

Article

# Reinscribing the Goddess into the Culturally Relative Minutiae of Tantric Texts and Practices: A Perennialist Response to *Tantric Visual Culture*

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Received: 27 July 2017; Accepted: 1 October 2017; Published: 3 October 2017

**Abstract:** A celebration and critical evaluation of Sthaneshwar Timalisina’s brilliant book, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach*. In this groundbreaking work, Timalisina utilizes the lens of cognitive studies to shed interpretive light on the Tantric visualization practices that he knows both as a scholar and lifetime practitioner. Timalisina argues that mastery of Tantric practice requires immersion in the culturally relative metonymic and holographic logic framed by the Tantric ritual texts. The conclusion that arises from his analysis is that Tantric “truths” are bound to the linguistic and cultural systems that frame them. In response, I herewith offer a perennialist critique and argument for a more nuanced consideration of the transcendent “truth” or “being” that is the stated aim of Tantric practice.

**Keywords:** metonymy; Tantra; cognitive science; cultural relativism; perennialism; hologram; sādhanā; visualization practice; J. Z. Smith; Mircea Eliade

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The mainstream hermeneutic approaches to reading Tantric culture have failed to address the nuanced domains of inscribing and deciphering meanings and images. The argument made here is the cognitive approach gives a new direction and finds meaning beyond the literal.

—Timalisina (2015, p. 48)

## The Wisdom of a Lineage Bearer

In his groundbreaking book, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach* (Timalisina 2015), professor of Indology at San Diego State University, Sthaneshwar Timalisina, utilizes the lens of cognitive studies to shed interpretive light on the Tantric visualization practices that he knows both as a scholar and lifetime practitioner. Timalisina argues that mastery of Tantric practice requires immersion in the culturally relative metonymic and holographic logic framed by the Tantric ritual texts. The conclusion that arises from his analysis is that Tantric “truths” are bound to the linguistic and cultural systems that frame them. In response, I herewith offer a perennialist critique and argument for a more nuanced consideration of the transcendent “truth” or “being” that is the stated aim of Tantric practice.

Sthaneshwar Timalisina is a scholar of uncommon gifts in the field of Tantric studies. Blessed to claim Sanskrit as his mother tongue, Timalisina spent the first 20 years of his life excelling in the traditional fields of Sanskrit learning, including grammar, poetry, aesthetics, Vedānta, Mīmāṃsākā, Yoga-Sāṅkhya and other classical *darśanas*, as well as multiple traditions of Tantric literature, including Trika Kaula and the Sarvāmnāya tradition of Nepal. When I first met Timalisina in 1997 in Nepal he could already claim being head of the Department of Tantric Studies at Valmiki Sanskrit Campus in Kathmandu, Nepal, despite being barely 30 years old. At that time he was widely regarded by his Nepalese colleagues as a foremost authority on Tantra-vidyā and was extensively published in

Sanskrit, Nepali and Hindi. He had also by that time already established himself as a foremost informant for such leading Indologists as Walter Slaje and David Gordon White. Unimpressed with his own significant accomplishments, Timalsina, as it were, was just warming up at this stage of his career. Despite having established himself as a leading Nepalese scholar prior to the age that most of us even complete our doctorates, Timalsina already had his sights on higher aspirations. Disinterested in merely being an informant for western scholars, Timalsina intended to establish himself as a leading Indologist, period. Toward this end, he recognized wisely that he would have to master the English language and procure a position within the Western academy.

Twenty years later Timalsina is professor of Indology at San Diego University and one of the most widely respected Indologists in the world. His path to this current status included the procurement of a second doctorate from Martin Luther University in Halle, Germany, as well as visiting appointments at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Washington University, St. Louis.

A lineage bearer of the Sarvāmnāya Tantric tradition, Timalsina has never been satisfied with merely understanding the rich world of his Tantric visual practice from the inner realm of his daily *sādhanās*. Rather, his ambition has been to become an insider to western modes of hermeneutical analysis; and, from that angle as a foreigner-gone-hermeneutical-native, turn the outsider's gaze back into his own esoteric tradition in order to describe the mechanics of his indigenous system via the language of an outsider actually capable of describing his tradition on its own terms. His *Tantric Visual Culture* achieves this long held agenda masterfully. By othering himself in relationship to his own native tradition Timalsina succeeds like few others in translating the rich, cultural-specific nuances of Tantric practice in terms that highlight the complex mechanisms by which Tāntrikas rely on a multiplicity of cognitive strategies. Through a careful manipulation of strategies of metonymy, metaphorical, mnemonics, holographic logic and the harnessing of aesthetic sentiments Tāntrika skillfully embed their texts with densely layered fields of meaning that they then decode via ritual practices that manipulate the human brain's profound and perhaps distinctively unique ability to construct culturally specific worlds of meaning.

