

Metaphor, Meaning and Oral Exegesis:
The Upside-Down Language of the Songs of *Sādhanā*

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Nabani Das Bāul, who is said to have been the Bāul guru of Rabindranath Tagore. Photo by Richard Lannoy, 1954.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research concerns the history of Bengali songs and their language. If the Nobel prize to Bob Dylan provoked stupor and debate within western audiences, conferring a literary prize to a songwriter would not have raised any eyebrow in pre-modern Bengal, since, as some scholars maintain, “the history of Bengali literature *is* a history of Bengali songs”.¹ Historical mappings of proto-Bengali and Bengali song texts show that the tropes used in Bengali esoteric songs and Tantric songs of *sādhanā* appear repeatedly in a strikingly homogeneous manner throughout their literary development:² identical images and symbols can be easily found browsing through eastern Apabrahmśa songs (collectively known as *Caryāpada*), early modern lyrics of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā poets, early 19th century collections of Bengali songs, and also in the manuscripts of little-known saint-songwriters of modern Bengal, such as those that I have collected and analysed during my doctoral research.³ In such songs, frogs eat the snakes' head, girls give birth to their own mothers, trees have roots upside-down, reaching for the sky. These tropes refer to virtuosic techniques, Yogic practices, Nāth imaginaries, and Sahajiyā perceptions of the body, sexuality and the cosmos: but who really understands them?

The explicit ambiguity of these texts requires us to interrogate the genre's views on meaning and interpretation. Is there anything like 'the' correct interpretation of a song of *sādhanā*? Is every interpretation equally correct, in an unlimited semiosis⁴ and an uncontrollable proliferation of

- 1 CHAKRABARTI 1990. *Bānlā Dehatattver Gān*. Kolkata: Pustak Bipani, p.13. Let us also remind the fact that, much more recently, Rabindranath Tagore was given a Nobel prize, in 1913, for a collection of Bengali songs: *Gītāñjali* (1910).
- 2 See among others: CHAKRABARTI 1990. *Bānlā Dehatattver Gān*, p. 10, 32. DASGUPTA 1962. *Obscure Religious Cults as a Background of Bengali Literature*. Kolkata: Firma KLM. JHA 2009. *Bāul Fakir Padābalī*. Kolkata: Manfakira, p. 11. KVAERNE 1977. *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs: A Study of the Caryāgīti*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget. MOJUMDER 1973. *The Caryāpadas: A Treatise on the Earliest Bengali Songs*. Kolkata: Naya Prokash. SEN 1956. *Caryāgīti Padābalī*. Bardhaman: Sahitya-Sabha.
- 3 LOREA 2015. “Learning to Swim in the River of Desire: Bhaba Pagla's Songs in Their Performative Context”. PhD diss., Italian Institute of Oriental Studies, Rome.
- 4 The risk of a semiosis *ad infinitum* was outlined in: PEIRCE 1931-58. *Collected Writings* (8 Vols.) (Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W Burks). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1.339, 2.303. see also ECO

meanings?

The long South Asian tradition of teaching and expressing *sāadhanā* through songs is vernacular and trans-sectarian, accompanying spatial and temporal dimensions of Indian cultural history and popular religions.⁵ The language of the songs of *sāadhanā* is often confusing, openly befuddling, intentionally obscure and provocatively enigmatic. Scholars of Tantric texts have referred to this language as *samdhyā bhāṣā*,⁶ while vernacular saints/songwriters call this language in different ways (e.g. “upside-down language” - *ulaṭ bāmsī* or *ulṭa bhāṣā* - in reference to the songs of Kabir⁷ and of the Bāuls respectively; “language of the mint” for the Kartābhajās⁸). The problem of the interpretation of *samdhyā bhāṣā* remains a debated topic in academic publications.⁹ Michael Broido remarks the impossibility to grasp meanings in Tantric texts without knowing “the methods of interpretation which were used by the commentators and teachers who interpreted them.”¹⁰ More recently, Wedemeyer proposed to look at contemporary practices to understand how to interpret the notoriously transgressive rituals of Tantric Buddhist texts.¹¹ The problem that clearly emerges in this regard is that, even conceding that contemporary practices could reflect what was practiced several centuries ago, an enormous gap between ethnography and Indology makes these attempts fallacious.¹² Wedemeyer himself relies upon the accounts of Horace Hayman Wilson, a Sanskrit scholar in 19th century Calcutta, who noted that the wild rites described in Buddhist Tantric texts were “nothing but a kind of family barbecue” in which booze and meat are consumed.¹³ This questionable reference not only tells us that we need to decolonise Tantric studies and learn more about the ways in which contemporary practitioners experience and interpret Tantric songs: it also underlines how textual scholars in Tantric studies often lack the training to deal with anthropological field-work and ethnographic accounts.

My research aims to disentangle the question of the interpretation of the enigmatic language of the songs of *sāadhanā* by using two tools: the literary and philosophical study of metaphor, which explains through cognitive lenses how metaphors are used for didactic, mnemonic and

1990. *I Limiti dell'Interpretazione*. Milano: Bompiani. And, ECO 2004. *Interpretazione e Sovrinterpretazione: un Dibattito con Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler e Christine Brooke-Rose*. Milano: Tascabili Bompiani.

