WHY GURUS ARE HEAVY*

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In his renowned essay, "Religion as a cultural system,"1 Clifford Geertz speaks of symbols as being unique to humans in the sense that, in any given culture, they may serve at once as models of and models for both a meaningful understanding (a world view) of reality and a pattern of thought and behavior (an ethos), which mutually reinforce one another. Drawing on random existence, a culture recognizes, aesthetically, in given social, linguistic, natural, etc., objects, forms, processes and concepts, various congruencies with its own received understanding of itself; and through the manipulation and integration of the same it is able to evoke anew that same (symbolic) understanding. In this way a culture recognizes meaning in being—without which existence would be intolerable—through intersubjective extrinsic sources of information which serve as templates for cultural patterns which shape public behavior. Culture is thus process, in which a people exists as a "being-interpreted"2 through the totality of cultural signifiers (appropriated from the world) at its disposal, even as it interprets itself and its world. We are what we eat, but tastes change.

There are many ways of interpreting oneself through one's world, of recognizing a basic congruence between particular lifestyle and a specific (if implicit) metaphysics. Principal among these are a belief system and a system of ritual practice, which are inseparable as they are informed by, and exist in a relation of process with, a set of symbols common to both. In religious practice, as in performance, one interprets a role which is based upon and enriches the belief system which makes that interpretation meaningful. There would be no need for a ritual interpretation if there were nothing to interpret, but there would be nothing if there were no interpretation of it. "In plastic drama, men attain their faith as they portray it."3

A symbol system thus sanctions given patterns of conceptualization and behavior (an ethos) by recognizing and reenacting through
them a vision of the way things really are (a world view). In order for these two modalities to reinforce each other, to serve as templates for each other, it is necessary that their constituent parts adhere to the internal logic of the symbol system in which they are situated. A symbol system must in some way—according to the physical, social, cultural, linguistic, religious, etc. matrix in which it operates—be efficient; and as it must be efficient over time and through change, it must be resilient and adaptable.

One means to understanding the resilience of “successful” symbol systems may be found in the concept of “key symbols,” as developed by Sherry Ortner. Ortner derives a schema for the interplay of what she terms “summarizing symbols” and “elaborating symbols,” with the latter category being divided into “root metaphor” and “key scenario.” This understanding of the potentialities of symbol systems to associate “vertically”, “horizontally”, “qualitatively”, “quantitatively”, etc. through ritual orientation and belief orientation is useful to a comprehension of a system’s flexibility. Furthermore—and this is Ortner’s explicit intention in her article—such a schematic understanding of the dynamics of a symbol system is very useful to their study.

A restatement of Ortner’s categories may be effected by substituting for “summarizing symbol” the concept of hierarchical system, for “elaborating symbol” that of system of correspondences, for “root metaphor” belief system, and for “key scenario” ritual system. While I wish to retain the values Ortner assigns to these concepts, I wish to employ the alternative terminology in cases where such lends itself better to the systems I intend to investigate, as will be shown. At the same time, I wish to maintain Geertz’ insight on the mutual reinforcement of ethos and world view through a culture’s self-interpretation in its belief and ritual systems.

The immediate object of this study is to be Hindu alchemy (rasāyana), as it constitutes a belief system and a ritual system, both as it is located within a broader hierarchical system and as it stands in correspondence with other related hierarchical systems. As alchemy today is nearly the “dead science” in India that it is in the west, this will be, of necessity, a textual study. The text upon which I will rely most heavily here is the Rasānavaṁ (“The Ocean of Rasa”), a twelfth century text which is generally seen as being the