singled out, it could be the following: This world is a metaphor for the Ultimate and there are limitless signifiers but only one signified. *There are no inherent hierarchical distinctions between signifiers.* The ultimate can be symbolized by the vocabulary of the bazaar equally well as by the vocabulary of philosophy: in either case, what is important is that the signifiers are mutually interchangeable and ultimately disposable. Brahminical ideology strives to preserve the principles of social stratification of ‘conventional’ reality and deploys egalitarian discourse only in the controlled setting of the ritual and in the ideal world of philosophical argumentation. To give just one example, in Vaiṣṇava theology men and women were claimed to be equally feminine in relation to God, but they nevertheless retain their gendered disparity in everyday life. From the perspective of the Siddhas, however, an ignorant person, that is to say, a person that is ignorant of *their* secrets, a non-initiate and a non-adept, is deemed inferior whatever his or her social standing might be. And vice versa, those who know the secret, those who control their senses and their sexuality are adepts, whether they are fishermen or kings.

The whole world is a metaphor for the ultimate and there is no hierarchical distinction between various signifiers. No symbol equals Reality and only Reality counts, not its representations. “Empty is not populated. Populated is not empty.”<sup>1</sup>

With these considerations and speculations, we are entering the world of Nāthist ideology. The next chapter will, accordingly, concentrate on the exploration of mental phenomena, of what I have been referring to as the esotericism of mind.

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 1. “bastī na sunyaṃ sunyaṃ na bastī.”



## CHAPTER 4

### THE NĀTH YOGIS AND ESOTERICISM OF THE MIND

This very mind is Śakti, this very mind is Śiva.  
This very mind is the life of the five elements.  
The one who controls the mind and remains in what is beyond the mind,  
He may speak about the secrets of the three worlds.

*Gorakh-Bānī* (GBS 50)

At the level of the uppermost *cakra*, the transformation of the *bindu* is complete. The semen returns to its place of origin and turns into nectar, *amṛt*, while the yogi becomes an adept, a *siddha*. This accomplishment coincides with the attainment of gnosis, which is a wisdom that has an experiential character and is distinct from ordinary (or, exoteric) intellectual knowledge and erudition. In this chapter, my primary concern will be to address the esoteric aspects of the mental phenomena as understood by the Nāth Siddhas and as sung about in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. By 'mental phenomena' I have in mind a variety of issues that are related to the questions of ideology, ethics, and the role of the mind in the context of the practice of yoga as envisioned by Gorakhnāth and his order of yogis. In order to correlate these concepts to the overall thesis of this study, the following needs to be emphasized:

*As far as doctrine (ideology, metaphysics) is concerned, it is tenable that what the Nāths are occupied with may meaningfully be conceptualized as esotericism.* Their orientation is predominantly practical, yet it relies on certain ideology. This ideology is esoteric not only because of the character of its particular metaphysical assumptions but also because it values the roles of teachers and lineages as more important than doctrinal orthodoxy and a rigid belief system.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the Nāth yogis rely primarily on the ritual transmission of knowledge, maintaining at the same time that the essentials of their worldview transcend the narrow boundaries of denominational strictures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frits Staal, in particular, emphasized this view in several writings.

<sup>2</sup> That is to say, we may observe the presence of the 'practice of concordance' (as an esoteric element) in the fact that the Nāth yogis move in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and even Muslim circles.

*The ideal mental achievement towards which a yogi strives is the condition of superior knowledge, gnosis. Alternatively, this ideal is expressed as the state of ‘no-mind’ or what is ‘beyond mind’ (unman). As an element of esotericism, this binds argument both in Arthur Versluis’ definition of the category,<sup>1</sup> and in the context of the Faivrian concept of ‘transmutation.’ A transmuted mind is no-mind.*

*Ethically, the moral ideal is correlated and subordinated to the practical concerns of yoga. As a result, ethical flaws observed in exoteric, or normative, religions are criticized in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. In addition, Gorakhnāth is also critical of those yogis who are involved in practices that are at variance with his vision of yoga. It follows that Gorakh is a reformer of yoga, as White has also observed. The esoteric character of the yogic ethics of Gorakh may be argued from the fact that morality is not thought of in terms of good and bad, or sin and virtue, but in accordance with the overall practical orientation and purpose of the discipline of yoga.*

*Functionally, the mind in the discipline of yoga has a role that is comparable to what is in Western esotericism understood as a practice of imagination. We have already come across this proposition in previous chapters. Expressed axiomatically, meditation corresponds to imagination. The disciplined mind engaged in esoteric work is typically called imagination in the Western esoteric traditions and meditation in India.<sup>2</sup> The parallelism between these two, imagination and meditation, has been noticed by scholars such as Agehananda Bharati and Mircea Eliade, but the issue has not been treated with adequate conceptual clarity.*

In each and all of the above-mentioned elements, the correlation between the principles of (Western) esotericism and the yoga of the Nāth Siddhas is demonstrable. The value of this correlation, as already suggested, lies in the fact that it opens a possibility to the reconceptualization of the nature of yoga, which thus opens door to comparative and cross-cultural investigations. I will devote the rest of this chapter to elaborations of the above assertions.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Versluis, the orientation towards the achievement of gnosis is a necessary condition of esotericism. See his article “What is Esoteric?”

<sup>2</sup> The Hindi and Sanskrit term for imagination, *kalpana*, does not correspond with the technical meaning that imagination has in Western esotericism. Meditation, *dhyān* (Skt. *dhyāna*), does. So does *bhāvanā*.

## IDEOLOGY AND THE 'RELIGION' OF THE NĀTHS

The ideology of the Nāth Siddhas, as exemplified in *The Sayings of Gorakh*, is almost exclusively concerned with the principles and concerns of yoga. As Dasgupta, Eliade, and especially White have shown, the *haṭha yoga* of Gorakhnāth and his followers is based on the presuppositions of Indian alchemy, or *rasāyana*. The main tenet of alchemy is the belief in the possibility of transmutation, whether it is the transmutation of base metals into gold, or of ordinary human beings into immortal adepts. The principle of transmutation is also a major characteristic of esotericism as defined by Faivre; thus, what the Nāth yogis base their practice on reflects by its very nature an esoteric ideological position. As I have already proposed, the concept of transmutation has, in the doctrine and practice of the Siddhas, its correlate in the process of reversal, *uṭṭā sādhanā*.

The principle of transmutation is also very similar in its implications to what the Buddhist scholar Ian Harris has called the notion of perfectibility. Perfectibility is interesting because it is at variance with assumptions that are typical of the categories of secularism and religion as they are commonly understood in the West. As Harris explains, "This is because Western systems, both secular and religious, generally fail to accept the notion of perfectibility of man to the extent that it is employed in the East."<sup>1</sup> Let us, in this context, recall that deification, becoming 'a second Śiva,' is the ultimate goal of the Nāth yogis. This strengthens the qualification of their project as esoteric, where the perfectibility or transmutation is an assumed element of theory and a desired goal of practice.

Perfectibility, or to use a stronger word, deification is also a process and achievement that is related to power. To change one's mortal status and become a 'second Śiva,' means, as already argued, to appropriate and share in the nature of the Great Lord, who possesses power, *śakti*, as one of his essential prerogatives. Gorakhnāth, for example, describes an ideal yogi as one who transcends the boundaries imposed by the elements that comprise the physical world: "He cannot be hidden in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Harris, *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 153. Qtd. in King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 247, n. 52. King critically refers to the ideological attitudes inherent in Kantian and post-Enlightenment philosophical traditions, which were also influential in the construction of the 'scientific study of religion,' as the 'epistemologies of limitation.' See *ibid.*, 179.

sky, / He cannot burn in fire; the wind can't push him in the air. / The weight of the earth can't break him, he cannot sink in the water.”<sup>1</sup> That the Nāth Siddhas are viewed as powerful persons in Indian society is common knowledge. I would like to emphasize, however, that the orientation towards power understood as the sacred is an important characteristic of magic as an esoteric discipline. In that sense also, the ideology of the *jogīs* is in general agreement with the main doctrinal presuppositions of esotericism. In addition, the claim of perfectibility that is at the heart of the discipline of yoga functions also as a rhetorical device, which serves as the symbolic capital of the Nāths, while at the same time it represents a typical device of esoteric discourse, as suggested by Stuckrad.

#### *Gurus, Lineages, And Devotion*

In his book *Orientalism and Religion*, Richard King emphasizes the incompatibility between the category of religion as shaped by Judeo-Christian presuppositions and the spiritual traditions of other cultures that do not share those assumptions. According to King, the monotheistic religions of the West are rooted in a paradigm that is marked by the insistence on theistic belief, exclusivity, and dualism between this and the transcendental divine world.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that this model of religion does not correspond to the ideological assumptions of the Nāth yogis. Instead of the supremacy of a theistic belief, they emphasize the indispensability of practice, *sādhana*. The *jogīs* are not exclusive but are, quite to the contrary, well known for mingling with Islamic esoteric groups. They also have close ties with Buddhist tantric groups, such as *siddhācāryas* and with Nepalese Buddhist traditions. The two sons of Matsyendranāth are also the legendary founders of two Jain sects. In recent times, the Nāth Siddhas have even collaborated with some Western occult figures.<sup>3</sup> Instead of the dualism

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 24. “gagane na gopant teje na sokhant pavane na pelant bāi / yahī bhāre na bhājant udate na dūbant.”

<sup>2</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 37.

<sup>3</sup> One of them was a British occultist known under the Hindu name Dadaji. “Dadaji lived in India from 1953 until his death in 1991. Dadaji has found the horse’s mouth and a genuine stream of magical tantra. This he made available to western adepts willing to accept initiation. Some of this material was published in a book entitled *Tantra Magick* (Mandrake of Oxford 1990) which has since been republished in India.” Katon Shu’al, *Sexual Magick* (Oxford: Mandrake of Oxford, 1995).

between this and the divine world, they teach the doctrine of sameness, *samras*. The world of the gods is not thought to be transcendental, but is in fact believed to be internally present within the subtle body of the yogi. Based on these elements, it is more meaningful to classify the Nāths as an esoteric tradition, than as a religion, if defined and understood as above.