### Tantra as Cognitive Engineering

Drawing from the writing of Merlin Donald, Timalsina situates the ritual art of Tantra as a type of "cognitive engineering" that both reflects and catalyzes cognitive processes. This deep structural analysis at once affirms the cultural specificities of Tantric practice while also enabling scholars to appreciate its rich transcultural implications. This careful interpretive dance between the meaning-eroding relativism of cultural constructivism on the one hand and the whitewashed reductionism of universalism characterizes Timalsina's outside-in hermeneutics. At the end of his chapter on metonymy Timalsina elucidates his method in a passage that is itself a metonym for his entire project:

Although the focus here has been on images, the metonymic structure does not apply to only the visualization practice. This is just one among many cognitive transactions that are culturally framed. Evident in this case study is that the system of meaning is governed by cultural parameters . . . What is universal in these culture-specific meanings is the cognitive mechanism that all cultures use in creating symbols and myths, and performing rituals and exchanging gifts. Returning to the study of images, while one image may metonymically suggest a single concept, it is generally the case that a single deity image embodies complex meanings. This process is aided by a vibrant exchange between the textual and visual cultures. Common to these different processes is the act of meaning-making, or a conscious effort to depict something that stands for something else. Rather than inventing new meaning, cognitive tools assist us in the hermeneutic effort to uncover how the texts and traditions have encoded and deciphered cultural symbolism. (Timalsina 2015, p. 49)

Put differently, that which is universal in the context of Tantric practice is the complex network of human cognitive functions that are themselves the genatrix of all religious practices. While the deep code may be universal, it is necessarily expressed within and through culturally specific symbols that are themselves the means by which one excavates the deepest, esoteric levels of meaning. Eliminate the cultural distinctiveness of Tantric symbols and their associated metaphors, Timalsina argues, and one loses the rich field of meaning that are necessary for the generation of the kinds of transformative experiences that are sought by Tāntrikas.

At the heart of Timalsina's theory is an appreciation of the creative capacities of the mind itself. Although Timalsina never references Jonathan Z. Smith in his masterful work, it is clear that his understanding of religion is consistent with Smith's argument that religion reflects above all the creative imaginings of man the fabricator (*homo faber*) (Smith 1982). Going beyond the insight that man's imaginings are the means by which he finds his meaning, Timalsina grounds his analysis in contemporary findings from the cognitive sciences to argue further that this creative act of meaning-making enables man to construct a technology for profoundly altering his experience of self, culture and reality. As I read Timalsina's book I imagine J. Z. Smith himself reading the work, perhaps in a coffee shop in Chicago, stroking his beard and smiling in appreciation that ideas akin to his own would be articulated with such clarity and universal relevance. In the reflections that might ensue perhaps Smith himself would be challenged to reconsider his own critiques of his own guru's writings on the Sacred Center.

Certainly, in Timalsina's analysis of the cognitive processes that are the deep structural gears that drive the engine of Tantric practice he is careful not to reduce the power and mystery of Tantra to cognitive processes alone. In his writing there is a playful dialectic between structuralist and trans-structuralist modes of analysis that allows a place at the hermeneutical table for cultural relativists and perennialists alike. Clearly, humans create their religions. But this fact by no means proves that some deeper, higher consciousness or being is not the goal or even cause of these cognitive processes. In other words, Timalsina is not reducing his own tradition to a set of culturally-relative cognitive processes. Rather, consistent with his own Tantric sources, he is pointing out that consciousness is by definition an infinitely creative projector of constructed meanings. Consciousness, Tantric scriptures proclaims, projects itself as the epistemological field of the signifier, signified and act of signification. This triadic hermeneutical process is the means by which the "I" is linked to the "It" in a liberating moment of re-cognition that is the desired end of Tantric practice. What Timalsina brilliantly illumines is that this moment of awakening is made possible not simply by a descent of grace, but rather by years, if not decades, of cultural encoding that make possible the complex processes of deep-level mimesis, metonymy, metaphor blending, meaning compression and mind-altering, heart-expanding aesthetic experiences.

### **Amidst All this Construction Does the Goddess Still Abide?**

As Timalsina himself points out, his analysis gives rise to a host of further questions.

