"I Am Afraid of Telling You This, Lest You'd Be Scared Shitless!": The Myth of Secrecy and the Study of the Esoteric Traditions of Bengal

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Abstract: As the verse chosen as a title for this article emblematically shows, esoteric movements have consistently used secrecy as a literary *topos* in their oral and written cultural expressions for a number of purposes. Scholars of South Asian religions, especially those in field of Tantric studies, have been scrutinizing for decades the need for secretive doctrines and a secret code-language (*sandhyā bhāṣā*), mostly interrogating textual sources and neglecting the contemporary experience and exegetical authority of living lineages. In this paper, I firstly address ethical and epistemological problems in the study of esoteric religious movements in order to propose innovative methodological strategies. Then, I offer numerous examples drawn from extensive field-work and in-depth literary study of contemporary esoteric lineages of West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh, in order to discuss the local discourse on secrecy. Finally, I review previously assumed notions on secrecy in South Asian religions, and I suggest to take into serious consideration local perspectives on the accessibility of esoteric knowledge, leading to a more nuanced idea of secrecy, constantly subjected to temporal and situational negotiations between silence and disclosure.

Keywords: Bāul Fakir; Sahajiẏā; Vaiṣṇava; Tantra; Kartābhajā; sandhyā bhāṣā; exegesis; guru; contemporary West Bengal; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The somewhat bizarre title of this article is taken from a couplet of the *Bhāber Gīta*, the repository of the lyrics of the Kartābhajā sect.[1] This religious community, whose origins are located in between Vaiṣṇava devotionalism and indigenous forms of Islam, has attracted mainly low-caste devotees. Its legendary founder, a Muslim Fakir named Āul Cāṃd (ca. 1686–1779), is considered a reincarnation of the fifteenth century saint Caitanya, who returned on the earth to restore an anti-casteist religion strongly opposed to the ideal of renunciation (*sannyās*). These antinomian, equalitarian and anthropocentric religious practitioners have been categorised as "deviant" or "heretic" (*apasampradāẏ*) by nineteenth century *bhadralok* reformers.[2] Statements even more shocking than the one I selected from the Kartābhajā repertoire are quite common among the "obscure religious cults" (Dasgupta 1962) of Bengal, which transmit esoteric teachings and vocally challenge established hierarchies and scripture-based normativity. One of their common traits is the focus laid on secrecy, a theme which this article proposes to explore.

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[1] Among the few studies dedicated to the Bengali religious community known as Kartābhajā (lit. "worshippers of the Master"), see (Banerjee 1995; Urban 2001).

[2] Referring to Bāul, Fakir, Sahajiẏā and other related religious lineages as "deviant" sects (*apasampradāẏ*) is still common among orthodox Gauṛiẏa Vaiṣṇavas and ISKCON followers. See (Sharvananda 1921).

Within the transmitted teachings of these esoteric lineages[3] of Bengal, secrecy is so recurrently emphasized that it could be understood as a literary *topos.* We may wonder whether the centrality of secrecy is a literary stratagem pervading these compositions, rather than an actual religious prescription reflected in the local epistemological discourse. The aforementioned verses of the Kartābhajās unambiguously represent one of the techniques of "advertising" secrecy and its dangerous content, a feature which is widespread in the lyrics and in the oral teachings of Bāul, Fakir, Sahajiẏā and other lineages which have been grouped under these umbrella-names.[4]

By using the term Bāul and Fakir, I refer to unsystematic groups of singers and/or religious practitioners who are often not organized around a centralised authority, an institution or a single charismatic figure, and nevertheless share performative occasions, corpora of songs, a particular language, and an entire system of beliefs and techniques concerning the body and the universe. Emerging as separate religious communities since the early nineteenth century, they incorporated elements and terminologies of more ancient traditions, particularly Tantric Buddhism, Sahajiẏā Vaiṣṇavism and mystic Islam. These lineages attack caste-based discrimination and proclaim equality among *jāti*s and *dharma*s (caste-based and religion-based social identities). Their body-centred psycho-physiological practices of self-realization (*sādhanā*) contradict hierarchies and norms of ritual purity imposed by both Hindu and Islamic orthodoxies, scriptural norms and religious establishments. Liberation, according to them, is to be attained through the body, which is considered a microcosm, a source of knowledge on the universe and also an instrument for experiencing divine love (*prem*). A major obstacle to self-realization is selfish sexual desire (*kām*), which rather than being repressed, needs to be controlled and transubstantiated into *prem.* They worship femininity and bestow a prominent role to women, at least in theory. Lastly, they do not attribute much if any religious authority to the Vedas, the Quran and the Śāstras: textual scriptures are regarded as indirect knowledge (*anumān*), while paramount importance is conferred to the teachings of a living Guru. Tenets and beliefs are memorialised and diffused through a vast corpus of orally transmitted songs that are typically very cryptic and enigmatic, needing to be decoded by a Guru in order to be understood. Similarly to Vaiṣṇava Sahajiẏā literature, as remarked by Glen A. Hayes, and in contrast to other Tantric[5] traditions,

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3　Concerning the possibility of applying the adjective "esoteric" somewhere else than in Western esotericisms, I am here referring to the groups in Bengal that proclaim themselves to be the holders of a secret (*guhya-* or *gupta-* or *gopan-*) doctrine and a set of techniques for achieving realization referred to in local understandings as hidden or mysterious (*marma, rahasya*) and reserved to *rasik* devotees. Though untranslatable in a local taxonomy, the attribute 'esoteric' and its opposition to the term 'exoteric' is reflected in the practitioners' opposition between *bahiraṅga* and *antaraṅga,* the outer aspect as opposed to the insiders' view on discipline and behaviour. Scholars have widely referred to the above mentioned Bengali traditions as "esoteric" (e.g., Capwell 1974; Knight 2011). The qualification seems to be appropriate for Bāuls if we take into consideration the definitions and characteristics of the 'esoteric' as listed by the phenomenological overview of Riffard (1996, pp. 462–75), i.e., the juxtaposition of exo/esoteric, the interiorisation of the temple, the androgynous model, the sophisticated systematisation of micro/macrocosmological correspondences, and the use of symbolism of letters and numbers.

4　Local and international scholarship on Bāuls and Fakirs produced a rather extensive literature, if compared with other oral traditions of South Asia. While the earliest works on Bauls were mainly interested in their literary production and humanism (e.g., Tagore [1931] 2005, pp. 188–206), after the pioneering work of Bhaṭṭacārya (1957) a series of in-depth studies based on qualitative research began to appear. In English, see particularly (Capwell 1986; Jhā 1995; Openshaw [2002] 2004; Fakir 2005; Knight 2011). Works specifically on Muslim Fakirs are more rare (see Salomon 1991; Trottier 2000; Fakir 2005; Lee 2008). The two groups are often referred to as the same religious movement and their name is frequently used together, hyphenated ("Bāul-Fakir", as in Cakrabartī 1989; Jhā 2001). Sahajiẏā refers to the followers of the *sahaja* path, literally meaning simple, spontaneous, or innate, alluding to the reintegration into an original state of blissful non-duality called *sahaja.* The term is an overarching attribute employed for describing many of the esoteric Bengali lineages (see for example McDaniel 1989; Cashin 1995). It is also a term that refers to a Tantric strand of post-Caitanya Bengali Vaiṣṇava literature (see Bose 1930; Hayes 1989).

5　Conceding there is something we can unanimously call Tantric at all, in the multifaceted historical and living traditions of the Indian subcontinent, I agree with Hayes's definition of Sahajiẏā lineages as "unsystematic Tantric groups" (2003, p. 167) and I generally accept other scholars' definitions of Bāul and Fakir beliefs and practices as Tantric. For a working definition of Tantric elements in religious practice I rely on the broad definition given by Hoens et al. (1979, pp. 7–9) and on the list of common elements of heterogeneous Tantric lineages provided by Brooks (1990, p. 53). Bengali esoteric groups would also fit the broader practical definition of Denton (2004, p. 101), who identified two prominent themes "in the Tantric mode: the centrality of the body as a vehicle for the attainment of salvation, and conscious inversion of the rules governing normal social relations". Esoteric lineages of Bengal have been a subject of scholarly interest for several publications on Tantrism,

for the esoteric lineages of Bengal we have "virtually no evidence of a written commentarial tradition" and "we are faced with many problems in hermeneutics [...] In part, this is due to the extremely esoteric nature of the teachings and practices themselves, as well as to the secrecy imposed upon generations of followers" ([Hayes 2003](#), p. 167).

Bāuls, Fakirs, Kartābhajās and low-caste Vaiṣṇavas have been described in missionary and colonial sources with adjectives such as indecent, obscene, sexually promiscuous, immoral and filthy. Urban educated elites adopted colonial stances on morality and took great pains to purge their religious institutions from such undesired elements. Due to nineteenth century reformist movements and religious institutionalization promoted by Bengali Hindu upper classes, these religious groups were systematized as *apasampradāẏ*—deviant and blasphemous Vaiṣṇavas.[6] A similar fate was reserved to Muslim Bāuls and Fakirs, harshly condemned by Islamic social reformists.[7] For these historical reasons, I will refer to these lineages as heterodox, considering that they have been excluded from upper-class Hindu institutionalization, while being simultaneously delegitimized and marginalized by Islamic reformers.