Frits Staal has also been emphatic, on numerous occasions, in the insistence that religion is not a suitable category to be applied to Asian spiritual traditions. His suggestion is that the term ‘religion’ should be used only in reference to Western monotheistic traditions. “In most parts of Asia, such religions do not exist, but scholars, laymen, and Western converts persist in trying to find them,” writes Staal. “What counts instead are ancestors and teachers – hence lineages, traditions, affiliations, cults, eligibility, and initiation – concepts with ritual, rather than truth-functional overtones.”<sup>1</sup> It hardly needs mentioning that teachers, lineages, cults, eligibility and initiations are of vital importance for the Nāth yogis, as these are directly related to what Faivre calls transmission, which is an element that is characteristic of esoteric traditions.

That gurus and lineages are important in the lifestyle of the *jogīs* is a well-known fact, although it is rarely brought into comparative correlation with the general features of esotericism. This correlation is, however, very important for it helps us to theorize about the Nāths from a fresh perspective. Based on that perspective, and seen in combination with other elements of esotericism, it seems clear that the veneration of gurus in this style of yoga should be seen as an act of devotion. The human guru is in fact only a symbol of the inner teacher that is fundamentally accessed through the yogic (imaginal) work on *cakras*. There is a line of correspondence that connects the human teacher with the inner, *true* guru, who is again correlated through the line of correspondence with the ultimate master of yoga, the great god Śiva.

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<sup>1</sup> Staal, *Ritual and Mantras*, 393. In his essay on “The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion,” Staal asserts that “neither language nor religion are natural and helpful categories of thought in the study and understanding of the Vedas, Buddhism, and Tantrism. Language is, of course, a necessary tool required to study and understand linguistic manifestations of the three traditions. Religion, on the other hand, has caused issues to be obscured. Language and religion are categories that divide into separate groups that are clearly similar and closely related, and group together things that have nothing to do with each other. In an attempt at conceptual clarification, the use of such categories, therefore, evinces bad logic” (46).

The following *sabad* from *The Sayings of Gorakh* combines two elements relevant for the present discussion: the importance of the mind in the practice of yoga, and the role of the guru as a helper in transcending the mind. The reader will notice a motif familiar from Kabīr, the metaphor of an arrow that stands for wisdom, which destroys metaphysical obstacles. The context makes it clear that the guru in question is in fact an inner, esoteric teacher. Gorakh says, “He whose mind has devoured / Both gods and demons / Should [also] kill the mind, / By taking hold of the arrow of guru’s wisdom.”<sup>1</sup> I will postpone an elaboration of the practice of going beyond the mind for a later section of this chapter. Here, I want to emphasize the implication contained in this *sabad* that the guru and his wisdom transcend the role and importance of gods (*devas*), who are otherwise also delegated a position inferior to the mind. The mind is able to do away with, to ‘devour’ the gods and demons, but the wisdom of the guru transcends even the mind. It follows that the attainment of ‘no-mind’ (*unman*) depends on the grace of the guru. That the ultimate achievement depends on the grace of the guru is a strong indicator that the relationship between a disciple and the teacher rests on the relationship of devotion, where grace is a crucial element.

The devotional relationship between disciple and teacher is also implied and reconfirmed in another *sabad* where Gorakh again speaks of mystical experience as being contingent on the guru’s grace: “A light is shining without fire. / I saw it through the guru’s grace.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in one of the *pads*, there is a description of the ludic nature inherent in the access to higher *cakras*, which is again declared dependent on the exercise of the teacher’s grace: “Gorakh plays between Ganga and Yamuna / Due to the grace of the guru Machindra.”<sup>3</sup> The rivers Ganga and Yamuna, as is well known, metaphorically refer to the inner channels of energy, *īṛā* and *piṅgalā*; the place between them is the famous *trikuṭi saṅgam*, the confluence of the three ‘rivers.’ The third river is Sarasvatī, which metaphorically refers to the main inner channel, the *suṣumṇā*, that is situated within the spinal column. The place where these three inner rivers meet is the *ājñā cakra*, one of the most important centers of the occult energy in the body, often referred to as the ‘third eye’ and generally associated with the attainment of wisdom.

<sup>1</sup> GBS 229. “jini man grāse dev dāṇ / so man mārile gahi guru gyāṁṇ bāṁṇ.”

<sup>2</sup> GBS 239. “biṇi baisandar jotī balat hai guru prasāde dīṭhī.”

<sup>3</sup> GBP 18: 5. “ganga jamuna bic khelai gorakh, guru machnidra prasādaṁ.”

These verses are thus a fine example of the ‘confluence’ of relevant motifs (the inner ‘geography,’ relevance of the teacher, the occult wisdom, and a coded rhetoric) that connect this style of yoga with the principles of esotericism.

The most striking illustration of the devotional attitude inherent in the relationship between teacher and pupil in the discipline of yoga is evident in the following *pad*. What we have here is an example of a ‘bridal mysticism’ that would be completely out of place if the yoga of the Nāths were really without the element of devotion, as is so often asserted. After he has referred to the wisdom of his guru as a water-gourd that helps him extinguish his greed, Gorakh continues: “In this way, the true guru has married me, / A delicate young maiden. / Śrī Gorakh spoke, through Machindra’s grace, / The fear of *māyā* is gone.”<sup>1</sup> The language is of course metaphorical, ‘marriage’ being an expression of the inner attitude of dedication to the guru and his wisdom, but the metaphor would be impossible if there were not an underlying assumption of devotion and love between the pupil and the teacher.

The devotional character of the Nath Siddhas’ approach to yoga has also recently been argued by Vijay Mishra in his study *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime*.<sup>2</sup> According to him, the project of the Nāths ‘marks a decisive shift in the ideology of bhakti as it returns to Yoga’s original emphasis on the corporeal.’<sup>3</sup> The body is thus approached as the site of metaphysical presence and as the focus of religious desire, what Mishra designates as the ‘sublime.’<sup>4</sup> In the context of the conceptual approach that I have been suggesting throughout this study, Mishra’s ‘sublime’ body is in fact the esoteric subtle body, which serves as a locus of divine presence and, ultimately, omnipotence. From another angle, the ‘sublime’ as the focus

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<sup>1</sup> GBP 16: 5. “eṇ satguri amhe paraṇāṃbyā, ablā bāl kuvāṃvrī / machindra prasād śrī gorakh bolyā, māyā nām bhau ṭārī.” In his commentary on this *pad*, Barthwal implies that the guru marries Gorakh to *māyā*, making him thus her master whom she has to obey. See *Gorakh-Bānī*, 106. Shukdev Singh was, however, adamant that, grammatically, ‘ablā bāl kuvāṃvrī’ (a delicate young maiden) qualifies ‘amhe,’ the first person pronoun. Also, the idea is that an ordinary person is married to a woman, and thus illusion (in the sexist rhetoric of the Siddhas, *māyā* is symbolized by woman), while the yogi is ‘married’ to a teacher, and thus free from illusion. Shukdev Singh, oral communication, 28 February 2003, Varanasi, India.

<sup>2</sup> Vijay Mishra, *Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime* (Albany, N.Y. : SUNY Press, 1998). In particular, see the chapter “Temples of Fire” (129-61), and especially the discussion on pages 142-8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

of devotional attention manifests in the guise of powers (the *siddhis*) that the yogis are striving to achieve and that are simultaneously the marks of the Great Lord Himself.<sup>1</sup>

In the preceding section, my intention was to emphasize several elements that are at the same time also mutually interconnected. By stressing the importance of the guru in the teachings of Gorakhnāth, I intended to show that his ideology is meaningfully qualified as esotericism, where the transmission of knowledge through initiation and teachers is a *sine qua non* requirement. I also wanted to demonstrate that the guru is often understood as an inner teacher, who may be experienced through the yogic work on the subtle body and its centres of occult energy.<sup>2</sup> This explains that the yogi's concentration on *cakras* and *nāṛīs* of the subtle body often has as its intended goal precisely the encounter with the inner teacher, who helps the disciple to accomplish major spiritual feats. According to the vocabulary of esotericism, this is possible because there is a correspondence between the body and its subtle aspect that is permeated by metaphysical entities. One of them is the 'true guru,' the veneration of whom is often hidden from the sight, because he is not externally objectified. The true guru bestows grace on the pupil and the relationship between them is fundamentally devotional. In conclusion, the yogic ideology is esoteric and esotericism as a category helps us to understand the less obvious, devotional side of this ideology.

### *The Concept Of God*

It is customarily asserted that the Nāth yogis are Śaivites. This attribution seems perfectly natural: Śiva is the Lord of yoga and he is the Original Master (*ādināth*) of the Nāth lineage. Gorakhnāth is also often understood to be a second Śiva, and every yogi, at least in theory, is attempting to achieve the same status. It appears that there is

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<sup>1</sup> I should also add that the devotional character of the Nāths is also implicitly acknowledged by the incorporation of the *sabads* and *pads* from the *Gorakh-Bānī* in the anthology *Devotional Hindī Literature: A Critical Edition of Pañc-vāṇī or Five Works of Dādū, Kabīr, Nāmdev, Raidās, Hardās with the Hindī Songs of Gorakhnāth and Sundardās and a Complete Word-index*, 2 vols, eds. Winand M. Callewaert and Bart Op de Beeck (New Delhi: Manohar, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> In this context, the following statements by Charlotte Vaudeville seem particularly appropriate: "The exaltation of the guru as a manifestation of the supreme Reality probably explains the remarkable silence maintained by the Siddhas and the Nāth-panthīs, as well as by Kabīr and the old Sant poets, on their human gurus, if indeed they had any. The role of the human guru as an external teacher and guide tends to be obliterated as he only makes manifest the true nature of Guruhood, which is expressed in the divine *Śabda*, participating of the transcendent nature of the Satguru." *Weaver Named Kabir*, 98.



nothing more natural than to confirm the above attribution, and since the Śaivites are Hindus, it follows that the Nāths are also just another group within Hinduism. And while this may be so, especially in recent times since the Western construct of ‘Hinduism’ has taken root as a self-identifying category in India, there are many indicators that this was not the original, or the only possible, sense of yogic identity. Scholars have noticed that the Nāths have their own ideology, even their own ‘religion.’ Before tackling that issue, let us first investigate the alternative concept of god in the doctrine of the Siddhas. Our focus will again be on *The Sayings of Gorakh*.