These arguments also relate to proprioception, our perception of own embodiment. Our perception of our own body is not fixed, and the way we experience our embodied states can be determined by varied factors. What about our altered self-experience, or our habitual body that is based on previous experiences? These questions suggest the direction for further studies in human cognition primarily in the cultural context, and the need for engaging Tantric practices in a wider discourse on human cognition. (Timalsina 2015, pp. 773–74)

It is precisely here, in Timalsina's suggestion of further studies in human cognition that my own recent works picks up. Like Timalsina I see recent work in cognitive studies as containing hermeneutic clues for the re-translation of Tantra into western modes of analysis. Also like my teacher, I affirm the intrinsic value of the culturally specific construction fields of meaning that make the decoding of Tantric

ritual impossible to all but those who have mastered its multiple systems of ritually interwoven logic. Without systematic epistemological training in the metonymically, holographically and metaphorically embedded Tantric images and ritual structures embedded in Tantric texts the world of Tantra inevitably remains heavily veiled. Being myself nowhere near the level of advancement in practice achieved by Timalsina, I can only sit in appreciation at the depth of hermeneutics Timalsina embodies through his daily practice, which itself non-dualistically merges his daily meditations with his academic teaching, his scholarship and his everyday exchanges with his family, friends, students and even momentary acquaintances. Himself habituated by Tantra, Timalsina's body is encoded with the webs of meaning framed by his practice and necessarily therefore affirms the well-being of the linguistic artifice that is his Tantric worldview.

Let me now, respectfully, provide an Eliadean, perennialist deconstruction of Timalsina's own J. Z. Smithian culturally relativist defense of his Tantric tradition.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps I, too, can stand atop the proverbial shoulders of a giant and see anew or at least in a way that causes that giant to take another step or two before deciding his analysis is complete. Of course, it is not likely that what follows below causes Timalsina to think in a new way. What follows is my humble and grateful efforts to position my own work in relationship to Timalsina's. So doing, I wish, in part, to highlight the rich distinctions in our approaches and thereby to propose the synthesis of my outsider's perennialist antithesis to his insider's culturally relativist thesis. In this way, I intend to evoke Eliade's theocentric hermeneutics as a complement to his anthropocentric casting of Tantric practice as an exercising of human cognitive functions.

### Transcending Cultural Restrictions

While Tantric practice is undoubtedly culturally embedded, there are nonetheless patterns of practice that transcend cultural restrictions and these transcendent dimensions of the practice must also be taken into account if we are to more fully appreciate the complexity and value of the Tantric tradition. Herein, I do so not to argue with Timalsina but rather to further pursue his call for a "new form of epistemology" capable of making sense of the kinds of "cultural and contemplative experience that relies on perceiving reality as integrated with every single aspect of existence interpenetrating and interdependent" (Timalsina 2015, p. 48). Timalsina brilliantly details the interpretive mechanisms at play, bringing to light the exceptionally complex layers of meaning that may indeed, as Fauconnier and Turner argue, reflect and precipitate the evolution of cognitive growth. Viewed in this light, Tantra shines forth as it truly is—the result of millennia of indigenous philosophizing necessary for the creation of a truly effective and brilliant culturally relative architecture of "cognitive engineering". The political implications of his argument are enticing. Perceiving that the esoterically sealed field of metonymic, holographic and metaphorical meanings makes possible the kind of aesthetically charged synesthetic experiences Timalsina details, one would necessarily be impelled to protect the matrix of Tantric knowledge as a unique and irreducible instance of a culture achieving heights of exquisite cognitive self-reflection.

At the same time, any sincere practitioner reading Timalsina's theory who does not share his depth of immersion within his own tradition, who is not as emic as he is, may walk away from his work believing that his or her efforts to understand Tantra from the inside is nothing more than a waste of time. At the very least he or she is going to recognize, in the vast majority of cases, that he or she has no chance of reaching the inner heights that Timalsina has attained, given that his ascent of

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<sup>1</sup> A Romanian historian, philosopher, mystic, and fiction writer, Mircea Eliade was indeed a giant in the eyes of many. By the time of his death in 1986 he had established himself as a leading voice in the comparative study of religions and his many writings and students still shape the field today. Central to Eliade thought was the understanding that humans are called to know the divine source of reality, which he termed the Sacred. The Sacred, Eliade, argued, is an irresistible Center, drawing us toward it so that we may know life's deepest meaning. Some of his most significant works include *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Eliade 2009), *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Eliade 1971), *A History of Religious Ideas*, vols. 1–3 (Eliade 1985), *The Sacred and the Profane* (Eliade 1961) *Myth and Reality* (Eliade 1963).