This article aims at examining secrecy in the context of the esoteric religious movements of Bengal on several levels. In the first section, I discuss the epistemological question which secrecy addresses to the scholar: How can one conduct research on the oral traditions of "secret" societies of adepts? This is a methodological problem for the outsider, the researcher, the translator, the "esoterologist" ([Faivre 2000](#), p. xxviii). Revising the epistemological and ethical problems related to the study of esoteric religious communities, I propose a methodological solution to overcome some limitations previously faced by scholars. In the second section, I explore secrecy as a leitmotif of oral literature, songtexts and oral teachings of Bāuls and Fakirs, and I aim to systematically explain what is the point in the use of secrecy, encryption and metaphorisation. In this part, I argue that the use of secrecy and of a secret language fulfils literary, sociocultural, cognitive-mnemonic and soteriological functions. In the third section, I attempt to dismantle previous representations of secrecy and to deconstruct, as the title of this article claims, "the myth of secrecy". I suggest that secrecy in Indian esoteric traditions has been often constructed as an imagined lack of accessibility, formulated by academic as well as popular literature, and I argue that this process needs to be contextualized and demistified. I will suggest to understand the *etic* emphasis on secrecy as a superimposed construction of the Other—in this case, the esotic/esoteric religious group—subjected to intellectual and academic scrutiny. I suggest that the historical and intellectual creation of a reified concept of secrecy is in opposition to a flexible reality of accessible, though esoteric, religious groups that continuously negotiate their balance between secrecy and disclosure, private gatherings and public audiences, hardcore subversion and socially acceptable codes of conduct.

The lyrics and the oral sources that I use in this article have been collected during a long field-work (2011–2014, winter 2015, winter 2018) in West Bengal, and more sporadically in Bangladesh, where I was conducting research on the lineages sprouting from the charismatic saint-composer Bhaba Pagla (1902–1984). A 'holy madman'—as his name indicates—and a talented as much as eccentric poet-performer, he is revered as a very popular composer of Bāul songs and as a Guru for many

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particularly Śākta (see [McDaniel 1989](#), [2004](#)). I have found some nineteenth century songs of the Baul repertoire referring to the Tantric doctrine ("*tantra mat*") in eulogistic terms. On the other hand, it is important to clarify that Bāul and Fakir practitioners at present do not call themselves Tantric, although they may share ritual spaces and performative occasions with self-defined Tantrics, and they do have in some occasions self-defined Tantrics as their preceptors. Because of the history and politics of cultural representation of the term in colonial Bengal, *tāntrik* is now in vernacular understandings synonymous with suspiciously sexy, dangerous and occult (see [Urban 2003](#)). Hence it is undesirable, for most of my informants, to become associated with the connotations borne by this loaded term.

[6]　This process is remarkable in the writings of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvati and their associates. On this matter, see also ([Fuller 2003](#); [Sardella 2013](#); [Bhatia 2017](#)).

[7]　This attitude culminated in 1926 with the promulgation of the "Mandate for the destruction of Bauls" (*bāul dhaṃsa phatoẏā*) by Maulana Reyazuddin Ahmad. On the persecution and marginalization of Muslim Bāuls and Fakirs see ([Cakrabartī 1989](#), [1992](#); [Jhā 2001](#); [Caudhurī 2014](#)).

Bāuls (Tamonāś 1985; Bhabā 1988; Gopikā 1995). His compositions, and those I recorded from Bāul performers, will be used to exemplify strategies of concealment, the "code language" used by Bāuls, and the manifold purposes of secrecy among contemporary heterodox lineages in Bengal.

2. Revisiting "the Double Bind of Secrecy": Methodological Interventions in the Study of Esoteric Traditions

There is an obvious methodological paradox that the researcher has to face when dealing with esoteric traditions. In order to explore a secret knowledge, transmitted among insiders and restricted to the initiate, one's understanding as a mere researcher is very limited. But if we get to know a share of the esoteric knowledge, how far are we allowed to reveal it and publicly discuss it, without betraying or disrespecting our informants? In sum, the researcher is faced on the one hand with an epistemological problem: how can I know, if it is secret? How can I make sure that I am not the victim of strategies of concealing and deception, operated by the informants/adepts?

On the other hand, the researcher has to solve an ethical problem: even if I know—suppose, if I take initiation and thus subscribe to a greater accessibility of the esoteric knowledge, how can I share it, or even publish it? Urban (1998, p. 209) called this ancient torment of the esoterologist the "double bind of secrecy", that is, in his words, "the question of how one can ever know with certainty the true substance of what is hidden, and then, supposing one can, the question of whether one should reveal it publicly".

The problematic methodological blind alley of secrecy does not only involve researchers in the field of Bengali contemporary lineages, but also scholars dealing with Tantric studies, esotericism, as well as cultural anthropologists who investigate initiatory rites and use participatory methods. The scholars who faced the "double bind of secrecy" have tried to solve this ethical/epistemological problem with a variety of strategies. One way of dealing with the problem is a purely textual approach, which extracts and insulates the text, detaching it from any practice of a living lineage. In this way, the researcher is saved from the ethical concern of preserving or revealing what the adepts say. In the field of Indian esoteric religions, this has been the most utilised approach, sanctioned by a long tradition of excellent literary scholars (André Padoux, Harunaga Isaacson, Raffaele Torella among many others).

The disadvantages implied in this approach are numerous, especially when textual analysis contradicts the vision expressed by the texts themselves. Tantric literature often emphasizes the priority of the Guru's oral interpretation of the texts and encourages one's direct and intuitive knowledge based on personal experience in the realm of *sādhanā*. Several sources stress the necessary complementarity of text and oral transmission.[8] Harshly critical toward this scholarly trend, Brooks (1990, p. xvii), himself a follower of a Śākta lineage, observed how this text-oriented approach has been inadequate and brought inaccuracy in the field of Tantric studies:

> Tantric esotericism *requires* the translator to take seriously the insights of living adepts [. . .]. The translator will require more than philological ability and a vivid imagination: one must gain access to traditional interpreters and develop a critical appreciation of their input.

Similarly Miranda Shaw, who has combined the study of textual material with oral exegeses and personal engagement in the tradition that she has researched, maintains that:

> Tantric written sources are not self-explanatory, and oral commentarial traditions are regarded as more authoritative than the printed word of ancient manuscripts. Therefore, it

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8   For example, a famous passage of the *Kaulāvalīnirṇaya* (1.20 f. in Avalon 1928) says "The fool who, overpowered by greed, acts after having looked up [the matter] in a written book without having obtained it from a Guru's mouth, he also will be certainly destroyed". Similarly, we read in the *Rasaratnākara*: "Neither sequence (oral teachings) without written sources nor written sources without sequence (are acceptable). Knowing the written sources to be conjoined with sequence (oral teachings), the person that then practices partakes of the *siddhi*s" (Rasaratnākara of Nityanātha 3.11b–12a in White 1996, p. xxii).

is necessary to obtain access to an oral commentarial tradition that is secreted in the minds and hearts of living masters (both male and female) of the tradition. Even after doing so, one must respect the fact that those who speak of esoteric practices often do so with the understanding that they will never be quoted by name and that on some points they will not be quoted at all. (Shaw 1994, p. 16)

The problem of the interpretation of *sandhyā bhāṣā*[9]—the enigmatic "twilight language" that characterises Tantric literature—has troubled scholars of South Asian religions for decades and remains a debated topic in academic publications.[10] Broido (1993, pp. 72–73) remarks on 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". More recently, Wedemeyer (2012, pp. 55–60) proposed to look at contemporary practices to understand how to interpret the notoriously transgressive rituals of Tantric Buddhist texts. 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. Wedemeyer himself relies upon the accounts of Horace Hayman Wilson, a Sanskrit scholar in nineteenth 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 (Wedemeyer 2012, p. 185). This questionable reference not only tells us that the debate on the decolonization of culture and knowledge has probably passed unnoticed in contemporary Tantric studies, urging us to take into serious consideration 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. Or, even more alarmingly, it informs us that scholars engaged in the history of Tantric traditions are not interested in vernacular and contemporary Tantric practices. "The only contemporary ethnography of Indian Tantric communities that I am aware of" says Christian Wedemeyer (2012, p. 264), is Bholanath Bhattacharya, a scholar who, back in 1977, described his encounter with Bengali Tantric practice as comprising "acrobatic sex and prostitution" (ibid.). Quite by contrast, a few ethnographies of Tantric traditions indeed appeared after 1977 and most of them portray their ethnographic objects in more respectful and responsible terms.[11] However, what I have presented as the purely textual approach is still the dominant voice, represented by established scholars in the West, and transmitted to their students. For instance, the detailed chapter on Tantrism in the *Continuum Companion to Hindu Studies* by Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson swiftly dismisses the matter by stating that "present-day practice falls outside the scope of this survey" (Goodall and Isaacson 2011, p. 132).

A second approach is what could be termed "espionage": the researcher conducts participatory field-work, is accepted by the insiders and partakes of the secret knowledge, and then, for the sake of the advancement of scholarly knowledge, he/she shares everything publicly with no concern for the consequences that this action will have on the local community of practitioners/informants. The case of Elsie Parsons may represent a famous example, drawn from the history of anthropology: Boas's friend, traveller and researcher, she worked extensively with the Pueblos tribe (Zumwalt 1992, pp. 241–48). When the results of her ethnographic work had been published, one copy found its way to the

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9   *Sandhyā* (Sanskr. *saṃ+dhyā*, alternatively spelled as *sandhā*, interpreted by Eliade (1970, p. 250) as a shortened form of *sandhāya*) *bhāṣā*—usually translated either as "twilight language", or as "intentional language"—is typically referred to as the enigmatic, secret language that characterises Tantric literature. It has been discussed by a number of authors, for example, (Bharati 1961; Wayman 1968; Kvaerne [1977] 2010; Bucknell and Stuart-Fox 1986).

10   See Brook's introduction (1990). More recent perspectives on metaphors in Tantric esoteric literature appeared in Timalsina (2007).

11   See for example (McDaniel 1989, 2004; Hanssen 2002, 2006). Other than anthropologists, some indologists have also relied upon contemporary masters and practitioners in order to elucidate and clarify parts of their textual sources. For example Hélène Brunner-Lachaux's critical edition and translation of *Somaśambhupaddhati*, an eleventh century Śaiva text, is equipped with photos of a contemporary practitioner whose "patient explanations have clarified several obscure terms" (Brunner-Lachaux 1963, p. xlvi, my translation).