On several occasions, Gorakhnāth refers to the ultimate theistic concept by the term *nirañjan*.<sup>1</sup> The literal meaning of the term is ‘without blemish,’ although it may also be taken to mean ‘without embellishment.’ The word *añjan* refers to a lampblack, which is applied as a cosmetic ornament to the eyes and eyelashes;<sup>2</sup> *nirañjan* would then designate the lack of ornaments or decoration. In this sense, the meaning of the term *nirañjan* is similar to the concept of *nirguṇ*, which refers to the ‘formless god’ or the ‘god without (describable) qualities.’ In North India, the *nirguṇ* conception of god is usually associated with the theological ideas of Kabīr and the devotional groups known as the Sants.<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the *jogīs* on the one hand, and Kabīr and other *nirguṇ bhaktas* such as Sants on the other, is complex and inconsistently formulated and maintained. In general, it is possible to make a simplified assertion that the Sants reject miracles and other eccentricities of yoga, while certain yogic concepts and technical vocabulary seem to have permeated their own rhetoric. We also know that at least some of the Sants preserved and included into their repertoire a number of yogic songs.<sup>4</sup> The reason I mention the above lies in the following: it is problematic to include the Sants under the umbrella of ‘Hinduism’ because of their critical attitude to the normative tradition. By extension, it follows that – to the degree that the *jogīs* are

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<sup>1</sup> See an interesting discussion on the concept of *nirañjan* in Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 326-8, where the Indian scholar relates this deity to Vedic Prajāpati and Hiranya-garbha.

<sup>2</sup> McGregor, *Hindi-English Dictionary*, s.v. “añjan.”

<sup>3</sup> On Sants, see *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, eds. Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Winand M. Callewaert and Peter G. Friedlander, *The Life and Works of Raidās* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), esp. 51-80. The teaching of the Nāth Siddhas was generally met with the approval by the Dādūpanthīs and the followers of Raidās; Kabīr was ambivalent; Nānak and Sikhs were critical and rejecting.

comparable to the Saints – the inclusion of the Nāths within Hinduism is equally problematic and artificial.

I would like to propose two things in this connection. First, the concept of the *nirañjan* is esoteric, for a number of reasons, but mostly because the god that is referred to by this title is mysterious, hidden, and inaccessible, unless it is experienced within, through the discipline of yoga. And second, this god is approached devotionally, the form of this devotion being yoga. I will now provide a substance to these two proposals.

*Nirañjan* is without describable qualities; however, this god may be experienced within. One *sabad* addresses the paradox inherent in the metaphysical idea of this order. Gorakh sings that “*Nirañjan* is without branch and without root, / All pervading, neither subtle nor gross.”<sup>1</sup> This invisible and ineffable but all pervading god manifests itself through the way of life of an enlightened yogi: the yogi thus becomes an embodiment, and his or her actions the expression, of the inner deity. This is made explicit in the following verses from *The Sayings of Gorakh*: “The [real] householder is the one who knows his body. / He keeps inside what goes outside. / Always the same towards everything, he cuts through illusion. / Such a householder should be called the form of *nirañjan*.”<sup>2</sup> I would like to emphasize that to become ‘the form of the formless,’ the prerequisite is to turn inside and become familiar with the body in its, presumably, occult aspects. It follows that *nirañjan* is both esoterically present within the body of the yogi, and that esoteric practice or yoga is the method for its realization.

In one of the *sabads*, Gorakhnāth refers to the mind as the mother, calling the *nirañjan* the father.<sup>3</sup> Again, the supremacy of the *nirañjan* over the mind (*manas*) is confirmed, based on the fact that in patriarchal society the role of the father surpasses the role of the mother. More important is the inherent relationship of devotion, established by calling the god one’s father. The most explicit in this context is the refrain of a *pad* where Gorakh weaves in his poetical statement the attitude of devotion to a god that is both formless and secret, inaccessible to those who follow the norms of exoteric worship: “I am your devotee, / Oh unmade god! / Everybody [else] serves the

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 111. “soī nirañjan dāl na mūl, sab byāpīk sukham na asthūl.”

<sup>2</sup> GBS 44. “gharbārī so ghar kī jāñai / bāhari jātā bhītari āñai / sarab nirantari kātai māyā / so gharbārī kahie nirañjan kī kāyā.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 202.

made-up image. / They don't know your secret.”<sup>1</sup> This god is, moreover, experienced as present within the subtle body of the yogi, as is evident from the following verses: “*Nirañjan* dwells in the tenth door, beyond mind [*unman*] / Contained in the reversed *sabad*.”<sup>2</sup> Here we have a cluster of esoteric elements: the tenth door (*brahmarandhra*), no-mind (*unman*), the *sabad*, and the reversal (*ulaṭi*). *Nirañjan* is within, accessed in the subtle body through the yogic process of reversal, esoterically correspondent to the *sabad*.<sup>3</sup>

The necessary conclusion is that the concept of god is inseparable from the practical presuppositions and rhetorical conventions of the discipline of yoga. The god of the Nāth Siddhas is conceptualized through a cluster of ideas that are principally based on the practice of yoga, which is just another way of saying that their spiritual doctrine may be defined as esoteric, if yoga is understood as an esoteric discipline. The vision of this god is grand: “*Nirañjan* is the god, and no other. / His age is limitless, / His end is nowhere to be found.”<sup>4</sup> The way of devotion that leads to the god understood in such a manner is yoga. Yoga is a form of esotericism, with a strong element of devotion in its structure.

#### *‘Nāthism’ As An Esoteric vs. Exoteric Religious Category*

In the introductory chapter, I have briefly mentioned that several scholars suggested classifying the ‘Nāthism’ as a distinct religion. For example, Daniel Gold and Ann Grodzins Gold have written that “‘Nathism’ has been recognized by some as a separate strand in Indian popular religion, representing, perhaps, an ancient religious tradition alongside Vaishnavism and Shaivism.”<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville has put forward a similar idea. According to her, “As a religion, Nāthism hardly comes within the pale of Hinduism and there appears to be some truth in the opinion held by some that it is a distinct religion. Mohan Singh has called it ‘Shabadism’ since the Śabda itself is held as

<sup>1</sup> GBP 58: refrain. “tujhi pari vārī ho aṇaghaṛīyā devā / ghaṛī mūrati kū sab koī sevai, tāhi na jāṇṇai bhevā.”

<sup>2</sup> GBP 11: 4. “dasvaim dvār nirañjan unman bāsā, sabadai ulaṭi samāṇnām.”

<sup>3</sup> See also GBP 19: 5, which carries a similar message.

<sup>4</sup> GBP 62. “dev nirañjan aur no koi / anat kalā jākai pār na pāvai.”

<sup>5</sup> Gold and Gold, “Fate of the Householder Nath,” 115.

the key to liberation.”<sup>1</sup> David Gordon White has also speculated on the distinct nature of the phenomenon of the Nāth yogis, set apart, according to him, from devotional, tantric, and Islamic trends that came to dominate Indian medieval spiritual traditions.<sup>2</sup>

The potentially separate nature of ‘Nāthism’ may be interrogated on several levels. I suggest paying attention to two issues when searching for the clues in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. On the implicit level, many of the poems are critical of the formal religion, advancing the view that real religious observances are those performed inwardly, by paying attention to the spirit instead of the letter of the precepts. The poems of this type are numerous. On fewer occasions, the path of yoga is explicitly distinguished from the religion of the Hindus and Muslims. It may be concluded that the Nāths are the followers of an ‘interior religion,’ an expression coined by Vaudeville to designate the spirituality of Kabīr.<sup>3</sup> It is also justifiable to classify them as an ‘esoteric current,’ understanding ‘esoteric’ to fall within the semantic range of ‘interior.’

There is a statement in one of the *sabads*, according to which the Nāths are Hindus by birth, Muslims<sup>4</sup> by wisdom, and yogis by ‘burning.’<sup>5</sup> The metaphor of ‘burning’ is, as previously explained, a reference to the practice of yoga, which serves the function of transmuting the yogi into a ‘cooked,’ that is to say, accomplished adept. More important for the present discussion is the assumed line of demarcation between the yoga of the Siddhas on the one hand, and the path of Hindus and Muslims on the other. The distinction is made even more strongly in the following verses, which also make explicit that what the yogis follow is the internal religion. Gorakh says, “A Hindu worships in the temple, / A Muslim in the mosque. / A yogi worships the supreme / Where there is neither temple nor mosque.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 99. Vaudeville is referencing Mohan Singh, *Kabir: His Biography* (Lahore, 1934), 68.

<sup>2</sup> See White, “Wonders of Śrī Mastnāth,” 401-2.

<sup>3</sup> Vaudeville, “Kabīr and Interior Religion.” The gist of Vaudeville’s argument lies in the following statement: “Throughout Kabīr’s work the accent is on interiorization: man ought to turn his attention away from the exterior world, from all sensible forms, in order to withdraw into the innermost depths of his conscience (undoubtedly analogous to the *sirr* of the Sufis) where God dwells “ (196).

<sup>4</sup> Or, according to Barthwal’s gloss, a Muslim sage or *pīr*, if ‘pari’ in the text is emended to ‘pīr.’ See *Gorakh-Bānī*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> GBS 14. “utpati hindū jaraṇām jogī akali pari musalmāmṇīm.”

<sup>6</sup> GBS 68. “hindū dhyāvai dehurā musalmān masīt / jogī dhyāvai parampad jahā dehurā na masīt.”

The distinct nature of yoga as practiced by the Nāth Siddhas is also evident in those poems where Gorakhnāth's stature is juxtaposed against and above the major gods of the Hindu pantheon.<sup>1</sup> This would be hardly possible if Gorakh considered himself a member of the normative religion. From the perspective of the *jogīs*, these gods are subjected to the same power of unconquered sexuality that binds human beings to the eternally recurrent realm of false reality that is *saṃsār*. For example, there is a set of three consecutive *sabads*<sup>2</sup> that share a common subject matter: lust, personified by the god Kām, which has subjugated both 'the gods and men.' "Lust has entered the god Brahma / And Indra has got a thousand vaginas."<sup>3</sup> It has overpowered '88.000 great sages,'<sup>4</sup> and all the ten avatars of the god Viṣṇu.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, it is claimed that Kām has conquered even the god Śiva, which represents a stark reversal of the traditional version of the story, according to which Śiva famously burns the god of lust to ashes: "This god of lust has danced upon Śiva, / The great god who originated dance."<sup>6</sup> The only one who was able to restrain lust was Gorakh, who did so following the principles of *haṭha yoga* related to the preservation of the semen. "The invincible lust was conquered by the ascetic Gorakhnāth / Who has preserved the downward flowing [*bindu*]."<sup>7</sup>

Very similar to the above is a *pad* that employs the compound metaphor of the serpent, which serves as a metaphor for woman, who allegorically represents lust. Lust has conquered the three worlds, which Gorakh saw as 'bitten by the snake.'<sup>8</sup> "The snake says, / 'I am a powerful woman. / I have deluded Brahma / Visnu and Śiva.'<sup>9</sup> There is an indication that death is powerless over the one who has killed the snake.<sup>10</sup> A sort of a

<sup>1</sup> In the text called "The Five Measures," Gorakhnāth accomplishes victory over Viṣṇu, arguably the most popular Hindu god: "Gorakh and Viṣṇu had an argument. / Gorakh won and sounded his horn. / Viṣṇu [then] took the form of a dear. / The dear was [also] beaten / And adored the *avadhūt*." *Gorakh-Bānī*, "Pañc Mātrā, 14. "gorakh bisn lāgā bād. / gorakh ler bajāyā nād. / bīsn kīyā mṛgh kā rūp/ māryā mṛgh dhyāyā avadhūt." Barhwal's "mudh" was emended to "mṛgh."