Tantra's interior hermeneutical mountain commenced the moment he first used his baby tongue to uttered the words "Mā" and "Pā", thereby beginning a lifelong process of habituating Sanskrit and its vast fields of knowledge as the code by which he transformed his own body in a hologram of the Sanskritic universe.

A further brilliance of Timalsina's book is that he details the inseparability of hermeneutics and Tantric practice. The Tāntrika is a native hermeneut, creating, bridging embodying and interpreting worlds of meaning through rituals of mimesis, metonymy, metaphor, holographic compression and aesthetic delight. Colonializing the interpretive strategies of the Western academy Timalsina subsequently reinvaded the lands of his native hermeneutics to demonstrate to outsiders that Tantra cannot possible be understood without adopting Tantric hermeneutics as the decoding mechanism itself. In so doing Timalsina cleverly situates himself atop the field of power that is Tantric studies—and, arguably, rightly so.

However, as Timalsina himself suggests but seems to largely ignore, perhaps cultural relativism is not all that abides at the heart of the Tantric *maṇḍala*. Perhaps there is also something transcendent, perennial, and timeless. His argument, in fact, is grounded in the insight that the cognitive processes of metonymy, metaphor construction and holographic thinking are all time-bound linguistic systems. In other words, while his analysis champions the culturally relative dimensions of Tantric practice it is simultaneously true that his work assumes that the culturally relative registers of Tantric meaning-making depend on universal cognitive functions. The Center, as it were, of his affirmation of Tantra's uniqueness is the transcultural capacities of the human brain and neurological system, a system that Tantra is so profoundly capable of stimulating and perhaps even evolving.

### Can an Outsider Reach the Summit?

My own interpretive concerns are highly pragmatic (Lidke 2016). While I deeply enjoy engaging in the hermetic world of Tantric scholarship I also recognize that most of the more brilliant works of Tantric scholarship are only read by those of us in the inner circle of Tantric studies. Tantric studies, in other words, is its own esoteric *kula* and, while our relevance is undeniable to those of us on the inside, there is minimal impact of our work on the world at large. Reading Timalsina's work, I more acutely appreciate how fortunate we are to have him speaking to us from not just the inside out but also the outside in. At the same time I find myself wondering, do the implications of his work not suggest that anyone who is genuinely interested in Tantric practice ought to assume that his or her chances of reaching the summit, as Timalsina has, are all but doomed unless he or she commits oneself to the prerequisite decades of Sanskrit learning to which you yourself have committed?

I think one valid answer to this question is Yes.

I wonder, though, could the practice not be entirely stripped of its hermetically sealed cultural layers of embodied meaning and still not have a valuable impact on human cognitive and neurological processes? Is there an archetype to Tantric visualization practice that can be decodified, simplified and disseminated without simply being commercialized? If the metonymic, metaphorical and holographic constructions of embodied meaning are central to Tantric practice could a Tāntrika not teach Tantra using not the India's own culturally-relative meaning system, but instead through culturally relative metonyms, metaphors and holographic perceptions of other cultures?

Timalsina notes that ritual practices generate synesthetic states grounded in the ritual generation of aesthetic modes (Timalsina 2015, pp. 16, 25, 61; cf., Lidke 2011). What would it mean to apply the dynamic of Tantra to the artistic fields of other cultures? Is there not an "I" beyond the field of all cultural constructions? Is the technology of Tantra really as culturally bound as he claims? Is Tantra simply a culturally relative body of historically contingent knowledge? Or is it a timeless, transcultural subjective gaze? Or is it the dance between that gaze and what is gazed upon? Could one not write a manual for the universal application of Tantra to any given culture? Would it not be possible to take the structure of Tantric practice and use it as the means to ritually encode one's own epistemological orientations into a field of synesthized awareness in which one's own experience is characterized

by the embodied perception that one is, as Timalsina puts it, “integrated with every single aspect of existence interpenetrating and interdependent”? And is it not the case, that this experience itself is the aim of Tantra? Further, can one not conclude that this experience is necessarily transcendent in so much that it is made possible by a universal cognitive processes?

