

Embodying Shiva and Shakti- the construction of gender in contemporary, European tantra

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A few years back, Mark Singleton suggested that we consider the term “yoga” as it refers to modern postural practice as a homonym, instead of a synonym, of the “yoga” associated with the philosophical system of Patañjali, or the “yoga” that forms an integral component of the Śaiva Tantras (Singleton 2010, 15). Perhaps the same suggestion could be made when considering the many techniques that go by the name of “tantra” within the milieu of contemporary spirituality in Europe. Few practitioners of these techniques (which include breathwork, yoga, meditation, and sensual/sexual practices) claim any connection to traditional tantric lineages, though many of them borrow concepts found in the north Indian texts called tantras, most importantly the notion of “Shiva”(Śiva) and “Shakti”(Śakti). Within traditions of monistic Śaiva Tantra, these terms commonly refer to the principle of consciousness respectively the principle of power and take mythological and iconographical forms as god and goddess. When used in contemporary, western tantra these concepts tend to be applied onto female and male bodies, suggesting that women are embodiments of “Shakti” and men of “Shiva”. Practitioners are often encouraged to strengthen their “feminine” or “masculine” qualities, with the purpose of creating greater sexual polarity and erotic tension, but also in order to liberate creative energy or gain spiritual progress.

This presentation, based on my current interdisciplinary PhD research, will showcase and problematize the construction of gender within contemporary, European tantra, using material from recently executed qualitative interviews with practitioners in the field, and applying a theoretical framework which highlights the “complexity and slipperiness of spirituality”(Fedele and Knibbe 2013, 3), especially in relation to questions of authority and power.

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