<sup>2</sup> GBS 198-200.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 198. "brahmā devatā kandrap byāpyā / yandra sahaṃsra bhag pāī." Kandrap or Kandarp is an alternative name for the god Kām.

<sup>4</sup> GBS 199.

<sup>5</sup> GBS 200.

<sup>6</sup> GBS 199. "yaṃn kandrap īsvar mahādev nāṭārambh nacāyā."

<sup>7</sup> GBS 200. "asādhi kandrap jāṭī gorakhnāth sādhyā / jani nījhar jharantā rākhyā."

<sup>8</sup> GBP 45: refrain. "tribhuvan dāstī gorakhnāth dīṭhī."

<sup>9</sup> GBP 45: 2. "srpaṇī kahai maiṃ ablā baliyā / bahā biṣn mahādev chaliyā."

<sup>10</sup> GBP 45: 1.

duel ensues; the snake is trying to run away while chased by Gorakh, who rushes after her 'like a wind,' chanting the *gaurī* mantra. The *pad* ends on a note of victory: "Ādināth's grandson, / Machindra's son, / Gorakh *avadhūt* / Has killed the snake."<sup>1</sup> It appears evident that the path of yoga is set apart from normative religion and its pantheon of gods, who are helpless to achieve what for the yogis is a fundamental accomplishment: the control of sexuality based on the control of semen. It is significant that even Śiva, who is supposed to be the tutelary god of the Nāth Siddhas, belongs here to the category of deities deluded by lust. In this sense, yogic self-identity is distinct: they belong to the esoteric path of yoga, which they consider superior to other spiritual alternatives.

The yogic distinction is also implicitly assumed in numerous poems from *The Sayings of Gorakh* that stress the importance and necessity of following the inner disposition, the *spirit* of religious observances. We are consequently told that to abstain from lust, anger, and selfishness is equivalent to going to holy places;<sup>2</sup> the real householder is the one who knows his body;<sup>3</sup> and the real renouncer is the one who listens the unstruck sound and whose mind remains in the *unman*.<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, the contrast between exoteric and esoteric approach is couched in Islamic vocabulary, as in the *sabad*, which teaches that the real dervish is the one who knows the way in (i.e. inner way) and who is constantly mindful.<sup>5</sup> Gorakh also makes it clear that he travels alone because all that he needs is internally present: wisdom is the real guru; the heart is a disciple, and mind is a friend.<sup>6</sup>

It follows from the above that the Nāth Siddhas translate external religious observances into their internal counterparts in a manner that is similar, to invoke a classic example, to the *upaniṣadic* internalization of Vedic sacrificial ritual. This gesture is by its nature esoteric: its basic assumption – whether explicitly stated or not – is that the human *microcosm* corresponds to the outer *macrocosm*. All that is metaphysically important is present within the body and mind of the human agent. Even more

<sup>1</sup> GBP 45: 4. "ādināth nātī machindra nāth pūtā / srpaṇīm mārilai gorakh avadhūtā."

<sup>2</sup> GBS 29.

<sup>3</sup> GBS 44-5.

<sup>4</sup> GBS 103.

<sup>5</sup> GBS 182.

<sup>6</sup> GBS 189.

importantly, the esoteric distinction is to emphasize the supremacy of internal practice over the outwardly performed ritual. The latter can be done superficially, formally, and absent-mindedly, while esoteric practice presupposes concentration and imaginative engagement. For that reason, Gorakh advises: “The journey to the temples is a journey in vain. / Journeying to the *tīrthas*, only water is found.” This criticism is juxtaposed with the positive statement that “The journey with the ascetics is a fruitful journey, / Where immortal words are spoken.”<sup>1</sup>

The ideological principle of yogic internalization advocates a mode of practice that is based on the belief in correspondences. Again, the human body is all that is essentially required for the performance of yogic *sādhana*. As Gorakhnāth says, “The body is a robe, and the mind is the yogi.”<sup>2</sup> The most explicit and consistent example of this attitude is evident in the following *sabad* where all the paraphernalia of yogic practice is internalized. The text is as follows, “The mind is the yogi and the body is the monastery; the five elements are the robe. / Forgiveness is sitting in the six postures. / Wisdom is the ascetic seat, and good reason the wooden slippers. / Thinking is the stick.”<sup>3</sup>

It follows, on the basis of the above, that the Nāth Siddhas are engaged in an ‘interior religion,’ to use again Vaudeville’s phrase. Occasionally, they juxtapose their spiritual path over and against the normative standards typical of Hindu and Muslim denominations. More often, they emphasize the need to approach religious observances by paying attention to the inner meaning of spiritual practices, irrespective of denominational particularities. The message of the poetry of *The Sayings of Gorakh* appears to be that one needs to turn inward and gain cognizance of one’s own body and mind, primarily in their hidden (occult) aspects. Whether this constitutes a distinct religious identity is ultimately a moot point. What is important is that there is a general line of agreement between the attitude of the Nāth Siddhas and the ideological presuppositions of esotericism ‘as a mode of thought.’ In that sense, esotericism rather

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 97. “deval jātrā suṃni jātrā, tīrath jātrā pāṃṇīm / atīt jātrā suphal jātrā bolai amṛt bāṃṇīm.”

<sup>2</sup> GBP 10: 5. “kāyā kanthā, man jogaṭā.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 48. “manvām jogī kāyā maḍhī / pañc tatt le kanthā gaḍhī. / kṣimā ṣaḍāsaṅ gyān adhārī / sumati pāvaṛī ḍaṇḍ bicārī.” (Barthwal’s ‘gāyā’ is emended into ‘kāyā.’)

than unqualified ‘religion’ seems to provide an appropriate model to conceptualize yoga of Gorakhnāth and his followers.

#### THE CONCEPT OF UNMAN: THE GNOSIS OF ‘NO-MIND’

The successful completion of yogic *sādhana* renders the yogi a gnostic, *vijñānī*.<sup>1</sup> It is paradigmatic that this knowledge or gnosis acquired through yoga stands in sharp contrast to the exoteric knowledge obtained through the study of books. Intellectuals, pundits, who base their authority on the latter epistemic model, are a constant target of criticism in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. “O pundit, enough of learned discussions!”<sup>2</sup> is a typical elocution in this context. *Jogīs* are discouraged from associating with scholars: “O *avadhūt*, do not sit in an assembly of fools! / Do not engage in discussions with pundits!”<sup>3</sup> There is no place for doubt on this issue: Gorakhnāth views exoteric knowledge in negative terms. He considers it misplaced knowledge, focused on what is inconsequential. “You are destroying what is alive / To worship what is dead,” Gorakh accuses the pundits in language suggestive of Kabīr. “You bathe in *tīrth* after *tīrth*. / Washing the outside, how will you reach the inside?”<sup>4</sup>

Does it then follow from the above that Gorakh is thoroughly opposed to the pursuit of knowledge? Not entirely.<sup>5</sup> It is evident from the allusions in *The Sayings of Gorakh* that the final achievement of yoga entails a way of knowing, a kind of gnosis. We read, for example, that “Śiva dwells in twelve temples; the chief amongst them is the knowledge of *brahman*.”<sup>6</sup> The return of the *bindu* to the highest *cakra* is after a manner a ‘gnostic event.’ The wisdom lies in the experience of one’s own essential self, *ātman*. There is thus a direct link between the return of the *bindu* to the highest *cakra*, the obtainment of the elixir, and the experience of gnosis. Immortality is not only related

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<sup>1</sup> In modern Hindi, the term ‘*vijñānī*’ denotes a ‘scientist.’ But this meaning is hardly commensurable with medieval Hindi ‘*bināmñī*.’ Contextually, ‘gnostic’ seems a best choice and I have adopted it throughout.

<sup>2</sup> GBP 38: refrain. “*paṇḍit jaṇ jaṇ bād na hoi*.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 121. “*mūrikh sabhā na baisibā avadhū paṇḍit sau na karibā bādaṃ*.”

<sup>4</sup> GBP 37: 2-3. “*sarjīv teṛiyā nirjīvī pūjila*.” “*tīrthi tīrthi snāṃn karīlā, bāhar dhoye kai sai bhītari bhedīlā*.”

<sup>5</sup> In the *Gorakhnāth Caritr*, 14-15, after testing Gorakh’s devotion to him as a teacher, Matsyendra “gave him instruction in all the Vedas and *śāstras* and made him a complete scholar.”

<sup>6</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “*Pañc Mātrā*,” 2. “*dvādas mandir siv thāṃn / tehu uttam brahma gyāṃn*.”



to the drinking of the nectar, it is also a consequence of self-discovery. “Those who have experience of their self (*ātman*) do not die.”<sup>1</sup>

As might be expected, the content of this experience is couched in the rhetoric that is permeated with an unmistakable esoteric flavour. “At the summit of the sky, the *sabad* emerges into light. / There, [the yogi] comes to know the Invisible Gnostic.”<sup>2</sup> The ‘invisible one’ or *alakh* is another typical yogic designation for the highest god and in that sense it is an alternative expression for *nirāñjan*. In this *sabad*, this god is interestingly enough qualified as the ‘knower’ or, as I prefer to translate it, as the ‘gnostic.’ *Alakh* is imperceptible for ordinary persons, but at the level of the *sahasrār cakra* (‘the summit of the sky’) it yields itself to the perception of a yogi in an orgasmic flood of interpenetrating photic, linguistic, and epistemic manifestations that seem characteristic - at least in yogic discourse - for that level of reality. To have this experience, to perceive the invisible knower, is to have a gnostic experience. This is an esoteric wisdom, as much as gnosis is an esoteric goal, as argued by Arthur Versluis.