Pueblos and the author's putative informants were killed. In the 60s, the Pueblos came to be known for their destructive raids in South Western libraries and bookshops, where they sought to burn every copy of her book. The need for full and authentic ethnography in the interest of "science" ultimately outweighed Parsons' sincere regrets at the harm it caused among those she studied (Bendix 1997, pp. 140–41).

In the field of the studies on Bāuls and Fakirs, similar ethical concerns arise while reading Anwarul Karim, one of the best-known folklorists of Bangladesh. In the conclusion of his article on Bāuls' practices of contraception he innocently stated that he promised his informants to keep the secret, but that in the end "he could not help it" (Karim 1979, p. 30, my italics).

> I observed these over years but did not divulge these secrets because of sentimental attachment with them. I talked to many of my foreigner friends who visited me here, they were surprised when they came to know some of my findings. *I promised bound by my Baul friends not to divulge these secrets but I could not help it* because I think their practice [...] if studied scientifically, it would help solve the population problem to a great extent.

Many would question the deontological plausibility of such an approach, for it reveals what was intentionally hidden, it transgresses the ethics of a researcher, and it aims at exploiting an indigenous system of knowledge from a dominant position, which is a form of cultural imperialism. Riffard reminds us that studies of this sort are necessarily bad in two senses: scientifically, because they reveal details of a whole that they cannot grasp, and deontologically, for they merely aim at arising scandal (Riffard 1996, p. 383).

A third attitude that some scholars chose to adopt is that of resignation and surrender: the exclusion of the subject as a research interest, admitting the impossibility of dealing with secrecy in the study of esoteric literature. Within the field of Tantric Buddhism, Conze's statement (Conze 1967, pp. 271–73) likely represents this position:

> These doctrines are essentially secret (*guhya*). Esoteric knowledge can under no circumstances be transmitted to an indiscriminate multitude. In this field certainly those who know do not say and those who say do not know. There are only two alternatives. Either the author has not been initiated [...] then what he says is not first-hand knowledge. Or he has been initiated. Then if he were to divulge the secrets [...] he has broken the trust placed in him and is morally so depraved that he is not worth listening to.

In the context of Bengali esoteric literature, a similar feeling of impotence and resignation in front of a methodological blind alley arose from the words of Tony Stewart. Leaving little hope for the scientific credibility of any study of esoteric words, Stewart maintains (Stewart 1990, p. 32, my italics) that we are facing "a lose-lose proposition":

> The knowledge that is produced concerning the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā tradition is questionable [...] Anything that is produced will be highly questioned and accepted only with a cynical distrust [...] We, as students of esoteric traditions, are faced with *a "lose-lose" proposition*: if you are not a believer, your speculation is and can only be just that; if you are a believer your statements cannot be trusted.

Notwithstanding the bitter disillusion of Conze and Stewart, both authors contributed with their valuable work to our understanding of different Tantric traditions in the Indian subcontinent. In fact, between the polarised opposites of "going native", on one side, and sticking to the text-based study of undecodable literature on the other, we can find some good examples of 'middle ways' of coping with the problem of secrecy. For instance, among those who investigated the esoteric lineages of Bengal, Śakti Nāth Jhā has focused on the Fakirs in the district of Murshidabad, and Hugh Urban has studied the literature of the Kartābhajā sect.

In the first chapter of *Bastubādī Bāul*, Jhā (1999, pp. 15–18) declares that he has been doing field-work for over ten years among Bāuls and Fakirs, and that he was accepted as one of them (to the extent that he has been elected as the president of the Bāul Fakir Saṅgha, an association of performers and practitioners that takes legal action and sensitises the public against the fundamentalists' attacks on Bauls). His sympathetic participation reminds us of some methodological suggestions proposed in the field of Western esotericism, such as Hanegraaff's "empirical approach" which is based on the balance between "emic material and etic interpretation" (Hanegraaff 1995, p. 108), and Versluis's "sympathetic empiricism".[12] Explaining the method of his ethnographic field-work, Jhā writes (ibid.) that he built a relationship of mutual trust and friendship with his informants, and he revealed as much as necessary for the purpose of his book, maintaining the anonymity of his interlocutors when explicitly required.

Nevertheless, during my field-work I encountered more than a few Bāuls that are discontent, if not seriously upset, with Jhā's writings. Jhā writes in Bengali language, and his books are easily accessible in West Bengal. It is not an exaggerated preoccupation to think that some copies could reach the hands of zealous members of conservative religious groups. There have been cases of attacks from fundamentalist gangs who burnt down Fakirs' *āśram*s, organized raids, cut off the Bāuls' hair buns and beards, and forcefully fed them beef. Far from being imagined fears, these are unfortunately real life stories.[13]

Jhā (1999, p. 18) felt the urge to justify, in the first pages of his book, the fact that he is not a practitioner of Bāul *sādhanā* (at least not publicly). He maintains that a participative approach does not work in the study of Bāuls for the following reasons. Firstly, if you are a disciple of one Guru you cannot ask for explanations of doctrines and practices to any other Guru. Secondly, taking initiation (*dikṣā*) does not necessarily mean to have access to *gopantattva*, the secret doctrine, which is only shared with worthy, selected disciples. Furthermore, being initiated and immersed in *sādhanā*, one cannot be a researcher. Therefore Jhā categorically excludes the possibility of being at the same time committed to academic work and personal *sādhanā*. Contrasting this view, the precious work of authors that combined personal experience with academic activities, for example Douglas Brooks, James Mallinson, Andrea Loseries, Rudrani Fakir, Mark Dyczkowski, Paul Müller-Ortega and Agehananda Bharati, may well prove Jhā's statement questionable.

Acknowledging the fallacy of discussing esoteric traditions without knowing the secret teachings, Urban (1998, p. 210) proposed a convincing solution: to turn our focus on "the form of secrecy" instead of on its content. In this view, new questions arise on the strategies that the practitioners develop to conceal, discuss or exchange esoteric knowledge. How is secrecy constructed? What is the language of secrecy? Under what circumstances is it exchanged? How does possession of that secret information affect the status of "the one who knows"? The answers to these questions do not aim to betray a secret knowledge by making it public, but rather they discuss the mechanisms and the reasons behind the process of veiling, occulting and hiding religious knowledge.

Urban's perspective contributed to the socio-political contextualization of esoteric lineages and emphasized, among the functions of secrecy, the creation of an alternative social structure and

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[12] Versluis's empiricism suggests that "esotericism, given all its varied forms and its inherently multidimensional nature, cannot be conveyed without going beyond purely historical information: at minimum, the study of esotericism, and in particular mysticism, requires some degree of imaginative participation in what one is studying" (Versluis 2003, p. 27). The suggested "imaginative participation" refers to the necessity of transcending the strictly literal meaning of esoteric texts in order to hypothesise (in case there are neither evidence nor living informants for the study of oral exegesis) the context, the para-linguistic and the implied meanings that a text communicates to an initiate reader/hearer.

[13] See "Minstrels in distress", *India Today*, 15/04/1994 (http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/religious-persecution-of-baul-singers-of-bengal-point-to-disturbing-social-trend/1/274088.html last access 20/10/2017). In 2014, during a gathering of Bauls and Fakirs disrupted by home-made bombs, a Baul singer has been killed and chopped into pieces in the district of Jessore, Bangladesh. See "Baul hacked to death in Jessore", *BDNews24*, 02/02/2014 (http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2014/02/25/baul-hacked-to-death-in-jessore last access 20/10/2017). See also "Baul singers including couple attacked in Chaudanga", *BDnews24*, 17/07/2016 (https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/07/17/baul-singers-including-couple-attacked-in-chuadanga last access 20/10/2017).

a hierarchy based on the rank of the holders of secrecy, in opposition to a discriminatory and marginalising hegemony. A similar stand is taken by Riffard (1996, p. 67) as he states that

> The solution is to be found in the acceptance of silence and void, but also in their interrogation. Silence thus becomes a revelation. It takes a shape, it emerges in a certain moment of time [. . .] it is constructed and premeditated. The door is, of course, closed: but which door, with which carved panels, with which symbolic key-hole? The absence of a sign becomes itself a sign.

Is it possible to analyse the forms and functions of secrecy without knowing the content of the secrets? Would this make us more prompt to misunderstandings and misrepresentations? Is this what has largely happened in Anglo-American scholarship on Indic esoteric traditions? Since secret movements and secret societies of adepts in Western history are generally associated with subversive political activity, violence and unrest (Webster 2000), there is a risk of superimposing culturally specific categories of secrecy and its negative connotations, disregarding the local landscape and presuming that whatever is kept secret has to do with transgressive practices, revolutionary thoughts, taboos, and scandal.

Looking at the nature of what is concealed, I noticed during my field-work that secrets are not ranked for their anti-social or subversive character: the most secret teachings may be actually extremely simple, and socially acceptable (the same has been noticed by Welbon (1987, pp. 61–62) in his analysis of secrecy in the context of Indian religions). They are secret because they are considered to be very precious; simultaneously, their value increases because they are secret. Rather than matching a culturally specific, collective imagery of secret societies, populated by masonry, Ku Klux Klan, and the like, the Indian category of secrecy in religions is, in this sense, better represented by the metaphor of the onion in the Upaniṣads.[14] The most precious truth is hidden underneath layers and layers, not because it is transgressive, but because it is highly cherished and valued. That does not necessarily mean that, in the Bāul context, the core teachings of *gopantattva* are deprived of practices absolutely despicable, if not obscene, in the eyes of conservative urban elites and orthodox religious exponents (e.g., practices of control, manipulation and intake of bodily fluids, particularly those referred to as the "four moons": urine, faeces, semen and menstrual blood; Jhā 1995). We should nevertheless keep in mind that the equivalence "secret = scandalous" is not always correct and it does not represent an exhaustive solution to the debate on the need for secrecy in esoteric lineages.