- 5 See BECK 2012. *Sonic Liturgy: Ritual and Music in Hindu Tradition*. Columbia: University of South Carolina.
- CUTLER 1987. *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- DAVIDSON 2002. *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: a Social History of the Tantric Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 223, 237.
- HAWLEY 2015. *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, p. 1-10.
- ORSINI ET AL. 2015. *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, p. 1-30.
- 6 See KVAERNE 1977 *An Anthology*, p. 37-38. BHARATI 1961. “Intentional Language in the Tantras.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 81, n. 3: 261-270. The striking similarity between medieval Tantric literature in eastern Apabrahṃśa, old Bengali, and Bāul songs in the use of terminologies, themes and symbols, allowed many scholars to speak of *samdhyā bhāṣā* also in the context of contemporary esoteric lineages (see CAPWELL 1974. “The Esoteric Belief of the Bāuls of Bengal.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33, p. 261; DASGUPTA 1962 *Obscure Religious Cults*, p. 413-424; JHA 1999 *Bastubādī Bāul*. Kolkata: Lok Sanskriti o Adibasi Sanskriti Kendra, p. 467; OPENSHAW 2004. *Seeking Bāuls of Bengal*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 62-71.
- 7 See HESS 1983. “The Cow Is Sucking at the Calf’s Teat: Kabir’s Upside-Down Language”. *History of Religions* 22, n. 4: 313–337.
- 8 See URBAN 2001. *Songs of Ecstasy: Tantric and Devotional Songs from Colonial Bengal*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 9 See Brook’s introduction in BROOK 1990. *The Secret of the Three Cities: an Introduction to Hindu Shakta Tantrism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 10 BROIDO 1993. “Killing, Lying, Stealing and Adultery: a Problem of Interpretation in the Tantras”. In *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, edited by Lopez, 71-118. Delhi: Motilal.
- 11 See WEDEMEYER 2012. *Making Sense of Tantric Buddhism: History, Semiology, and Transgression in the Indian Traditions*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 55-60.
- 12 It has been noted that David Snellgrove based his ethnographic information about the actual performance of Tantric practices on Briggs (1938), who based his knowledge on the reports of William Ward (1817) and Edwin Aitkinson (1882-86), whose information was neither based on first hand observation nor on field-work. SNELLGROVE 1987. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors* (Volume I). Boston: Shambala Publications, p. 170.
- 13 WEDEMEYER 2012, *Making Sense*, p. 185.

soteriological effects;¹⁴ And the ethnography of oral exegesis, which reveals sophisticated indigenous strategies of multilayered interpretation and local perspectives on the *samdhya bhasā* discourse. Bridging the two, I propose to understand the tradition of enigmatic songs of *sāadhanā* through an “ethnography of speech”,¹⁵ and particularly, an “ethnography of metaphorical speech”: determining for particular social milieus and literary genres which kinds of statements count as metaphors, which count as “explanatory paraphrases”,¹⁶ and what kinds of standards are invoked to define some interpretations as more appropriate than others.¹⁷

With the illusion that to one metaphor always corresponds one semantic referent, scholars on Tantrism attempted at compiling lists and glossaries giving one-to-one equivalences (e.g. *padma* = vulva, *vajra* = *liṅgam*).¹⁸ My research shows how metaphors in Bengali esoteric songs carry multiple and simultaneous meanings according to the literary, intertextual and semantic context in which the song is inscribed, but also the contingent and performative context of reception: who is singing, for whom, and for which purpose? These contexts are referred to by contemporary gurus using exactly the same terminology and hierarchies of meaning employed in pre-modern Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā works,¹⁹ showing a consistent transmission that allows us to think of a *longue durée* of hermeneutical practices.

Tantric practitioners have always considered oral instruction by the guru as indispensable for the aspirant towards self-realization, therefore present-day gurus' exegetical strategies could be examined as a means of access to modern Tantrism.²⁰ My research builds upon this premise and suggests that the ethnography of metaphorical speech is a valuable instrument for the future of Tantric studies, opening a new range of questions: who is allowed to attribute meanings to esoteric verses? How do meanings change according to different interpreters and different performative contexts? Who gives authority and legitimacy to those interpretations?

The acknowledgment of different and simultaneous levels of meaning is an old concern of Tantric hermeneutics: esoteric practitioners traditionally identified at least three levels of signification of their scriptures, the “outer”, “inner” and “secret” levels,²¹ although “the most profound interpretation is only unwritten and is to be heard from the mouth of one's guru”.²² Similarly, in the contemporary lineages of Bāuls and Fakirs that I have studied, metaphorical

14 This methodological attempt was pioneered by Glen A. Hayes. See HAYES 2003. “Metaphoric Worlds and Yoga in the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Tantric Traditions of Medieval Bengal”. In *Yoga: The Indian Tradition*, edited by I. Whicher and D. Carpenter, 162–184. London: Routledge. HAYES 2006. “The Guru's Tongue: Metaphor, Imagery and Vernacular Language in Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Traditions”. *Pacific World* III, n. 8: 41–71.