The wisdom that is the fruit of yoga comes from experience, *paricay*. According to Charlotte Vaudeville, “Kabīr and the other Sants undoubtedly inherited from Nāthism their claim to derive spiritual awareness not from a particular guru, but from direct experience ... conceived as the hearing of the mysterious Word ... spoken in the depth of the soul by the *Satguru*.”<sup>3</sup> The yogic distinction lies in the insistence that only practice, *sādhana*, leads to that experience. In that respect, they are in agreement with the spirit of occultism, which also emphasizes a practical orientation. As Gorakhnāth reminds his *jogīs*, “There is no book higher than meditation.” A purely intellectual approach to what might be termed spiritual awareness is rejected. “Sitting in the posture, stopping the breath, / All the functions of duality cease. / Gorakhnāth says, Thinking about *ātman* / Is like watching the Moon in the water.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, contrary to Vaudeville’s assertion, Gorakh maintains that initiation received from a guru is

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<sup>1</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Pandrah Tithi,” 1. “ātam parcai marai na koi.” Cf. *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Sapt Bār-Navgrah.” “ātmā parcai marai na koi.”

<sup>2</sup> GBS 4. “gagani sikhar mahi sabad prakāsyā / tahā būjhai alakh bināmñīm.” Alternatively, the second verse could be understood in the sense that one should acquire the ‘imperceptible wisdom in the form of gnostic knowledge,’ which is the way Barthwal understands this *sabad*. See *Gorakh-Bānī*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Vaudeville, *Weaver Named Kabir*, 92.

<sup>4</sup> GBS 82. “āsa baisibā pavan nirodhibā, thāmñ-māmñ sab dhandhā / badant gorakhnāth ātmām vicārant. jyūñ jal dīsai candā.”

conducive towards this goal. “The knowledge of the self [*ātman*] is experienced in [or, from] guru's mouth.”<sup>1</sup> This is another element that connects yogic *sādhana* to the overall trend of esotericism, the secrets of which are regularly transmitted through initiations.

The particular quality of yogic wisdom is very often described by the designation of ‘no-mind,’ *unman*. Alternatively, this term may be understood to mean, ‘beyond mind.’ I would like to correlate again this concept with the implied notion of transmutation: the ordinary mind is perceived as limited and limiting, and it needs to be transcended, through the process of reversal (*ulṭā sādhana*). That the fluctuations of the mind are integral to the experience of false reality, *samsār*, is a leitmotif of Indian spiritual traditions. Gorakhnāth addresses this issue in a very strong language: “O man, you should kill the mind, the enemy! / It has devoured the whole world, / The gods and the demons. / This mind should be killed / By seizing the arrow of guru’s wisdom.”<sup>2</sup>

The famous definition of yoga by Patañjali declares that the essence of this discipline lies in the cessation of the whirlings of the mind.<sup>3</sup> Gorakhnāth expresses this idea by stating that “There is no greater illness than the unsteady mind.”<sup>4</sup> He therefore suggests the transcendence and reversal of the functioning of the mind into the state of *unman*, which is a preferable mental condition: “They are truly wise whose mind dwells in the *unmani*.”<sup>5</sup> The ordinary mind (while in its ‘exoteric’ condition) is deluding; in its reversed state, through which it becomes ‘no-mind,’ it is wisdom.

The disciplined mind, concentrated through the practice of yoga, gone beyond its natural condition so that it has become no-mind, has its parallel achievement in the production of the elixir, the *amṛt*. The convergence of these motifs, the mutual corroboration and causal connection between mental concentration and the acquisition of the subtle nectar, is indicated in the following verses: “When

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 38. “āpā parcai guru mukhi cīṃnh.”

<sup>2</sup> GBP 32: 2, 3. “māribā re narā man drohī ... / sab jag grāsiyā dev dāṇaṃ, so man māribā re gahi guru gyāṃn bāṇn.”

<sup>3</sup> “yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ.” Rāma Prasāda translates this as “Yoga is the restraint of mental modifications.” *Pātañjali’s Yoga Sūtras: With the Commentary of Vyāsa and the gloss of Vāchaspati Miśra*, trans. Rāma Prasāda (Allahabad: Panini Office, 1912), 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Sisṭ Purāṇ.” ”cit cañcal uparānti rog nahīṃ.”

<sup>5</sup> GBS 114. “sati te sūrivāṃ unmani man maiṃ bās.”

concentration<sup>1</sup> is broken, how can the nectar flow? / When [the mind is] fixed in the *unmani*, [the flow of the nectar] is stable. / When [the mind is] fixed in the *unmani*, there is bliss.”<sup>2</sup> The similar idea is expressed in the verses, which declare that “Having drunk the stream of flowing nectar, / The mind becomes settled.”<sup>3</sup>

The mind is also related to the breath. Mutual correspondence between the two lies at the foundation of the yogic technique of breathing, *prāṇāyama*: the mode of breathing is supposed to affect the state of mind. Again, it is paradigmatic to the general trend of yoga that the junction of mind and breath has as its desired goal the ultimate transcendence of both. Gorakh says, “I will tie the mind with the breath and I will tie the breath with the mind. / Then I will speak powerfully. / I will make the mind into my disciple; I will push out the breath. / There, where the mind and breath cannot go, I will remain absorbed.”<sup>4</sup> Yogic practice implies control over mind (‘I will make mind my disciple’) as much as yogic identity assumes the transcendence of this same mind.

In conclusion, Gorakhnāth is critical of the intellectuals whose authority is not based on the personal experience of transcendental wisdom acquired through the practice of yoga. In accordance with the general trend of Indian spiritual traditions, he sees the ordinary, ‘exoteric’ mentality as limiting and deluding. The mind, in its ‘natural’ state, is an enemy. In contradistinction to this, Gorakh advocates the ideal of the no-mind, which is accessible through the yogic practice of reversal. In his approach to the phenomenon of the mind, Gorakhnāth is in functional agreement with the position of esotericism, whether in those instances where he recommends the *transformation* of the ordinary mind, or when he upholds the ideal and rhetoric of *gnosis* or no-mind, or when he recommends *initiation* as a requirement on the path towards wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, ‘thread’ or ‘string,’ but contextually discipline, concentration. Barthwal glosses ‘ḍorī’ as yogic ‘samādhi.’ See *Gorakh-Bānī*, 45.

<sup>2</sup> GBS 128. “tūṭī ḍorī ras kas bahai / unmani lāgā asthir rahai / unmani lāgā hoi anand.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 67. “nījhar jharṇaiṃ aṃmṛt pīyā yūṃ man hūvā thīraṃ.”

<sup>4</sup> GBS 265. “man bāṃdhūṅgā pavan syūṃ pavan bāṃdhūṅgā man syūṃ / tab bolaigā kovat syūṃ / man terā kī māī mūṇḍū, pavanā dauṃ ra bahāī / man pavan kā gam nahīṃ tahāṃ rahai lyau lāī.”

## THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF *THE SAYINGS OF GORAKH*

The ethical ideas and ideals promulgated in *The Sayings of Gorakh* are intimately related to the concerns of yoga. In this regard also, it is appropriate and meaningful to approach the Nāths as an esoteric current. Their ethics have a primarily practical dimension: ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are judged with reference to the general principles of yogic *sādhana* and the peculiar idiosyncrasies related to the treatment of the *bindu*. Celibacy is encouraged, not because there is a moral stain attached to sexuality, but because the preservation of the semen is essential to the praxis of yoga. The same practical concerns are at the root of precepts against religious formalism: what is emphasized is, again, an esoteric dimension and inner understanding of the nature and purpose of religious observances.

*Jogīs* do not seek salvation; they expect that the performing of yogic *sādhana* will result in the acquisition of powers, the *siddhis*, and the obtainment of the elixir, the *amṛt*, which leads to immortality. The ethical dimension of their practice is solely concerned with the methodological assumptions of *haṭha* yoga. From that perspective, they are a separate and self-sufficient group, who base their moral behaviour on the expectations and standards of their own ideological position and practical orientation. I have been suggesting that the Nāths are best viewed as an esoteric current; given the primacy of praxis over theory that is characteristic of the occult, it is consonant with my thesis that the ethical concerns of the *jogīs* are also of a primarily practical nature. Let us investigate the main issues.

There is a marked tendency, in *The Sayings of Gorakh*, to emphasize that the ethical concepts of ‘sin and virtue,’ *pāp* and *punya*, do not apply to the *jogīs*. This should not be construed in the sense that Gorakhnāth recommends antinomianism. The intended message is that yogis have to transcend the dualism implied, *inter alia*, in the notions of right and wrong. In the text called *Sikhyā Darsan*, Gorakhnāth utters a steady chant (*abical jāp*) at the level of the head *cakra* that is “not smeared by virtue or sin.”<sup>1</sup> The colophon to this and a number of other Nāth texts ends with a formulaic

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<sup>1</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “*Sikhyā Darsan*.” “*badant gorakh abical jāpaṃ / lipai nahīṃ tahāṃ puṃṇ na pāpaṃ*.”

expression that “Gorakh’s disciples are ... not smeared by sin, nor overcome by virtue.”<sup>1</sup> The yogic achievement is thus assigned to the realm that is ‘beyond good and evil.’ And, to the degree that the concept of sin is employed at all, it is understood that it also is eradicated through the practice of yoga. Gorakhnāth asserts that “day by day, the fire devours the sins.”<sup>2</sup> The fire in question is the fire of yoga, which ‘cooks’ the practitioner into an adept; in other words, this is the fire of *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, often referred to as *brahmāgni*, ‘the fire of *brahman*.’ The implication is that the method of practical morality needed to remove ‘sins’ lies in the discipline of yoga.

The ethics of the Nāth Siddhas is pragmatic and wed to the concerns of yoga. If the latter is practiced satisfactorily, there is no negative moral judgment involved even in those situations that, from a habitual point of view, do not accord with the conventional expectations of yogic behaviour. The most radical example of this attitude is put forward in an already quoted *sabad*, which claims that there is no harm involved even if the yogi engages in a sexual act – otherwise emphatically argued against – provided that the semen has not been discharged: “Those who in making love preserve the *bindu*, / They are Gorakh’s brothers.”<sup>3</sup> A similar spirit is expressed in the verses that assert: “You may laugh, you may play, but you should maintain meditation. / You should speak day and night about the wisdom of *brahman*. / Do not break your meditation when laughing and playing.”<sup>4</sup> Dedication to the principles of yoga surpasses other concerns; if discipline is maintained, no harm will accrue to the *jogī*.