If the answers to the above questions are affirmative, then could not one argue that the culturally relative dimensions of Tantra are in fact unnecessary for the generation of the aesthetic states that are the goal of Tantric visualization practice? Certainly, Tantra-vidyā reflects a refined development of Indian thought, and the mastery and manipulation of which makes possible a kind of liberating, synesthetically charged aesthetic experience. However, perhaps a next step in Timalsina’s own scholarship on Tantra might include a stepping away from the coffee table with Smith and other cultural constructivists over to the table with Eliade and his perennialist friends for further reflections on the transcultural dimensions of the Tantric tradition. Abhinavagupta’s analysis of *sādhana*, after all, assumes a practice that is unbound and transcendent to cultural forms, the so-called *anupāya*. Some would argue that the *anupāya* is only achieved by means of progression through the prior stages of practices found in the *āṇavopāya* (Way of the Individual) *śāktopāya* (Way of Power) and *śambhavopāyas* (Way of Will). However, Abhinavagupta notes that in cases of extremely intense *śaktipāta*, an aspirant ascends immediately into higher planes of cognitive awareness (Lidke 2013). Is “descent of power” itself not at once a metonym, metaphor and holographic field of meaning? Is power not knowledge? Is knowledge not what the guru embodies, creates and disseminates? And is the guru not the bestower of the descent of knowledge-power? Does this not mean that the guru has the power to bestow knowledge? Is such bestowal not the height and sign of the guru’s mastery? Could it be that one form of *śaktipāta* might be to decode Tantra’s cultural relativism precisely to make it universal?

### The Value of a Neo-Eliadean Analysis

What is significant about Timalsina’s work is that he so carefully grounds his analysis in the minutiae of texts and practice. Whereas Eliade’s grandiose theories of religion have rightly been criticized as lacking empirical depth, Timalsina’s own work is indisputably centered in verifiable data. In challenging Timalsina to take a step or two in the direction of perennialist thought, I am not asking him to leave behind his commitment to the excavation of culturally grounded texts and practice. Rather, this is an invitation for him to be the kind of neo-Eliadean scholar that neo-Eliadeans like Bryan Rennie describes in his numerous writings on both the limitations and yet abiding relevance of Eliade’s work (Rennie (1996, 2001, 2006)). Indisputably, Smith’s critique of Eliade was sound.<sup>2</sup> However, as Rennie points out, there is still much hermeneutical room for consideration of the transcendent dimensions of religious practice. Cultural relativism reminds us, rightly, to pay attention to the details of practice on the ground. However, these very real details in and of themselves are not proof that specific texts, practices and traditions are not themselves conduits to a sacred reality that transcends such specifics. Given that Tantric texts themselves claim to produce a state of consciousness that is transcendent and timeless it would make sense that a master Tāntrika like Timalsina could articulate the kind of hermeneutics that synthesizes the critiques of cultural relativists with the theological wisdom of the perennialists.

In *Tantric Visual Culture* Timalsina illuminates and helps his readers navigate the depth, complexity and heights of the metonymic, metaphorical, holographic and culturally-relative meaning-mountain at the center of the Tantric *maṇḍala*. In his next work perhaps he can deconstruct this mountain, laying it bare to make its relevance culturally transcendent. Having viewed his traditions through the etic gaze of Smith and the cultural constructivists perhaps he can now look again through the eyes of Eliade

<sup>2</sup> In “The Wobbling Pivot” (Smith 1972), for instance, Smith systematically deconstructs Eliade’s perennialist assumptions, proving through a careful analysis of the data referenced in some of his works that Eliade may have been more committed to the affirmation of his alluring ideas than accurately reading the data itself.

and the perennialists whose views also tally well with the findings of the cognitive and neuroscientists. Having written a dense and brilliant work that should be mandatory reading for all scholars of Tantra, now he can write a book that instructs cognitive neuroscientists in the methods for creating research platforms for replicating *samāveśa* (deity possession) and other Tantric states of aesthetic absorption in the minds and hearts of any and all who desire such an experience, without requiring them to first spend thirty or so years climbing the culturally restricted edifice of Sanskrit learning. After all, the Goddess is both within and beyond the field of meaning, being at once She who is constructed (*ākalpitā*) and She who transcends construction (*parākalpitā*). *Tantric Visual Culture* details Her culturally relative constructions in the subcontinent (Lidke 2017). As a complement to your own magisterial work, now illumine us as to Her unconstructed dimensions.

**Acknowledgments:** The author expresses his gratitude to the Society for Tantric Studies for the opportunity to present the original draft of this essay before an international audience of Tantric scholars in beautiful Flagstaff, Arizona, November 2016.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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