15 See HYMES 1962. “The Ethnography of Speaking.” *Anthropology and Human Behavior* 13, n.53: 11–74. HYMES AND GUMPERTZ 1972. *Directions in Sociolinguistics: the Ethnography of Communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

16 URBAN 1939. *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism*. New York: Macmillan, p. 39.

17 BASSO 1976. “Wise Words of the Western Apaches: Metaphor and Semantic Theory”. In *Meaning in Anthropology*, edited by Basso and Selby, 93–121. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, p. 95.

18 For example, ELIADE 1958. *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 252. SHAHIDULLAH 1928. *Les Chants Mystiques de Kāṇha et de Sarāha*. Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, p. 9-10.

19 See BOSE 1932. *Sahajiyā Sāhitya*. Kolkata: Calcutta University Press. DAS 2004. *Sarbarasatattvasar : Baiṣṇab Sahajiyādharmā Biṣayak Puthi*. Kolkata: Pustak Bipani. RAY 2012. *Sahajiyā Sāadhan Saṃgīt*. Kolkata: Ekuśa Śataka.

20 GUPTA, GOUDRIAAN AND JAN HOENS 1979. *Hindu Tantrism*. Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, p. 10.

21 See THURMAN 1993. “Vajra Hermeneutics”. In *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, edited by Lopez, 119-148. New Delhi: Motilal. A charting of the levels and stages of explanation can be found in STEINKELLNER 1978. “Remarks on tantristic Hermeneutics”. In *Proceedings of the Csoma de Koros Memorial Symposium*, edited by Ligeti, 445-458. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. On the “four modes of explanation” or *caturvidhākhyāyikā* in Tantric hermeneutics see ARÈNES 1998 “Herméneutique des Tantra: Étude de Quelques Usages du «Sens Caché».” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21, n.2: 173- 226. See also GRAY 2005. “Disclosing the Empty Secret: Textuality and Embodiment in the Cakrasamvara Tantra.” *Numen* 52, n.4: 417-444. For levels of interpretation of *Caryāpada* songs see Balpo Asu in SCHAEFFER 2005. *Dreaming the Great Brahmin: Tibetan Traditions of the Buddhist Poet-Saint Saraha*. New York: Oxford University Press. Also, on Kāṇha's verses and their interpretation: JACKSON 2011. “Ambiguous Sexuality: Imagery and Interpretation in Tantric Buddhism.” *Religion* 22, n.1: 85-100.

22 See JHA 1999 *Bastubādi Bāul*, p. 469.

expressions can be interpreted in radically different manners according to the '*sāadhanā*- stage' that they address.²³

The fecundity of meaning is certainly not a surprising characteristic for those who are familiar with the hermeneutics of religious texts, especially after the contribution, in contemporary hermeneutics, of Gadamer, Eco, and Ricoeur. This concept liberated the text from the constrictive implications of singularism, leading to the famous statement of Ricoeur that “a text means all that it can mean”.²⁴ At the same time it implicitly leads to a dilemma: how to do justice to the actuality of many differing interpretations, while not succumbing to relativism?²⁵ How can we then decide where to mark the boundary of legitimacy?

This has been a matter of controversy and debate among scholars in Tantrism and Sahajiyā literature. For Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā lyrics, Dimock acknowledged the need for “intellectual gymnastics” to fit very different streams of thought and practice in the same texts.²⁶ Religious change and its accommodation is a matter of exegesis, where interpretive gymnasts use different muscles and different accoutrements to create their explanatory paraphrase. To complement this view and to structurally decolonise the study of Tantric texts, it is crucial to understand the local discourse around *saṃdhyā bhāṣā*: What are the living strategies of exegesis of the twilight/intentional language²⁷ of Tantric songs? How do they relate to traditional Tantric hermeneutics? What can they tell us to understand older texts and their metaphors? Can they draw a bridge in between Tantric studies focused on texts, and modern ethnographies of lived religious experience?

My study attempts to provide for a missing link between scholarly theories on the functions and meanings of *saṃdhyā bhāṣā* and the emic perspectives on song-texts' reception and interpretation, wishing to fill a long-lasting gap between Indology and local embodied practices.

23 Namely *sthūla*, *pravarta*, *sādhaka*, *siddha*. See LOREA 2017. “How many know how to (make) love?” - Semantic understanding of Bengali Bāul songs and politics of power among the lineage of Bhaba Pagla”. *Kervan - International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies* 21 : 81-116.

24 RICOEUR 1981. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 176.

25 STIVER 2001. *Theology After Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p.96.

26 DIMOCK 1966. *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaiṣṇava-Sahajiyā Cult of Bengal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 12-13.

27 This expression refers to the most used translations for *saṃdhyā/saṃdhā bhāṣā*. A critical analysis of such understandings is offered in BROIDO 1985. “Intention and Suggestion in the Abdharmakośa: Sandhābhāṣā Revisited.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 13: 327-381.