Gorakhnāth advocates going beyond the duality implied in the ethical opposites of good and bad. The royal road that leads to freedom from all constraints is yoga. It is significant that in the description of the ‘limbs’ of yoga, contained in the *Gorakṣa Śataka*, a Sanskrit text translated by Briggs, there is no mention of *yama* and *niyama*, which are the constituents of Patañjali’s yoga that deal with ethical issues.<sup>5</sup> The same is true of

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. “śrī gorakh sikhyā ... pāpe na lipante punne na hārante.” See also *Gorakh-Bānī*, the colophons to “Prāṇ Saṅkalī,” “Narvai Bodh,” “Ātma Bodh,” “Pañc Mātrā,” and “Gorakh-Gaṇes Guṣṭi.”

<sup>2</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Ātma Bodh,” 15. “ahanisi agni pāp kūm khāi.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 141. “bhog karantām je byand rākhai te gorakh kā gurbhai.”

<sup>4</sup> GBS 8. “hasibā khelibā dharibā dhyāṁn / ahanisi kathibā brahma giyāṁn / hasai khelai na karai man bhaṅg.”

<sup>5</sup> *Gorakṣa Śataka*, 7. “Postures, control of breath, withdrawal of the senses from their external objects, fixing of the mind upon a single object, abstract meditation and identification of the self with the object of meditation, these, they say, are the six stages of the Yoga.” In Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 285-6. Cf. Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtra* 2, 29: “Restraint, Observance, Posture, Regulation of breath (Prāṇāyāma), Abstraction,

another important text, the *Gorakṣa-Vacana-Saṃgrahaḥ*, which also defines yoga as consisting of 'six limbs,' without *yama* and *niyama*.<sup>1</sup> It would be incorrect, however, to assume that Gorakh dispenses with morality altogether. There are unambiguous messages in *The Sayings of Gorakh* that stress the importance of ethical living. There is no contradiction here. Gorakh either recommends transcending the duality of ethical opposites from the position of ultimate truth, or he ties the moral arguments to the overall interests of yogic discipline, which are of particular importance especially at the beginning of practice. In either case, ethical teachings and standards are formulated in accordance with the pragmatic worldview of *haṭha* yoga.

The insistence on celibacy has received sufficient treatment in the foregoing sections of this study, and for that reason I will not dwell upon it here. I only want to stress one more time that the reasons for these anti-sexual attitudes do not lie in the moral sphere: physical sex is advised against because of the importance attached to the *bindu* as the potential elixir of immortality. In addition, Gorakhnāth admonishes his followers that, in order to practice yoga, they must “first get rid of lust, anger, and egotism.”<sup>2</sup> There is a mutual correlation between moral uprightness and the mental concentration that is necessary for yogic practice. For that reason, Gorakh urges his follower: “The *nāth* says, listen oh *avadhūt* : / Be firm, keep your mind in control! / Give up lust, anger and egotism! / That is [equal] to going to all [holy] places.”<sup>3</sup>

The *jogīs* are often perceived as being prone to the use – and misuse – of various intoxicants. Briggs reports that, “Accusations are made of hypocrisy, and of bad habits, such as drinking and the use of drugs. ... They ... use spirituous liquors, smoke *gāñja* [marijuana] and eat opium.”<sup>4</sup> In this respect, Gorakh is unequivocal: intoxicants and yoga do not mix. “If someone, having become a yogi, / Scorns other people and consumes wine, meat, and *bhang* [hemp], / He causes 71.000 of his ancestors to go to

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Concentration, Meditation and Trance are the eight accessories of Yoga.” In Prasāda, *Pātañjali's Yoga Sūtra*, 155.

<sup>1</sup> See *Gorakṣa-Vacana-Saṃgrahaḥ* 62: “āsanaṃ prāṇasaṃrodhaḥ pratyāhāraśca dhāraṇā / dhyānaṃ samādhiretāni yogāṅgāni vadanti ṣaṭ.” In Banerjea, *Philosophy of Gorakhnath*, 337.

<sup>2</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Narvai Bodh,” 2. “pahlai ārambha, chā au kām krodh ahaṃkār.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 29. “nāth kahai tum sunahu re avadhū diḥ kari rākhahu cīyā / kām krodh ahaṃkār nibārau tau sarbai disantar kīyā.”

<sup>4</sup> Briggs, *Gorakhnāth*, 202, 55.

Hell.”<sup>1</sup> It has to be emphasized, however, that the main reason for this position vis-à-vis intoxicants lies in the practical concern of yogic discipline. Intoxicants are rejected not because there is something inherently amoral about their use, but because their effect is contrary to the practice of yoga as envisioned by Gorakhnāth. The reason is stated explicitly: “Eating *bhang* destroys wisdom and meditation.”<sup>2</sup> The prohibition is specific and utilitarian, rather than being rooted in abstract moralizing.

The Nāthist tendency to internalize the performance of spiritual observances extends also to moral issues. In the following *sabad*, Gorakh suggests inner correlates to the performance of daily ritual baths: “Truth and virtuous conduct are the [first] two baths. / The third is [listening to] the guru’s speech. / The fourth bath is [instructing] the disciples. The fifth bath is compassion. / The child Gorakh performs these five pure baths every day.”<sup>3</sup> The implication is, again, that *jogīs* value inner disposition, an interior ‘religion,’ over and against external observances. That they consider moral uprightness preferable to the letter of the law is a telling sign that the charges of immorality, so often leveled at them, are without support, at least as far as the message of *The Sayings of Gorakh* is concerned. It is true that Gorakhnāth advises against (empty) displays of religiosity, insisting that truthfulness to the inner spirit of one’s duties surpasses their outward performance, but he is by no means antinomian in his directive. His position on this issue is unambiguous: “The root of yoga is compassion and generosity.”<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, the ethical concerns of the Nāth yogis, as exemplified in *The Sayings of Gorakh*, exhibit a character that may be suitably designated as esoteric. This is mostly reflected on two levels. On the one hand, abstract morality is subordinated to the requirements that are inherent to the discipline of yoga. The moral ideal is correlated to the vision of an ideal yogi. On the other hand, Gorakhnāth insists that moral uprightness exerted in the pursuit of the ‘interior religion’ surpasses outward obedience to the norms and obligations of the ‘external’ (exoteric) religion. At the

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<sup>1</sup> GBS 164. “jogī hoi par nindya jhakhai / mad māṃs aru bhāṅgi jo bhakhai / ikotarasai purikhā narakhi jāi.” Cf. GBS 165, 208, 213, 241.

<sup>2</sup> GBS 165. “bhāṅgi bhakhant gyāṃn dhyāṃn khovant.”

<sup>3</sup> GBS 258. “satyo sīlaṃ doy asnāṃn tritīye guru bādhak / catrathe śiṣā asnān pañcame dayā asnān / ye pañc asnān nirmalā niti prati karat gorakh bālā.”

<sup>4</sup> GBS 228. “jog kā mūl hai dayā dāṇ.” Cf. GBP 32: 4.

highest level of reckoning – and that level is accessed at the ‘summit of the sky,’ in *sahasrār cakra* – ordinary morality is transcended, as are the notions of good and bad. As Gorakh states, once the yogi has awakened to his own self, “The body is untouched by sin or by virtue.”<sup>1</sup>

#### THE MIND IN ACTION: A CORRELATION BETWEEN CONCEPTS OF IMAGINATION AND MEDITATION

The undisciplined mind is, as far as the *jogīs* are concerned, an enemy. The mind, however, may and should be yoked through the discipline of yoga. It needs to be harmonized with the breath and the semen and it has to reach and operate at the level of the highest *cakra*. This method of mental discipline is customarily designated as the practice of meditation, *dhyān*. In tantric practice, the mind is sometimes conceptualized, as Teun Goudriaan reminds, as the instrument of inner or ‘mental worship,’ *mānasapūjā*. My proposal, already advanced on several occasions, is that the yogic / tantric practice of *dhyān* or *mānasapūjā* is comparable to what is in Western esotericism understood as the exercise of imagination.

Ioan Couliano defines magic as ‘the science of the imaginary.’ Henry Corbin, whose work on the concept of imagination is seminal, stresses that “on the one hand the notion of the *Imagination* as the *magical* production of an *image*...; and, on the other hand, the notion of the image as a body (a *magical* body, a *mental* body)...”.<sup>2</sup> Antoine Faivre, in discussing the Renaissance elaboration of this idea, asserts the conclusion that “It was a matter of training the imagination to make of it an instrument of allowing the acquisition of divine powers.”<sup>3</sup> These ideas are of significant importance if applied to, or ‘translated’ into, the mental discipline of the Nāth Siddhas. A possible model of this correlation is as follows:

Let us commence with the imagination understood as ‘the magical production of an image.’ In the case of the Nāthist *haṭha* yoga, the most important of these images

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<sup>1</sup> Gorakh-Bānī, “Ātma Bodh,” *colophon*. “pāpe na punne liye na kāyā / ātmā bodh kathant śrī gorakhrāyā.”

<sup>2</sup> Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, 179; italics as in the original. Corbin adds, “But a warning is necessary at the very outset: this *Imaginatio* must not be confused with *fantasy*. As Paracelsus already observed, fantasy, unlike Imagination, is an exercise of thought without foundation in nature, it is the ‘madman’s cornerstone.” Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Faivre, “Vis Imaginativa: (A Study of Some Aspects of Magical Imagination and Its Mythical Founders),” in *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition*, 101.



are those of the *cakras*. As is well known, meditation on and visualization of the *cakras*, done in combination with breathing exercises while seated in the yogic posture, is also one of the central practices in tantric yoga. Yogic and tantric literature abounds with descriptions of *cakras*. A short text called *Aṣṭ Cakr*, contained in the *Gorakh-Bānī*, states for example that “The first *cakra* situated at the anus is called the ‘basis’ [*ādhār*], its lotus has round petals, [there you should] hold the breath [by counting] one hundred. Above that *cakra* is *dṛṣṭ cakra*, at the level of penis, its lotus has six petals ...”<sup>1</sup> The list continues until all the *cakras* have been enumerated, together with a description of their ‘lotuses’ and the number of their ‘petals.’ Very often, the *cakras* are represented in an elaborate form, their description consisting not only of the number of petals, but also of the presiding deities, appropriate colours, associated mantras, and other elements.<sup>2</sup>

Now, in order to work on these *cakras*, the yogi has to visualize them. They do not exist materially, which is a plain fact emphasized by Bharati. The yogi has to keep the images of these *cakras* in his mind vividly, while performing *bandhas* and breathing exercises. This practice is crucial for the success in yoga. The implication is that the performance of yoga is conditioned by the ability to create and maintain images in one’s mind. This ability, that comes under the heading of meditation (*dhyān*) in the terminology of yoga is exactly the ‘magical production of an image’ mentioned by Corbin. The image (in this case, of the *cakras*) is produced ‘magically’ in the sense that it has been *created* through the disciplined mental effort of the practitioner.<sup>3</sup> Meditation on and visualization of the *cakras* is an act of the magical production of images, in other words, it is imagination.