In order to find a way out of the intricate epistemological-ethical limitations concerning the study of secrecy, I propose to use a 'middle way of the middle way': keeping the focus on the forms and strategies of secrecy, as suggested by Urban's "middle way", I argue that it is necessary to integrate the awareness of the content of the secret, obtained through empirical research and a "hyper-participating" ethnographic field-work.[15] In the utmost respect for my interlocutors' protocols of knowledge accessibility, and responsibly writing only what is considered fit to be shared, I particularly concentrate on the modalities through which secrecy finds its expression, and I inquire into the language and the functions of secrecy. This discussion will also shed some light on the problematic aspects that scholars on *sandhyā bhāṣā* have encountered.

Sandhyā bhāṣā has been considered as the metaphorical, polysemic and ambiguous twilight-language that accompanied Bengali songs of *sādhanā* from their origins[16] up to the repertoire

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[14] I refer to the *kośa* theory. See *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II, 1–6 (Sharvananda 1921).

[15] I borrow the expression from the field-work experience of Rudrani Fakir, a researcher as well as member of a lineage of Fakirs of Bangladesh. Rudrani Fakir "the researcher" and Rudrani Fakir "the initiate" have necessarily a different relationship with the esoteric secret. The author had to find a compromise between the two. In her book, especially dedicated to the concept of womanhood and femininity in the Fakirs' system of beliefs, she clarified her limits: "The path being secret, I do not convey 'everything', but I do betray the secrecy of certain aspects that shed light on the F/feminine. Furthermore, 'everything' is meaningful only for a practitioner, and a description of practices out of proper context would merely seem shocking for a 'spiritual' mind, and uninteresting for 'objective' minds" (Fakir 2005, p. 19).

[16] It is a widespread opinion among scholars of Bengali literature that the earliest literary evidence of proto-Bengali language is to be found in the Buddhist esoteric songs composed by Siddhācāryas around 10th–12th century. These have been collected

of the contemporary lineages of Bāuls and Fakirs. Notwithstanding the continuity between premodern esoteric songs and contemporary Bāul lyrics, at least in terms of literary devices, tropes and vocabularies, which indeed allowed several scholars to speak of "*sandhā bhāṣā*" also in the context of contemporary esoteric lineages (see for instance Dasgupta 1962, pp. 413–44; Capwell 1974, p. 261; Jhā 1999, p. 467; Openshaw [2002] 2004, pp. 62–71), an important difference needs to be pointed out. Contemporary practitioners would not usually refer to the language of the Bāuls' repertoire as *sandhyā bhāṣā*. Following the "oral literary criticism" (Dundes 1966) of the diverse oral sources collected during my field-work, other terms are preferably used: for example, *ulṭa bhāṣā* (upside-down language), *iṅgite balā*, or *iśārāẏ balā* (to say by hints and signs), *āṛāler bhāṣā* (a veiled or screened language), *fakiri bhāṣā* (language of Fakirs) and also *māẏik bhāṣā* (the laguage of Māyā—see p. 14). Nevertheless, the striking similarity between pre-modern Tantric literature in Bengali and Bāul songs in the use of terminologies, images and symbols, where at times identical verses are found, allows this discussion to be of methodological significance for a wider range of genres and time periods, beyond what is strictly considered to be Bāul (a definition not deprived of controversy in itself—see Openshaw [2002] 2004, pp. 19–72).

3. *A Moon Appeared in the Body of the Moon*: the Language of Secrecy and Its Multifold Purposes

I am going to apply this approach offering as an example a Bāul song that largely employs the literary devices of the enigmatic code-language that I have previously discussed. I chose the composition *Cāṃder gāẏ cāṃd legeche* (*A moon appeared in the body of the moon*),[17] because it allows me to touch on different topics that I consider crucial for the understanding of the use of secrecy.

> A moon appeared in the body of the moon
>
> what shall we do, having thought of that?
>
> The mother's birth is from the daughter's womb,
>
> what do you call her?
>
> There was a six month old girl
>
> at nine she got pregnant, at eleven there were three offspring.
>
> Which one will the Fakir take? [. . .]
>
> And so, the one who thinks all these words make no sense,
>
> He's not going to be a Fakir![18]

The song is in the style of *heẏālī*, a riddle: a form widely employed in the medieval songs of the Sants, and especially loved by Kabir, whose verses portray befuddling paradoxes, such as cows drinking milk from calves and the rain falling from earth to sky (Hess 1983, p. 315). Before thinking at all about the esoteric meanings of the symbols, the first reactions of the reader/listener are confusion, hilarity and befuddlement, which Hess interprets as ways of "breaking habitual thought patterns" (ibid., 320).

Looking at these few verses, we can legitimately suppose that the use of an intricate language, richly embroidered with paradoxes, symbols, allegories, rhetorical questions, an esoteric numerology

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and studied, among others, by Bagchi (1938), Sen (1948) and in Mojumder's *The Caryāpadas: A treatise on the earliest Bengali songs* (Mojumder 1973).

[17] Particularly well-known is the rendition performed by Gostha Gopal Das in the album *Bengali Folk Songs* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTJhHb6LbGM last access 26/10/2017). The song is widely attributed to Lālan Fakir (?–1890), but other versions of the song bear in the colophon the name of the composer Mansur Fakir (e.g., Ferrari 2002, p. 82).

[18] *Cāṃder gāẏ cāṃd legeche āmra bhebe kar'bo ki?/Jhiẏer peṭe māẏer janma tāre tom'rā balbe ki?/Chaẏ māser ek kanyā chilo/naẏ māse tār garbha halo/egāro māse tin'ṭi santān/kon'ṭā kar'be phakiri? [. . .]/Ābār e kaẏe kathār artha naile, tār habe nā phakiri!* For the full text with more variants, see Ahmad's anthology *Lālan gīti samagra* (Lālan 2002, p. 523).

and elaborated figures of speech, aims at concealing the actual meaning from the ears of the outsiders. The song is about *sṛṣṭitattva*, the doctrine of procreation. It has several layers of meaning, and each layer may be interpreted differently according to the personal experience of a practitioner. As Trottier (2000, p. 110) reminds us, the terms of the Fakirs' songs "recall a specific interior experience and would have little sense or depth without this lived experience. [...] they are practically consubstantial with what they name. The enunciation of such terms awakens and instantly actualize the corresponding experience" (my translation).

Among the variegated range of existing interpretations, keeping in mind that more than one "correct" interpretation is accepted, I offer one of the explanations I was exposed to.[19] The moon that came in the body of a moon represents the menstrual blood that appeared in the body of a young woman: in the womb of a girl the potentiality of being a mother appeared. The numbers refer to the ovulation cycle: months are actually to be counted as days. There was a girl of six days. After nine days (9 + 6 = 15, in the middle of the cycle, at the peak of fertility) her womb is ready for pregnancy, coinciding with the phase of ovulation; after eleven days (15 + 11 = 26) she menstruates and produces three streams of menstrual flow, for a symbolic period of three days. On one of the three days, one of the three streams is considered to be particularly appropriate for a blissful intercourse and for the internalization of the procreative substance. The last lines of the song can be paraphrased as such: one who knows which day and which stream the verses are referring to, and one who knows the meaning of these words is a Fakir; the others cannot understand.

These few verses already provide some important information: the composer is teasing the non-initiate listener, advertising the secret knowledge of Fakirs and giving a privileged status to the holders of the secret ("*e kaẏe kathār artha naile, tār habe nā phakiri*"). Riddles and rhetorical questions are used as a "marketing strategy": catching the interest, puzzling the audience and thus "promoting" a secret symbolic capital. The strategy is well-known in the history of Indian esoteric movements and their claims to superiority by virtue of selectivity: as noticed by Davidson (2002, p. 245) in the context of the reception of the Siddhācāryas' verses, few themes fan the flames of desire like restricted access and an aura of incomparability.

In this section, I document numerous Bāul songs' verses that can eloquently show how secrecy is conceived, protected, or advertised. This leads me to argue that secrecy in the Bāul tradition performs an act of communication that addresses multiple dimensions, such as self-defence, ineffability, social empowerment, self-realization through paradox, and the creation of an alternative model of hierarchy.

3.1. Keep the Mango "Hidden in a Jar": Secrecy and Self-Protection

The first and most obvious reason for the use of a code language is to avoid persecution, to protect oneself from verbal and physical attacks by those who strongly condemn these lineages' ideas and practices. Thus a renowned proverb of the Kartābhajās, widely repeated among Bāuls as an almost identical saying,[20] states "*loke madhye lokācār, sadgurur madhye ekācār*": in public and in society, the practitioners should observe the prevalent social norms and customs, but in the company of their Guru and fellows, they should observe the only mode of worship that has been laid down by the transmission (Banerjee 1995, p. 44). Verses in which the composer is encouraging the concealment of one's *sādhanā* for self-defense are widespread. Some examples can be drawn from the oral repertoire of sayings, songs and oral teachings common among the disciples of Bhaba Pagla: e.g., "*Gopane karo

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[19] This was the exegesis that I gathered from a circle of musicians/practitioners in Birbhum district. A similar exegesis, also gathered from practitioners in the district of Birbhum, is given by Ferrari, where the three children are interpreted as the three flows that give origin to menstrual blood: "like a triplet childbirth in which the ova are transported by the three currents that constitute the menstrual flux" (Ferrari 2002, p. 127, my translation). Other oral interpretations of the song are reported in Capwell (1986, p. 185), Cakrabartī (1989, p. 38), and Bhattacharya (2002, p. 264).

