

“We wish you a very successful erotic exploration of life”: Revisiting tantric paths in the West

The rise of tantra's popularity in the West, which roughly begun with the movement initiated by Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) in the 1970s, is showing no sign of stopping anytime soon. Thus far, scholars have mostly analysed tantric practices in the West for their emphasis on sensationalised sexuality (Urban 2008), under the lens of consumerism (Padoux 2017) and as cultural appropriation (Timalsina 2011), even though more recently also their potential for healing trauma has been recognised (Plancke 2020).

Without denying the hedonistic elements professed by many Western tantric schools and their often-problematic relationship with tantra's South Asian origins, here I wish to shift the attention from questions around how tantric practices manifest in Western contexts to questions investigating why they manifest the way they do. More specifically, I ask 'What ontological conditions do cross-cultural ritual transformations respond to?'; 'Can tantric practices that are not adapted to the context in which they unfold maintain their efficacy?'

Data for this study derive from my ongoing anthropological fieldwork consisting in open-ended conversations with practitioners from a number of tantra schools in the UK and Europe and my own participation in tantra workshops, festivals and lectures. Acknowledging that tantric practices are embedded within practitioners' modes of being-in-the-world and their realms of existentiality, and juxtaposing Western practices with the findings from my earlier research on contemporary tantric practices in India, I wish to shed light on cross-cultural ritual adaptations and their efficacy.

Through a genealogico-archaeological approach, it emerges that different understandings of gurudom, bodies, gender, divinity, the environment and beingness at large call for different practices as precondition for their efficacy. Therefore, looking beyond discourses of cultural appropriation, sensationalism and consumerism can help to better understand the seemingly unstoppable rise of tantra in the West and the profound needs this phenomenon may respond to.

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