Corbin states that imagination also implies ‘the notion of the image as a body (a *magical* body, a *mental* body).’ Within the contextual framework of yogic *sādhana*, this magical or mental body is one that Indian terminology classifies as the ‘subtle body,’ *sūkṣm śarīr*. With regards to this issue, White writes that, “Crucial to the initiation process [in yoga and tantra] is the notion that within the gross body of the human

<sup>1</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Aṣṭ Cakr.” “prathame ādhār cakr bolie gudā asthāṃne, cakr dal kaṃval, khaṭṣai sāṃs / tis cakr ūpari dṛṣṭcakr, liṅg asthāṃne ṣaṭ dal kaṃval ...”

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the elaborate description of the *cakras* given in *Śiva Sa hitā* V: 56- 131. Cf. the chart reproduced in Barthwal, *Traditions of Indian Mysticism*, 164-5.

<sup>3</sup> The same remarks apply to the visualization of the *kuṇḍalinī* and of her ‘ascent’ through the spine.

microcosm or protocosm there is a subtle, yogic body that is the mesocosmic replica of the divine, universal macrocosm or metacosm.”<sup>1</sup> The above-described *cakras* are situated and operative precisely within this subtle body, as is the *kuṇḍalinī*. Śiva and Śakti also dwell in that body. If this subtle body is cultivated, if it has been perfected, that body will be immortal. Dasgupta refers to such a perfected body as the ‘yoga-body’ and claims: “Such a yoga body (*yogo-deha*) is rare even to the gods; it is a body bereft of all limitations and bondage and at the same time possessing great powers; it is limitless like the sky but purer even than the sky.”<sup>2</sup>

The immortal body created through the practice of yoga is the basis and vehicle of immortality. This body is created through the process of imagination consisting of visualization and concentration on the image of the subtle body decorated with *cakras* and ‘72.000’ conduits of energy (*nāṛīs*). It is ‘possessing great powers,’ and ‘rare even to gods.’ Here we have a cluster of mutually related notions of great importance. Image is a body, literally, just as the (subtle) body is an image. The concentrated imagination of the yogi results in the *creation* of a yogic body. This body is powerful. Faivre’s remark that ‘It was a matter of training the imagination to make of it an instrument of allowing the acquisition of divine powers’ is both meaningful and appropriate when applied to the creation of the yogic body. Through it, the yogi becomes immortal and powerful, surpassing even the gods, becoming a god himself.<sup>3</sup> (Deification is, in fact, the culmination of the process of transmutation, an integral constituent of esotericism.) And finally, since yogic work centers on the subtle body and its energies, and since the perfected subtle body is the final aim of *haṭha* yoga, and since this body is created through the disciplined use of imagination, yoga itself may be defined as ‘the science of the imaginary.’ In that sense, yoga is analogous to magic as conceptualized by Couliano. This is an important conclusion, deserving further research.

To conclude: In this chapter, I suggested that as far as the ideology of the Nāth Siddhas is concerned, it is again meaningful to see them as an esoteric current. They insist on

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<sup>1</sup> White, “Tantra in Practice: Mapping a Tradition,” in *Tantra in Practice*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta, *Obscure Cults*, 220.

<sup>3</sup> The perfected body of the yogi is also called a ‘divya deha,’ the ‘divine body’ and “this is the *Siddhi* or the perfection after which the Siddhas aspired.” Ibid., 219.

the supremacy of the practical aspect of the discipline of yoga and on the principal value of gurus and lineages, while doctrinal issues and even formal affiliation within normative religious groups are to them of secondary importance and value. Even their ethical ideals are subordinated to the pragmatic orientation of *haṭha* yoga. This practical orientation is congenial to the occult and esotericism, as much as is the fluidity of doctrinal and denominational boundaries observed among the Nāths. Finally, while discussing the yogic approach to the discipline of the cultivated mind, I have drawn a parallel between the concepts of imagination, as understood in Western esotericism, and meditation, as conceptualized in yoga. My overall conclusion is that in this regard also, as far as the attitude towards mind and mental phenomena is concerned, esotericism remains a useful conceptual category through which to understand the Nāth Siddhas and the ideas expressed in *The Sayings of Gorakh*. I also conclude, on the basis of comparisons conducted here, that there are a significant number of formal similarities between Western and Indian esotericisms. I suggest investigating the implications of these conclusions in the next chapter.

## CONCLUSION: ESOTERICISM, TANTRA, AND THE TRANSLATION OF CULTURES

We are always in danger of drawing our own eye, for we depict our own vision when we think we are depicting the world. The choice of lens level is indeed arbitrary, but not entirely arbitrary. It is heuristic: we choose a specific level in order to make possible a specific task. Where one focuses depends on the sorts of continuities one is looking for; in all instances, something is lost and something gained.

Wendy Doniger, "Myths and Methods in the Dark"

Let us start this final chapter from the margins. The following examples address Wittgenstein's marginalia on Frazer's classic of 'armchair ethnology,' *The Golden Bough*. Wittgenstein's comments have been the subject of an insightful analysis by Stanley Tambiah in his *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*.<sup>1</sup> Both Wittgenstein's and Tambiah's remarks are integral to my argument. The crux of the matter is as follows: In 1931, Wittgenstein made notes on Frazer's book, expressing often his irritation at the author's narrow-minded approach to the issue of magic.<sup>2</sup> One of Wittgenstein's criticisms, as commented on by Tambiah, is especially relevant. Tambiah states that "Wittgenstein raises the acute question of 'translation between cultures': if Frazer uses the English words 'ghosts' and 'gods' to represent savage concepts, does this not imply that he is equating these terms with those familiar to him in his own cultural experience as a modern European?"<sup>3</sup> In other words, Wittgenstein is drawing attention to the fact that 'savage concepts,' such as those concerned with magic, are an integral part of our language, which in its turn determines our own mentality and comprises an essential element of our own culture. He expresses this idea succinctly

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Wittgenstein's marginalia are discussed on pp. 54-64. For the full text see A. C. Miles and Rush Rhees, "Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*,'" *Human World*, 3 (May 1971): 28-41.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein writes: "How narrow is the spiritual life for Frazer! Thus, How impossible to understand another life in terms of the English life of his time! Frazer can imagine no priest who is not basically an English parson of our time, with all his stupidity and dullness". In Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

through the formulation that “*In our language a whole mythology is laid down.*”<sup>1</sup> The implication is that Frazer and the ‘savage,’ the scientist and the magician, share a common ground, that they are mutually related. “In proposing this unity of mankind,” comments Tambiah, “Wittgenstein reveals a truth that some of our contemporary philosophers have been trying to articulate: that translation of another culture’s conceptions into our linguistic categories necessarily implies a ‘shared space,’ a ‘bridgehead of understanding between the two.’”<sup>2</sup>

The conviction that magic, or the occult, or esotericism is ‘a shared space’ between Indian and Western cultural spheres lies at the heart of my approach to understand the Nāth Siddhas and *The Sayings of Gorakh*. I am persuaded that the laws that govern the operational principles of Western and Indian occultism are to a significant degree commensurable. The main thesis of this study thus consists of the proposal that esotericism is a meaningful conceptual category through which to approach the theory and practice of the Nāth yogis in particular and the phenomenon of tantra in general. In what follows, I would like to devote some space to the discussion of the implications of this proposal.

My approach is based on the conviction that the ‘translation of cultures’ is possible and desirable.<sup>3</sup> In an important sense, it may be argued that every increase of knowledge is based on some sort of comparison. This comparison is in fact already present and at work when we say that ‘tantra is an element of Hinduism’ for ‘Hinduism’ is a Western concept. Similarly, if we identify tantra as a form of religion, the translation of cultures is again already happening, for ‘religion’ is again a Western concept without an entirely befitting equivalent in traditional (non-Muslim) India. My contention is that religion, as employed uncritically, is too broad and in that sense, and to that degree, an imperfect category to be applied to tantra and yoga of the Nāth Siddhas.

If, however, the Nāth Siddhas are viewed through the conceptual lenses of esotericism, we will find that the features of our ‘subject’ appear more clearly. Whether we conceptualize yogic *sāḍhanā* as alchemy, magic, or esotericism in general, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 63. Italics as in the original.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> On the translation and commensurability of cultures, see Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 111-39.

categories fit. Let me reiterate my arguments. Alchemy, as a science of transmutations, explains the supremacy of the process of reversal (*ulṭā sādhanā*) by which the semen returns to the top of the head, the Śakti rises along the spine to meet Śiva at the ‘summit of the sky,’ the yogic rhetoric turns the world ‘upside-down’ and the mortal yogi becomes an immortal adept. Magic, as a science of the imaginary oriented towards power based on the erotic principle of union, is also applicable to the theory and practice of the *jogīs*. Yoga is union (eros)<sup>1</sup>; yogic work focuses on the imaginal (subtle) body; the fruit of yoga are the powers (*śidhis*). The Nāths operate in agreement with the general principles of esotericism. Correspondences, which are at the root of the conviction that the whole universe is found within the body, are present. Imagination, which builds the subtle body, is present. The notion of living nature, exemplified by the internally present Śakti and by the *bindu*, is present. Transmutation is present, its essence lying in the process of reversal and the belief in perfectibility of human beings into immortal adepts. The ritual transmission of knowledge and the practice of concordance are present. The correlation is complete.

My argument therefore, throughout this study, rests on the conviction that Western and Indian esotericisms are commensurable. To address the issue from one more angle, I would like to take into consideration two recently proposed definitions of tantra. I would like to demonstrate that it is possible to extrapolate conceptual framework of the basic elements of tantra in such a way that its formal (typological) correspondence with the conceptual framework of (Western) esotericism emerges as meaningful.