[20] *Lok'mājhe lokācār, sadguru samāje ekācār*, also reported in Jhā (1995, p. 471). This expression can be translated as "Behave like a common person when in the middle of people; adopt the only one behaviour when in the middle of true *guru*s".

gopī sādhanā"—"In secrecy perform the *sādhanā* of the Gopī";[21] "*Cup karei thākā bhālo, bobār kono śatru nāi*"—"If you keep silent that's good, for dumb people have no enemies" (in Bhabā 1988, p. 155); "*Khabar haẏe gele, gabar haẏe yābo*"—"If I become spread news, I'll turn into cowdung"(a common saying of Bhaba Pagla).

In the cases mentioned above, secrecy is invoked respectively for protecting the practice referred to as *gopī sādhanā* from the harsh judgement of mainstream society; for protecting the practitioner against social opponents; and for preserving one's own integrity and well-being. The underlying implication at work is the fact that, if made public, the beliefs and practices of the Fakirs can be dangerous, for the outsiders as well as for the adepts' safety and freedom.

The use of reticence, mysterious or confusing statements and even, if we look at the broader spectrum of Indian esoteric movements, the use of nonsense languages and glossolalia fulfils a further task. This concerns the need for expressing the ineffability of the experiences derived from *sādhanā*. The kind of knowledge that the ecstatic practitioner reaches is not fit to be communicated into words. Language can express it with certain limitations. The practice does not aim at accumulating intellectual vapours: rather than being communicated, it is to be lived. Thus the theme of ineffability is a leitmotif of many esoteric schools: in the words of the Sufi poet Mīr Dard of Delhi (d. 1785), "... for Who knows God, his tongue becomes dumb" (Schimmel 1987, p. 93). References to the ineffable experience of the practitioner are extremely common in Bāul and Fakir lyrics. In the ending stanza of Bhaba Pagla's song "*Guru āmāẏ karo karuṇā*" ("Guru, give me your mercy"), we hear:

> "*Bhabār guru biśvajanā/sei kathāṭā keu jāne nā/ye jāne se kathā kaẏ nā/jaṛiẏe āche pā dukhānā*" ("Bhaba's *guru* is mankind, nobody understands this/the one who understands, he doesn't speak/he remains bound to the two feet").[22]

In the Kartābhajās' repository of esoteric songs we also encounter a comparable mistrust on the capacity of language to express the knowledge of the embodied divine principle, known as *maner mānuṣ*, "the man of the heart", which became an emblematic expression of Bāul songs: "Oh my mind, who knows the habits of the Man of the Heart? And if one could know them, *could he express their form? The mind can't know* that sweet beauty! As long as life stays in my body, *I fear to speak of it*" (Urban (2001, p. 19). My italics).

For Bengali heterodox movements mainly transmitted among subaltern groups and low castes,[23] the elitist character of secret knowledge links secrecy to social empowerment. Privileging the significance of initiation and the primacy of the Guru, according to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, allowed these heterodox communities to challenge the hierarchy of caste and to make an alternative discourse of dignity, where an autonomous social space could be created and asserted (Bandyopadhyay 1997, pp. 32–34). Gurus and initiated disciples—the holders of the secret—are entitled to enjoy an elevated social status, if compared to those who ignore the secrets' content. This constitutes a matter of pride for those who detain the secret knowledge, and works as a social coagulant, for it offers an alternative kind of distinction, it grounds its members' identity, and provides a shared "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 283–85). Thus secrecy is jealously protected by different means. In one of our informal interviews, a spiritual teacher (*murśid*) of the Fakirs' doctrine from Birbhum, put it like this:

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[21] A Gopī is a woman cowherd, one of the lovers of Kṛṣṇa. For orthodox Vaiṣṇavas, she is a symbol of extreme devotion, for the cowherds neglected their duty and social reputation, surrendering to a selfless and total dedication to Kṛṣṇa's love. For Sahajiẏā-type practitioners, the love of the Gopī is not merely ideal, but has to be realized within the vehicle of the body. The verse, attributed to Bhaba Pagla, has been recorded from Tarun Khyepa at Kamakhya Mandir, Guwahati, 26/06/2012.

[22] The full text has been published in Cakrabartī (1989, p. 125).

[23] According to Ray's statistics, 83% of the Bauls residing in Birbhum district are "ex-untouchable". The Trinamool government of West Bengal decided, in 2012, to include the "folk singers" as a special category of Other Backward Classes (OBC). The State government felt that, even if the performers' social groups were already categorised as Scheduled Castes and OBC, the disadvantaged members were not able to benefit from the policies of affirmative action, and thus needed a special categorisation to access welfare schemes (see Times of India, *Welfare covers for West Bengal folk artists*, 18/10/2012, URL http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Welfare-cover-for-West-Bengal-folk-artists/articleshow/16857586.cms last access 20/10/2017).

If you expose a mango, people would steal it, it would attract flies and insects, it would overripe and get rotten; but if you conceal it, make a pickle and keep it hidden in a closed jar... then it will last forever. If you reveal the things that I am going to tell you, your mind will get mad. . . . Speaking you get the ocean of poison; keeping silent you get the seed of immortality. (Muluk Gram, Birbhum, 7–8/07/2013)

The use of a cryptolect, a specialized terminology and terms of art (Wedemeyer 2012, p. 134) shared and understood only by *sādhaka*s emphasizes the elitist character of the esoteric knowledge. It constitutes a restricted way to the ultimate truth, accessible only to worthy devotees and experienced initiates, rather than a universal message. At the same time, the restricted access to the message gives the insiders a sense of distinction, identity and superiority (Doniger and Urban 2001, pp. 16–21). It represents a socio-political strategy of opposition, a "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1985) and a revolt against the traditional protocols of accessing, holding and sharing religious knowledge, restricted to *paṇḍit*s—the Brahmin experts in Vedic rituals and scriptures—and *maulavī*s, learned theologians and authorities of Islamic law, both target of satirical remarks in Bāul and Fakir songs. Contemporary practitioners belong mostly to low class families (from Hindu and Muslim milieus irrespectively), who do not share the status accorded to high caste Hindus, nor they partake of the social privileges of orthodox Islamic theologians. The creation of a secret symbolic capital shared among marginalised, low-caste practitioners lays the foundations for a different model of hierarchy, which places at the top rank the holders of the secret religious knowledge, and disregards blood ties and identities acquired by birth.

The implied sense of excellence and distinction accorded to those who hold the interpretive keys for understanding esoteric songs is evident in Bhaba Pagla's verses; for example, "*Bujhibe se jan, pather pathik/jibante ye jan marā*"—"Only some passengers on the path are able to understand me/those who are dead while alive" (full songtext in Bhabā 1988, p. 87). Many other occurrences can be found in the broader repertoire of Bāuls and Fakirs. For example, "*Sādhak bine kathā bujh'te pāre eman sādhya kār/kathā ye bujheche se majeche, giẏeche se beder pār*"—"Apart from the practitioner, who has the power of understanding these words?/The one who understood, he lost himself in bliss and went beyond the Vedas" (composed by Padmalocan, in Jhā 1999, p. 479). A song collected from Gaṅgādhar Dās says: "*Āmār kathā bujh'be rasik bhakta/paṇḍit jan'ṭā bojhe nā/cheler garbhe mātār janma/ke bujh'be e kathār marma*"—"My words will be understood by the connaisseur of love/the *paṇḍit* doesn't understand/The mother is born from the son's womb/who will get the essence of these words?" (in Capwell 1986, p. 197).

Not only the profane outsider would not understand the words of wisdom transmitted among initiates, but if she was to hear them, it would be extremely dangerous for her own life and well-being. By enhancing the sentiment of cohesion and the sense of belonging to a distinct group, the enigmatic language of the songs of *sādhanā* protects the outsiders from a content that may be lethal for those who are not prepared to receive higher truths. This mechanism, widespread in Tantric and Nāth literature, but also in Western esotericism,[24] has a twofold implication. Firstly, in the insider's perspective, the mechanism of veiling certain truths acts out of compassion, for the incomprehensible metaphors of *sandhyā bhāṣā* protect the non-initiate hearer from danger. In the second place, the proclaimed danger enhances the attractiveness of the secret knowledge by displaying and 'advertising' its potentially destructive power, as it clearly emerges from the verses of the *Kulārṇava Tantra* (2.6 in Avalon 1965, p. 144): "What I tell you must be kept secret. It must only be given to a devoted disciple. It will be death to any others".

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[24] Riffard (1996, p. 455) compares esoteric knowledge with water for "it drowns the one who is not able to swim and supports the one who swim".

3.2. The Secret Sādhanā and the Sādhanā of Secrets: Mnemonic, Didactic and Soteriological Functions

Discussing the use of the "twilight language" in the Tantras, Bharati suggests a number of additional functions that have to do with heterodoxy and orality. Some of these observations are helpful to understand the use of the upside-down language (*ulṭa bhāṣā*) in Bāul songs. In both cases, there is an intimate connection between their heterodoxy and orality: in the context of the Fakirs' transmission of knowledge, Fakir (2005, p. 168) states that heteropraxy "is the representational-real wisdom of an oral culture, as opposed to orthodox spiritualization that is inferential, disembodied, scripture-based". Considering that heterodox movements are generally unwilling to rely upon written transmission, preferring to entrust the veil of secrecy to the Gurus' words of mouth, it is useful to build on Bharati's hypothesis (1961, p. 264) that *sandhyā bhāṣā* has also a mnemonic function. Paradoxical expressions and weird combinations of images, according to Bharati, would be more easily remembered than plain ordinary language, especially when they are orally taught. This mnemonic device, and in general, the "love for paradox" (ibid., 266) would then have petrified in the course of time, explaining the formation of a religious community's specific lexicon and mode of discourse. In line with these premises, Hayes (2003, 2006) has adopted linguistic and cognitive theories on metaphor to explain Vaiṣṇava Sahajiẏā literature. According to such theories, metaphor is not merely a linguistic mode of expression; rather, it is one of the chief cognitive structures by which we are able to understand the world (Lakoff and Johnson 2008; Johnson 1987). Through metaphor, we make use of patterns that we obtain in our physical experiences, creating correspondences between body and outer reality, to organize our more abstract understanding. Language works together with bodily experience to create coherent metaphoric worlds or "mappings". Thus the language of Sahajiẏā literature,[25] which we find in very similar forms in contemporary Bāul and Fakir songs and oral teachings, discusses the body and its components through tropes such as rivers, ponds, suns and moons, winds and storms, offering to the learners not only an aesthetically enjoyable stylistic device but also, and more importantly, a didactic tool for recognising and understanding experience.[26]

The yogic jargon that thus emerged continues to be a cementifying agent for religious identity, consolidating the practitioners' sense of belonging. According to Trottier (2000, p. 75), the inaccessible, enigmatic songs of the Fakirs represent a social revenge in front of oppression and marginality, and an alternative source of dignity and identity for subaltern groups.

