CHAPTER 6

‘East’ and ‘West’ in the Kaleidoscope of Transculturality—The Discursive Production of the Kuṇḍalinī as a New Ontological Object Within and Beyond Orientalist Dichotomies

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This essay examines the transcultural production of the Kuṇḍalinī\(^1\) as a psychosomatic process within the Orientalist framework of early studies of culture, spiritually inclined psychology and experiential testimony.

Since the late 19th century, notions of ‘East’ and ‘West’ have shaped cultural processes in general and religious discourses in particular. The influence of South Asian literature on the development of psychophysical techniques, later to be popularized as ‘Yoga’ and ‘Tantra’, has been fostered by academic and religious elites from Europe and South Asia. For instance, European Indologists and scholars of religion sided with religious agents from South Asia in an effort to translate and make sense of a growing textual corpus deemed sacred.\(^2\) Among the latter, the canons of Yoga and Tantra appeared to be of particular interest to a circle of intellectuals who were simultaneously seeking occult teachings of foreign cultures and grounded in the philological skills necessary for the respective acquisition.\(^3\) The translations and interpretations of Sanskrit texts concerned with psychophysical techniques aiming at the liberation from the life cycle or the procurement of super-human abilities attracted a number of high-profile charismatics from other fields of study.

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\(^1\) For the sake of phonetic accuracy, I apply the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (I.A.S.T.). This does not apply to indexicalized names (e.g., Swami Vivekananda instead of Svāmī Vivekānanda). For the sake of demarcation, all Sanskrit nouns are interpreted as proper nouns and written in upper case (e.g., Yoga instead of yoga). The transliteration does not separate words that are merged according to Sanskrit grammar (e.g., Bhagavadgītā instead of Bhagavad Gītā). The varying notations from the numerous quotes are left unaltered.

\(^2\) Especially the pioneering project Sacred Books of the East compiled by the Indologist and founding figure of the Study of Religion Friedrich Max Müller (von Stuckrad 2006, 10).

\(^3\) I am aware of the pejorative notions surrounding the signifier ‘occult’, however, I reframe it here to its etymological meaning of ‘hidden’ and ‘concealed’.
One such seminal figure was Swiss psychologist and religious virtuoso Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Deeply steeped in the idea of intrinsic cultural differences between ‘East’ and ‘West’, Jung aspired to create a truly encompassing psychology by tapping into an archaic and collectively shared fund of unconscious images and narratives, which he referred to as *Archetypes* (Jung 1969). Jung identified one such archetype in the Kuṇḍalinī, an occult energy variously mentioned in Yoga and Tantra scriptures as a metaphysical entity playing a crucial role for the attainment of karmic liberation and esoteric powers. Decoding the highly symbolic language according to his psychotherapeutic interests, Jung helped to mold the once esoteric and ambiguous notion of the Kuṇḍalinī into an intelligible, scientifically accessible and universal entity connected to the development of the human subject into a spiritually liberated individual (Shamdasani 1996). Later in the 20th century, Jung’s articulation of the Kuṇḍalinī as a cosmic transformational force was integrated into the wider phenomenon of the *religio-therapeutic* discourse, where the distinction between metaphysics and healing, religion and science is deliberately blurred (Madsen 2014). Furthermore, Jung’s specific construction of the Kuṇḍalinī as a processual entity, which was itself influenced by earlier Orientalist scholarship, has been mirrored in later accounts, even among South Asian agents.

One particularly visible example for the emphasis on the experiential nature of the Kuṇḍalinī *awakening, experience or process* has been famously described by the Indian mystic Gopi Krishna (1903–1984), who framed his own Kuṇḍalinī awakening as an adventurous process of internal transformation oscillating between a psychophysical annihilation and a renaissance towards a new evolution of human consciousness. In the second half of the 20th century Krishna became a nodal point for the integration of the Kuṇḍalinī into alternative forms of clinical psychology, such as Transpersonal Therapy, which aimed at a holistic and spiritual understanding of the human subject (Krishna 1967; Moss 1999). Moreover, Krishna’s narrative was favorably received by Jungian scholars and therapists from Europe and America, thereby transgressing the Orientalist dichotomy.

In what follows, I will explore the Orientalist influence on the interpretation of Yoga and Tantra in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which is the basis for the later construction of the Kuṇḍalinī as a psychosomatic phenomenon. Secondly, I will demonstrate how C. G. Jung has borrowed the notion of the Kuṇḍalinī from Orientalist sources and transformed it into a universal category of his *Analytical Psychology*. Thirdly, I will introduce Gopi Krishna’s autobiographical account on the Kuṇḍalinī awakening and explicate its synthesizing function for late 19th century Orientalism with 20th century Psychotherapy by triangulating his narrative with Jungian interpretations of Krishna’s