In his erudite introduction to a collection of essays on the subject,<sup>2</sup> David Gordon White has advanced the view that tantra is a solely Asian discipline. His definition, however, although meant to be exclusive, very easily translates into Faivre's definition of esotericism. This is how White defines tantra:

Tantra is that 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 godhead that creates and maintains that

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<sup>1</sup> Between male and female energies, the mind and its object of concentration, Śiva and Śakti, etc.

<sup>2</sup> White, “Mapping a Tradition,” in *Tantra in Practice*, 3-38.

universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.<sup>1</sup>

Let us 'translate' this definition. It centers on the process of the appropriation of the universe (as energy) within 'the human microcosm,' which implies the notion of *correspondence* between a human being and the universe: microcosm corresponds to macrocosm.<sup>2</sup> It tells us that the universe is in fact 'the divine energy of godhead,' that is to say, a *living nature*: 'Śiva without Śakti is but a corpse,' therefore his energy (*śakti*) must be alive. To appropriate this energy in 'creative and emancipatory ways' implies a *transmutation*, whether of human subject or of the external world, for creation and emancipation are contrary to a *status quo*. Whatever has been created and emancipated has been transformed from its previous state. And to 'channel that energy within the human microcosm' refers to the work on *kuṇḍalinī śakti* and her ascent through the *cakras*, which process (the 'channeling') is based on the cultivation of *imagination*. The 'ritual appropriation' of this energy implies, *inter alia*, the ritual *transmission* of tantric knowledge through rites of initiation. Finally, the fact that White denotes tantra to be the 'Asian' and not denominational 'body of beliefs and practices' is just another way of pointing out the element of the *practice of concordance* that is at the heart of this tradition. White himself refers to tantra's "regional and vernacular Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain forms in Asia ...".<sup>3</sup> The whole definition of tantra is thus in essential agreement with the definition of Western esoteric tradition.

Similarly, in his introduction to the collection of essays on *Religions of India in Practice*, Richard H. Davis defines tantra in a manner that again indicates formal correspondence with the main features of esotericism. According to Davis,

Hindu tantric groups most often recognize the female goddess Śakti ("energy"), Śiva's consort, as the fundamental creative energy of the cosmos, and therefore as the Absolute. Tantrics view the human body as a microcosm of the universe, and focus on it as a vehicle for attaining powers and liberation. Through yogic practices and ritual activities the tantric adept seeks to inculcate knowledge physically. Rather than seeking a disembodied escape from bondage or a

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ritually appropriated' energy is often called *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, which corresponds to the greater *śakti* understood as the universe, which is the 'concrete manifestation of the divine energy of godhead.'

<sup>3</sup> White, *Mapping a Tradition*, 9.

devotional relationship with divinity, tantrics set as their highest goal the transformation of the body itself into divinity.<sup>1</sup>

The reader will recognize that 'the creative energy of the cosmos' corresponds to the notion of 'living nature,' that 'the human body as a microcosm of the universe' assumes the presence of the principle of 'correspondences,' and that 'the transformation of the body' points to the idea of 'transmutation.' She will also notice the importance given to the 'practices and ritual activities' that are important element of occult attitude, and that the orientation towards powers that aim at divinity establishes a formal link with magic. The conclusion is that it is possible and meaningful to conceptually and analytically approach tantra as an esoteric discipline.

The insight that tantra and the yoga of the Nāth Siddhas may be conceptualized as esoteric disciplines is important. Needless to say, esotericism is only a conceptual grid that, just as any other, makes selection out of the available data on the basis of convergence of several elements (correspondences, imagination, etc). It is certainly a construct, a second-order term, but at least it has an advantage in that it attempts to look for the points of concord between cultures. Instead of claiming exclusivity to either tantra or Western occultism, it is more meaningful to consider them regional variations of esotericism. I propose that esotericism should be seen as a cross-cultural phenomenon and that comparative esotericism is a meaningful and important, albeit insufficiently explored, avenue of scholarship.

How do we explain the apparent commensurability between Western and Indian models of esotericism? Admitting that there are no simple solutions to this complex query, I think that there are two basic, mutually non-exclusive answers. Taking the terminology with a grain of salt, we may broadly speak of exoteric and esoteric links between the two traditions. 'Exoterically' speaking, Indian and Western esotericisms share certain elements that are the result of historical contacts.<sup>2</sup> Alchemy

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Davis, "Introduction: A Brief History of Religions in India," in *Religions of India in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>2</sup> The historical links between ancient Indian and Western culture are explored in great detail in Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002).



is a good example: Indian alchemists were in contact with both Chinese<sup>1</sup> and Islamic<sup>2</sup> alchemical traditions. Both Chinese<sup>3</sup> and Islamic<sup>4</sup> alchemical ideas and practices were disseminated to the West. Similarly, tantra has moved between Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and even Muslim traditions in India, and it has traveled from India to Nepal, China, Tibet, Bhutan, and other countries. Finally, in the last century or so, tantra and yoga have arrived in the West, becoming important elements of the Western esoteric tradition. In that sense we may speak about the diffusion of esoteric traditions through historical contacts. In this process, esotericism serves the function as ‘a means of cultural transfer.’<sup>5</sup> By establishing links between various traditions, often situated in different countries, esotericism also operates as a means of cultural unity. This is an additional element that calls for its more comprehensive scholarly treatment.

‘Esoterically’ speaking, the similarities between Indian and Western occult disciplines may lie in the nature of the functioning of the human mind. Here I refer to what Ioan Couliano has called a cognitive approach to the genesis and ‘transmission’ of religious (and other) ideas.<sup>6</sup> Following and elaborating on the ideas of scholars such as Claude Lévi Strauss and Mircea Eliade, Couliano sees the operations of the human mind as the driving force behind the construction of diverse religious (as well as social and scientific) systems. It follows that “[t]he fundamental unity of humankind does not

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<sup>1</sup> “Since India’s original fascination with alchemy most probably arose out of early contacts with a China (India was exporting Buddhism to China in this period) whose Taoist speculative alchemical tradition has been developing since the second century A.D., one might conclude that such traditions reached south India via a maritime route.” White, *Alchemical Body*, 53.

<sup>2</sup> To give just one example, relevant to the Indian sufi tradition of the Shattārīs, established in the second half of the fifteenth century. “The Shattārīs, probably more than any other spiritual lineage, appropriated Indian yogic practices into their regimen. Among Shaikh Muhammad Ghaus’s many compositions is the Persian *Bahr al-Ḥayāt* (‘The Water of Life’), a now-lost Sanskrit text on yoga.” Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman, “Introduction,” in *Madhumālātī*, 23. White addresses the same issue as follows: “Finally, we know that Muslim physicians, alchemists and mystics were avid for the wisdom of their Indian counterparts, as evidenced by the translation, in the sixteenth century, of a treatise on *haṭha yoga*, attributed to Gorakṣa, entitled the *Amṛtakunḍa* (The Pool of Nectar).” *Alchemical Body*, 106.

<sup>3</sup> White reports that, “As Joseph Needham has demonstrated, China stands, according to the best evidence, as the primal source for the world’s transmutational and elixir alchemy. According to Needham’s historical reconstruction, the first-century A.D. Chinese technique of *kim* or *chin*, ‘aurifaction,’ would have been carried west to the Mediterranean world in perhaps the third century A.D.” *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>4</sup> For example, “The idea of an alchemical elixir came to the West, via Islam, in the early Middle Ages.” Coudert, “Elixirs,” in *Hidden Truths*, 251.

<sup>5</sup> See Wilson, *Scandal*.

<sup>6</sup> See Ioan Couliano, Introduction: Religion as a System,” in Mircea Eliade, Ioan P. Couliano and Hillary S. Wiesner, *The HarperCollins Concise Guide to World Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 1-7.

reside in a unity of *views or solutions*, but in the unity of the *operations* of the human mind.”<sup>1</sup>

Esoteric thought, according to this view, operates similarly in various contexts, and this operation is essentially one of internalization. As soon as a religious practice is internalized, the notion of correspondences (“the outside and inside are one”<sup>2</sup>) necessarily follows, the imagination is necessarily there (the inner cosmos not being observable by physical senses), as are the notions of transmutation<sup>3</sup> and living nature.<sup>4</sup> Esoteric thought also typically operates in the symbolic mode,<sup>5</sup> going beyond rigid identifications, finding similarities between differing phenomena of reality and various cultural systems,<sup>6</sup> which results in the practice of concordance.

I am convinced that every exoteric religion has its esoteric complement. This conviction should not be construed as if to mean that every esoteric tradition is alike. Being an inner aspect of a particular tradition, esoteric teaching - and practice - shares in a number of formal elements of that tradition and it is shaped and altered by the continuing process of historical change. We should also be sensitive to the fact that ‘esoteric’ and ‘exoteric’ comprise a binary opposition, which just as any other implies the mutual correlation and codependence between its constitutive elements, and which should not be overstated. In the final analysis, it may be said that various esoteric traditions are engaged in an array of complex, dynamic processes characterized by the interplay of elements that display features of both the sameness and difference. I have attempted to elucidate some aspects of the former, but this is only a methodological

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 7; emphasis in the original. Couliano adds that, “no matter how bizarre some religions may appear to us at first sight, they can ultimately be understood as the dwelling of human minds on certain hypotheses concerning nature and existence, wrestling with the perennial mysteries of life, death, good and evil, human purpose, justice, and so forth.” Ibid., 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Gorakh-Bānī*, “Pañc Mātrā,” 4.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of transmutation follows necessarily from the idea of correspondence between micro- and macrocosm. The reason is that this correspondence implies the ultimate identity between the two, which means that human microcosm transforms its initial limited state by becoming one with the divine macrocosm.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of living nature, the idea that the middle ground between human being and divinity is also impregnated with spiritual value, necessarily stems from the notion of correspondence.

<sup>5</sup> “*And magic always depends on the idea of symbolism and of language.*” Wittgenstein, as quoted in Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 59; italics in the original.

<sup>6</sup> Tambiah remarks how this idea “has been magnificently documented by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, in terms of that sixteenth-century European thought known as the ‘doctrine of signatures,’ in which the notion of ‘resemblance’ played a key role in the relation between man and the phenomena of his cosmos.” Ibid., 87.

choice, and as such it should not be taken as a suggestion that we should neglect the latter.

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