Scholars who undertook a critical analysis of Tantric literature, such as Mircea Eliade and Per Kvaerne, have underlined the importance of the soteriological function of *sandhyā bhāṣā*, and the ways in which its stylistic devices represent a part of *sādhanā* in themselves. As we have seen in the song of the moon, Bāul and Fakir lyrics employ extreme paradoxes and semantic shocks, and the result is a temporary suspension of the semantic function of ordinary language. Bringing together two semantic fields in an unexpected way, riddles, enigmas and paradoxes (e.g., the mother being born from the daughter's womb) annihilate dualistic conceptual thought. Similarly, the esoteric teachings profess a non-dualistic view of reality. In this sense, the language of secrecy reflects the content of secrecy. How could one teach non-ordinary knowledge in an ordinary language? If *sahaja* is a reality of no distinctions and non duality,[27] the form in which this reality is expressed unsurprisingly makes good

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[25] Collections of Sahajiẏā manuscripts have been edited, among others, by (Bose 1932; Dās 1972; Jhā 2013).

[26] On the use of metaphor as a didactic tool, creating anomaly in the mind of the listener and thus constituting a pattern for memorability, especially in oral cultures, see (Ortony 1993).

[27] As already mentioned, *sahaja* is a term used in various esoteric lineages, crossing the borders between Tantric Buddhism, Sant poets, Vaiṣṇavism and Bengali forms of Islam, to refer simultaneously to the guiding principle, the way and the aim of the quest for self-realization. A state of ultimate blissful unity, *sahaja* also means "simple" in modern Bengali, to indicate a path that revolts against the complexities of exterior ritualism. Its etymology (*saha+ja*, born 'together with') refers to a spontaneous and innate state, but also to the return to a state of non duality, where *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are one and the same. According to the graceful definition given by Turbiani (1994, p. 246), it is the state of transcendental equipoise where physical phenomena and the diachrony of events are done away with, and in which one realizes the unity of becoming and being.

use of paradoxes, metaphors and clashing semantic fields. Both Eliade (1958) and Jhā (1999, p. 475) explained *sandhyā bhāṣā* as an exercise similar to a technique of meditation or the use of a *mantra*: by reflecting on these irrational propositions, the initiate is led into the "paradoxical situation" (Eliade 1958, pp. 250–51), the state in which the ordinary conceptual structures and categories by which we carve up reality are suddenly shattered and transgressed. The state of *sahaja* being itself a paradoxical state in which *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are experienced simultaneously—and, hence, abolished—the songs of the Sahajiẏās reveal in their essential structure the nature of the ultimate state (Kvaerne [1977] 2010, p. 63).

Is the soteriological function of the shocking language of *sādhanā* discussed only by the scholars on Indian religions, or is it something acknowledged and discussed by practitioners as well? An answer to this question will necessarily rely more heavily on oral sources than on printed collections of Bāul and Fakir songs, where I could hardly find metalinguistic reflections. However, the ways in which Bāuls and Fakirs refer to their poetic language is already a token of the close connection between language, or better to say, non-ordinary language, and *sādhanā*. A Guru from East Bengal known by the name of "mad father", Khyepa Baba, himself a prolific composer and an enthusiastic performer of Bāul songs, had explained in one of our meetings that the language of the songs is "*māẏik bhāṣā*", an illusionary language that tricks the listener, just like m*āẏā* tricks the observer in the twilight and causes a rope to be mistaken for a snake. But "the one who has done the experience, does not see the illusion"[28], just like the spectator who knows the illusionist's trick does not get deluded in the misperception of reality. Hence the practitioner who has physically experienced the reality expressed through the symbolic code-language of a song does not get deceived by its multiplicity of meanings.

Bāuls often refer to the language of their compositions as *ulṭa bhāṣā* ("upside-down language")[29] and, significantly, they call their practice *ulṭa sādhanā* (or *ujān*, against the current). Moreover, the enigmatic language of their songs is strikingly similar to the language of the Gurus' oral teachings that one can hear during gatherings (*sādhusaṅga*): the images, terms of art and figures of speech used in *hari kathā*[30] (the 'god-talk' which refers to doctrinal discussion among practitioners) reflect exactly the language of the songtexts, often employing, borrowing and reiterating similar, if not identical, images and even entire phrases. Connecting more explicitly the practice of songs with the bodily and spiritual training of *sādhanā*, a well-known refrain of Bhaba Pagla, widely sung in Bāuls' public performances, says "*gān-i sarvaśreṣṭa sādhanā*"—"songs are the most important practice of *sādhanā*".[31] The most intricate songs of the repertoire are often referred to as *dhāṃdhā racanā* ("composition of dazzlement", a puzzle, a labyrinth), reflecting that "love for paradox" which is, at the same time, a social shield, a share of symbolic capital, and a tool for liberation.

3.3. Can the Subaltern Not Speak? Silence, Secrecy and Strategies of Self-Promotion

The elitist character of the esoteric teaching, its dangerous content, and its extreme secrecy are alluring. Urban (1998) unveils the mechanism, employed by Tantric and Bengali Sahajiẏā-type orders, of "advertising the secret", for secrecy intensifies the "sexiness" of the doctrines. As already pointed out by a first-generation German sociologist like Georg Simmel, its basic premise gives one a sense of superiority and exception: "I know something that you don't know" (Simmel 1906, p. 464). It elevates the value of the things concealed and is a very effective means for diffusing the doctrine and attracting new adepts. According to the ethnographies of Jhā (1999, p. 17) and (Openshaw [2002] 2004, p. 208), the new followers of Bāul-Fakir lineages are often drawn into the ranks of discipleship because of

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28 Siur Gram, Birbhum, 09/02/2018.
29 This closely reminds of the upside-down language of Kabir (*ulaṭ bāṃsī*), which Hess (1983) has discussed. The Kartābhajā refer to the code-language of their esoteric teachings as the language of the mint (*ṭyāṅkśālī*): just as a mint transforms ordinary metals into legal currency, so too the mint language transforms ordinary words into highly valued commodities that can be exchanged in the "secret marketplace" which is the Kartābhajā sect (Urban 2001, p. 111).
30 For a detailed discussion on *hari kathā* as "talking about practice" see (Openshaw [2002] 2004, pp. 233–39).
31 For the text of the whole song see (Cakrabartī 1989, p. 119).

curiosity: they want to understand the songs, and acquire the key for decoding the secret language. Willing to solve the riddles diffused through the enchanting music of the oral performances, they take initiation. *Sandhyā bhāṣā* thus serves as a powerful bait for non explicit proselytism. This function has been frequently emphasised in India in its most malicious sense. For example, in Bose's opinion (Bose 1956, p. 137; my italic) "the Tantras indulge in sandhya-language with double meaning on many occasions. These were *catch-phrases to the common people* in the old days [...]". When Tantric practices were perceived as the worst and most corrupted form of a decadent Hinduism (for example, Monier-Williams 1878, pp. 122–26), the language of the Tantras was reported to be an instrument aimed at turning people away from orthodox observance and "to lure them into the Tantric web" (Bharati 1961, p. 264).

A more focused discussion needs to be addressed about the relation between secrecy and the distribution of power. Many among the most influential teachers and composers of esoteric songs of Bengal have clearly ordered their disciples to keep silent, or to speak through hints and allegories, as clearly shown in the following examples: "*Dekhe yāo sab duṭi cokhe/kaio nā kichu tomār mukhe/lukiẏe thāko cup'cāp*"—"Open your eyes and look/Don't speak through the mouth, hide yourself and keep silent" (Bhaba Pagla, full songtext in Bhabā 1988, p. 152); "*Calo yābo man sādhane/gopane gopane/jān'be nā re keu/tomār premer dheu*"—"Oh mind, let's do *sādhanā* in great secrecy: do not let anybody know your waves of love" (Bhaba Pagla, recorded from Asim Sarkar, Badkulla 06/12/2012); "*Iśārā kaibi kathā [. . .] yena keu nā jāne keu nā bujhe keu nā śune... kichu din mane mane gharer kone Gaur-prem rākh gopane*"—"You'll speak through hints [...] so that nobody will know, nobody will understand, nobody will listen... For some time, in your mind, in a corner of the room, keep the divine love secret" (Bāul song attributed to Nabani Das Khyepa Baul, made popular by the staged performances of Parvathy Das Baul).[32]

Addressing Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 1988), Bāul songs would provocatively reply that s/he actually does not: the subaltern keeps silent, for subaltern words are secret. The expression of their subalternity, in this case, is actively and deliberately concealed, their words are bound by the initiatory secret and orally revealed in the underground society of the practitioners, while on the other hand, they are hidden behind an embroidery of symbols and metaphors: the devices of opposition and protest, together with silence itself. Silence and extreme metaphorisation can be interpreted as the voice of the subaltern, whose narrative is actively and deliberately concealed. For subaltern communities of singers/practitioners, the mysterious and baffling words of their songs awaken curiosity and constitute a formidable marketing strategy to potentially attract new devotees.

4. Questioning Representations of Secrecy

Secrecy in Indian esoteric traditions has often been either criminalized or romanticized by those who represented it in both academic and popular literature. In this section I turn to the analysis of how secrecy has been depicted. I will attempt at questioning the crystallised conception of secrecy in esoteric cults that has been portrayed to the West during the colonial period, adopted and appropriated by Indian reformists, and reiterated by scholars. I will then juxtapose this monolithic construction of secrecy with a more nuanced and negotiable reality of balancing secrecy and disclosure in contemporary Bengali lineages.

Esoteric cults emerging from a Yogic and Tantric substratum have been exploited at length for their titillating effect: it is not rare to see tickling words as "secrecy", "hidden" and "secret" used in catchy titles for publications on Indian religions and philosophies. It is sufficient to have a look at the titles of the well-known books of the British theosophist, traveller and writer "Paul Brunton" (pen name of Raphael Hurst) to realize how successful it may be to rely upon the reification of secrecy:

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[32] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNh2kjmSzPw (last access 20/10/2017).

A search in secret India (Brunton 1934); *The secret path* (Brunton 1935); *Hidden teachings beyond yoga* (Brunton 1941), etc.

The myth of secrecy is still found to be very attractive on the academic market as well. Its use in the publishing industry[33] may reveal a reified image of secrecy that works as an efficient logo, hyper-simplifying more nuanced social and historical dynamics of concealment and disclosure. It is in part because of the exploitation of the sensuality connected to initiatory cults, together with the need to respond to the harsh missionary and colonial criticism against low-caste esoteric movements—that some scholars of Bengali Vaiṣṇavism had to first engage in lengthy explanatory premises in order to convince their readership that Sahajiẏā practices were not merely despicable and obscene. In *The Post-Caitanya Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*, Bose (1930, p. 233) did so by rationalizing sexo-yogic practices, explaining their value through the terminology of physical science, where Kṛṣṇa represents molecules, while Rādhā is intermolecular energy that aggregates matter. He also compared the most controversial erotic components to some Greek equivalents, in order to make them more digestible to a judgemental reader. Even Edward Dimock (1966, p. 235) had to put some effort into justifying the practice of *nāẏikā sādhanā*—worship of the consort and ritualized sexual intercourse—that he described in *The Place of the Hidden Moon* as "crass" and "to many, offensive". The connotation of an alluring but scandalous secret knowledge is equally transpiring from the word choice of Bengali scholars, showing how local intellectual elites adopted and incorporated the exotic-erotic idea on Indian esotericism as scrutinised by colonial morality. The attributes "obscure" and "occult", chosen and popularised by Dasgupta in *Obscure Religious Cults* (1962), echoed in Bhowmik's (1978) *Occultism in Fringe Bengal*, and in Karim's *The Bāuls of Bangladesh: A Study of an Obscure Religious Cult* (Karim 1980), are but a few examples of the fascination for esoteric sects and their supposedly tenebrous and tortuous alleys (the title *Gabhīr nirjan pathe*, "Along deep lonely alleys"—Cakrabartī's book on Bengali esoteric songs (1989)—fits quite appropriately in this context).

Oriental, exotic and esoteric were constructed on a similar basis: both suffered from the superimposition of mystified characteristics over an imagined Other, as a result of unequal positions of power between the 'representer' and the 'represented'.[34] But if we extract secrecy from abstraction and contextualize it socially and historically, we may realize that the relation between 'secrecy' and 'publicity', or between 'secrecy' and 'revelation', is not always one of striking polarisation. In this section I argue that in living religious traditions secret knowledge is flexible and negotiable; it can be more or less concealed according to the eyes from which it has to be hidden, and its parametres change according to time and history. Once the myth of secrecy is challenged, new analytical questions arise and contribute to a more holistic understanding of secret knowledge: has it always been secret? Are there multiple stages of secrecy, rather than a monolithic secret capital that is either stored or publicly displayed?

My evidence suggests that complete secrecy is more of a legend than a historical reality. The device for which esotericism pretends it does not want to express what it nevertheless expresses is known as "preterition" or "pseudosimulation" (Riffard 1996, p. 462), and it is indeed widespread throughout the history of esoteric literature.[35] The relationship that esoteric religions foster with secrecy is a very ambiguous one. On the one hand, for the very survival of the lineages, the secret cannot remain

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[33] Titles of recent articles and books on Tantric literature prolifically employ the semantic field of secrecy: see, for example, "The heart of the secret: a personal and scholarly encounter with Shakta Tantrism and Siddha Yoga" (Caldwell 2001), *Secret of the Vajra world* (Ray 2002), "Disclosing the empty secret: textuality and embodiment in the Cakrasamvara Tantra" (Gray 2005), "Myth and secrecy in Tang-period Tantric Buddhism" (Lehnert 2006), and the endless cases of non scientific and more facetious books that exploit the charm of secrecy for selling an esoteric-erotic cauldron, emblematically represented by titles such as *Sex, Magic, Tantra & Tarot: The Way of the Secret Lover* (Hyatt and Duquette 1996).

[34] On the exotic-esoteric representation as "positive Orientalism" see (Granholm 2013, pp. 22–23).

[35] In the context of esoteric Judaism, communicating the dilemma between hiding and disclosing the mystery that constitutes the core teaching of esoteric doctrines, Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai said: "May I be cursed if I reveal the Mysteries, and may I be cursed if I don't reveal them!" (Zohar, III, 127b). The passage in English translation is available on the website of the Center for Online Jewish Studies at http://cojs.org/zohar_3-127b_-idra_rabba/ (last access 20/10/2017).

completely inaccessible; on the other hand, for the reasons we already discussed, it cannot be easily uncovered and loudly manifested.

Nuances of Secrecy: A Negotiable Balance between Hiding and Disclosing

In the context of the heterodox lineages of Bengal, a deeper look into the dynamics of secrecy among Bāuls and Fakirs demonstrates that there is a wide range of nuances within which secrecy works. The first question that needs to be explored is: Secret for whom?

A closer look to the parametres to access secret teachings may reveal that secrecy is such only for particular classes and types of people. I am offering a few examples. Dimock (1966, pp. 244–45) reports that in a manuscript preserved in Calcutta University Library called *Nāyikā-sādhanā-ṭikā* (1860), a commentary on ritual sexual intercourse, the writer Rūpānuga Dāsa says:

> Whoever makes it known to other than our people is, I know for certain, lost, and will go to hell. [. . .] [These secrets] shall never be revealed to *paṇḍit*s who are followers of other paths, or to those who believe in the Vedas. [...] Vaiṣṇava *paṇḍit*s will understand its inner meaning [. . .] but those Vaiṣṇavas who worship with the Viṣṇu-mantra do not understand the inner meaning of it. [. . .] Having taken refuge in the sahaja, that man will know and gain the company of the eternal siddhas in Vraja.

This short passage clearly exemplifies the multi-layered nature of *gopantattva*, the secret doctrine. Here the secret is such only for *paṇḍit*s, although its content is declared to be accessible for Vaiṣṇava *paṇḍit*s, but not for all of them: it is meaningful and comprehensible for the *rasik* practitioners, the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiȳās, who are initiated with a Kṛṣṇa-*mantra* and follow the path of embodied divine love.[36]

In the sophisticated dialectics of silence and revelation among contemporary Bāul and Fakir lineages, a number of requirements have to be fulfilled for the secret to be disclosed. The suitability of an individual for receiving esoteric teachings depends on different factors. Many among my informants reported that the secrets of *sādhanā* should not be taught to *kāmī* and *lobhī*: people whose preponderant qualities are sexual desire and greed. Hence one of the gurus I have spent most time with, eloquently said that "texts on *yugal sādhanā* always speak with a very technical vocabulary, so that the content does not go to a pornographic mind; the same words to you evoke sublimity, and to him evoke vulgarity".[37] Other spiritual teachers do not share their practices with those disciples who are not physically 'whole' (*akhaṇḍa*), e.g., those missing a limb, an internal organ, or those who underwent a surgical operation, especially vasectomy or sterilization. Thus the shades of secrecy and revelation are negotiated in relation to a disciple's social background, a disciple's qualities, or even their physical characteristics.

The second question that deserves some attention is: Secret for which stage, on the laddered path of *sādhanā*? In the system of beliefs and practices transmitted among Bāuls and Fakirs, the quantity and quality of secret teachings that a disciple is exposed to depend on his/her progression in the journey of self-realization. What is secret for me may not be secret for someone at a higher level of spiritual (and bodily) accomplishment. *Sādhanā* is divided in ascending steps,[38] each of them having its own secrets, and for each of them, the same metaphorical image reveals different truths. My personal experience on

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[36] On contemporary Sahajiȳā practitioners living in the Nabadvip area of West Bengal see Sukanya Sarbadhikary (2015, pp. 109–50).

[37] Siur Gram, Birbhum, 10/02/2018.

[38] Most lineages refer to such 'steps' on the way towards self-realization as *sthūla, pravarta, sādhak, siddha*—from the most 'gross' and non purified state of discipleship until the most perfected. Each stage is further divided into four sub-stages (the *sthūla* of the *sthūla*, the *pravarta* of the *sthūla*, the *sādhaka* of the *sthūla* and so on). A fifth hidden one, surpassing and transcending the previous four stages, called variously *sahaja* or *śṛṅgār*, is often referred to. For a discussion of these stages in Vaiṣṇava Sahajiȳā literature and practices see Dimock (1966, pp. 222–25) and Sarbadhikary (2015, pp. 133–47); for the Bāuls' stages of practice see Openshaw [2002] (Openshaw [2002] 2004, pp. 206–7). Fakirs may refer to four stages with the Sufi terminology of *śarīyat, tarīkat, hākikat, mārephat*. These are called the four *manzil* or four stations; on the relevance of the concept of *mokām* (abode, but also step, station) in relation to the four *manzil*s in Islamic esoteric doctrines of Bengal see (Cashin 1995, pp. 116–22; Hatley 2007; Lee 2008).

the field absolutely confirms the play between different shades of silence and expression as described in the field-work experience of Jhā (1999, p. 17 my italics):

> The practitioners are not used to talk overtly about the doctrine. It requires a lot of time. When they hear the question they can understand how much the interlocutor knows. If he shows he does not know anything, then they would not reveal much. If the interlocutor is able to show that he partially knows, then they would answer. If the question is addressed to a guru in the presence of another guru, he would probably avoid answering, or he would answer using metaphors and concealed language. Begging for answers, doing *sādhusaṅga* [mixing with Gurus and their disciples, attending gatherings] for a long time, it is possible to gather some information about the doctrine.

While in the previous problematic question (Secret for whom?) the quantity of shared secrecy depended on the listener's profile, here the access to *gopantattva* depends on the way the knowledge-seekers respond to a 'test', their answer showing how much they already strove in order to know, and allowing them to add some information to what they have previously got to know. The chances to be introduced to a deeper layer of exclusive knowledge are much higher if the researcher, or the 'beginner' practitioner, is able to frame answers and questions using the special terminology of the code-language appropriately.[39] For example, a few years ago I started to visit the headquarters of the Kartābhajā community, which revolves around the *āśram* dedicated to Satī Mā, in Ghoshpara (Nadia district). The eldest preacher of the lineage received me in his room and started talking in general terms to describe his community. I would intervene in between his sentences to call out the notions I was familiar with, referring to the specific terms used by practitioners: for instance, when he mentioned the importance of recognising one's mother and father as first gurus, I referred to the teachings I received in the doctrinal realm named *mātāpitātattva*—which includes the local system of knowledge about embryology, ontogenesis and cosmo-physiology.[40] The preacher immediately shifted tone and register, moving the discussion from the devotional to the body-centred plane of *sādhanā*, as if the sectorial term had opened a door lock. He also referred to an annoying experience with foreign researchers, mentioning an American scholar who visited the Kartābhajā community some years before only to ask quite indelicately whether they were still performing "*parakīyā*" practices (alluding to sexual intercourse with a woman other than one's own wife), for the word often appears in the songs of the Kartābhajās (Urban 2001, pp. 97–104).[41] Unsure about his motivations, he did not talk about any of their practices with him, but only discussed their outer devotional facade. The researcher evidently did not pass the language test: secrecy remained intact, and his incompetency in going through the laddered topics of *sādhanā* with proficiency in the code-language resulted into the adoption of deceptive and concealing strategies.

The third question that needs to be addressed in order to deconstruct reified representations of secrecy is: Secret, but when? While the advocates of the myth of secrecy emphasised its perennial condition, the following examples are meant to show that different doctrines or practices can modify their secret status and become more or less hidden according to sociocultural contingencies in a determined time period. Tony Stewart, for instance, has suggested that Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā lyrics have never been as intricate and metaphorised as during the British rule, when Tantric movements were described as the most extreme examples of all idolatry and licentiousness that has corrupted Hinduism in modern times; hence, Sahajiyā practitioners felt the need of becoming "more invisible than ever" (1990, p. 28).

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[39]　A very similar experience has been reported by Sudhīr Cakrabartī, who has conducted field-work and studied esoteric texts of contemporary Bengali lineages for over two decades (see especially Cakrabartī 1989).

[40]　I have written specifically on this topic in the book.

[41]　In Bengali Vaiṣṇavism, *parakīyā* is the supreme kind of devotional love, represented by Rādhā, the beloved of Kṛṣṇa who was married to someone else, and surpassed social boundaries, fears and shame in order to unite with her lover.

The barrier for the protection of secrecy can therefore be reinforced due to unfavourable conditions for the esoteric practitioner, when safety and survival are at stake, or when criticism from dominant groups can impact negatively the practitioners' lives. On the other hand, other historical contingencies can make the barrier more porous and easier to cross. It happened several times during my field-work that a Guru admitted that what we were talking about was supposed to be secret (*gopan)*, but since nobody nowadays is interested in learning esoteric practices and it is hard to find suitable disciples, then they were inclined to share them during our conversations. Other times, the Gurus would justify the disclosure of secret doctrines because they said they understood my intentions as genuine. Some instead have stated that, because so many wrong interpretations and misconceived notions on Bāul *sādhanā* have been publicly disseminated, it is now a time to abandon secrecy and give a more open access to such doctrines, to avoid further misinterpretation. The same teacher who supported this view, however, distinguished among levels of exegesis during our *sādhusaṅga*s. For example he used code-language terms while talking to me so that, he argued, the rest of the listeners could not undertsand unfamiliar expressions related to practices that are not suitable to be publicly discussed.

The historical and situational variables of secrecy cannot be summarized with the "lose-lose" paradigm. I argue, on the contrary, that there is a lot to 'gain', in terms of new findings and unexplored sources. Encouraged by the "lose-lose" proposition, scholarship on Sahajiyā literature and contemporary Tantric lineages has long been confined to written sources, and therefore the repertoire of *emic* perspectives and oral interpretations of living lineages has yet to be critically examined and integrated. New avenues for fruitful academic research in this field can be opened by applying a revisited perspective on the study of esoteric traditions, and by engaging in field-work with contemporary esoteric lineages in order to work towards the decolonisation of knowledge, unmask long-lasting erotic–exotic–esoteric constructions, and take seriously into consideration the local discourse on secrecy.

5. Conclusions

In the chapter "Secrecy in Indian religions", Welbon (1987) cleverly suggests that the problem of secret knowledge is based upon a different consideration of knowledge itself. In other words, the right question that the scholar needs to pose is not 'what is the object of learning that has been made secret', but rather 'which knowledge is a secret/sacred knowledge'? A distinction needs to be made between a purely intellectual and notion-based knowledge that remains external to the mind and consciousness of the learner, and a transformative knowledge that gets incorporated and internalized. Exoteric knowledge and esoteric knowledge reflect the difference between "knowing something" and "being" something. What I experienced during field-work is that if one is ready to "become" what s/he wants to "know", the doors are generally open: if the attitude of the learner is to take esoteric teachings seriously and apply them in personal and embodied forms, these cannot be refused. Moreover, according to most of my informants, while practices are fit to be covered by secrecy and a secret jargon, theories are not. Demystifying the hyperbolic weight attributed to secrecy in Tantrism, Welbon (1987, p. 62) rightly stated: "[...] the restrictions protect secrets from those who would not take them seriously. Those who demonstrate their earnest desire to know these secrets by seeking out a teacher find them open". From the local tradition of Bāul verbal arts, resonating in similar manners in the premodern words of Siddhācāryas, of Sant poets and Bengali Sufi mystics, it is possible to grasp a larger picture related to South Asian conceptions on epistemology, where informational and experiential knowledge is difficult to conciliate. How can one communicate the experience of a knowing process when, in the perspective of the practitioner, true knowledge resides in the unity between knower–knowing–known?

In the first part of this article I reviewed the ways in which previous scholarship has dealt with deontological difficulties in the study of esoteric movements. I argued that a valuable methodological path needs to take into serious consideration the local discourse on secrecy, meaning and interpretation. Secondly, I have explored the literary forms and devices by which secrecy is achieved and I have

discussed some of its main purposes, including self-protection, advertisement, memorization and the reflection, through the upside-down language, of *sahaja* as the ultimate blissful reality of non dualism. In the last part, I attempted to deconstruct assumed and exploited notions of secrecy in Indian religions and I offered as a contrasting picture a more complex, interstitial and contradictory reality in which secrecy and disclosure are constantly negotiated.

The ethical and epistemological concerns that assault the researcher about the problematic balance between knowing and revealing are ultimately the same doubts experienced by the esoteric practitioner. From both textual and contextual sources, a certain dose of ambiguity, hesitation and contradictory attitudes can be observed: composers and teachers oscillate between loquacity and reticence, between sharing and silencing. For insiders too, the problem of how to 'outwardly' teach the results of an 'inward' and embodied experience brings to a controversial clash of knowledg*es.*

In this sense, the researcher and the practitioner, the "esoterist" and the "esoterologist", partake of a similar concern, making a dialogue between practised religion and Religious Studies a significant and fruitful path. If their two realities were not able to communicate, we would have a situation of double mutism: the esoterist keeps silent in order to protect and respect the initiatory secret, while the esoterologist keeps silent because he does not possess the keys to interpret codes and contents of secret information.

A more open interaction between researchers and practitioners, and a dialectic integration of textual studies and empirical research, could enrich our understanding of Tantric traditions, and shed some light on otherwise "obscure" (Dasgupta 1962) contemporary lineages and their literature. It is a promising future concern for further research to integrate local oral interpretations on the use of a secret code-language, as envisaged by the holders of the transmitted religious knowledge: the "human dictionaries" (Jhā 1999, p. 467) of *sandhyā bhāṣā*, whose agency provides the balance between retaining and sharing, experiencing and teaching, protecting and disclosing, in the liminal zone of the twilight-words of wisdom.

> The final point of scholarly knowledge is the shore of love,
>
> when he puts his foot forward, he becomes drowned.
>
> How could he give information,
>
> and how could the drowned one retain knowledge?

<div align="right">Ahmed Ghazzali[42]</div>

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[42] Translated by Schimmel (1987, p. 96).

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