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The Category of Altered States of Consciousness in Medieval Śaiva Tantric Texts and Its Modern European Conceptualization

Main questions:

Altered states of consciousness is a vague category that opposes "normal state(s) of consciousness" (the everyday rational mode of its functioning) and "altered states", which include all that exceeds the "normal" mode. Ludwig defines these states as follows:

any mental state(s), induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for the individual during alert, waking consciousness.¹

Thus, we find in this category a set of very different phenomena: from spirit possession to the use of drugs and from paranormal capabilities to mental disorders.² From the position of the studies of human consciousness and psychology, altered states of consciousness is a universal category, which can be applied to any cultural system. The Indian *tantric* material, however, makes last statement uncertain.

The *tantric* traditions represent a particular world view, which can be qualified as "esoteric" and which provides a possibility of understanding differently the "exoteric" bodies of many of the different religious traditions of India, such as, for example, Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. This esoteric world vision indeed includes working with particular states of consciousness as a rapid method to achieve the soteriological ends proper to each of the named traditions.³ But when we talk about altered states of consciousness, are we speaking about the same thing in the European and in Indian cultural systems?

If we try to apply the category of altered states of consciousness to the Indian *śaiva tantric* texts written in Sanskrit and transmitted from the 5th century AD on, we would face many difficulties. Not only can the term "altered states of consciousness" not be retranslated back into Sanskrit, but every component of this European category demonstrates a logic of construction, which is very different from the Indian one. For example, the Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon provides at least 88 different Sanskrit terms translated into English with the help of the term "consciousness". Twenty-five amongst them are translated by "consciousness" directly. These approximately twenty-five different terms appear in Sanskrit medieval texts to qualify varieties of the representations of consciousness according to various traditions, and all of them belong to a particular historical and philosophical context. It is very problematic, however, to find equivalents for so many different terms in European languages. Other such examples would include essential cultural differences in the understanding of what is "normal", of what is "altered" and of what a "state" is in general. This means that we simply cannot use the category of altered states of consciousness for the analysis of the Indian material without a prior critical analysis of the category itself. However, at the present stage of my research I shall continue to use "altered states of consciousness" though it seems more appropriate to use the term in inverted commas.

I shall further concentrate my attention only upon the *śaiva tantric* traditions. In the context of the encounter between the European⁴ and the Indian cultural systems, it took a long time for these traditions and their texts to acquire their place as a subject for study. The reasons for this are the philological difficulty of these texts (particular terminology, non-classical Sanskrit), the presence of passages that cannot be easily accepted by the European sensibilities, like those dealing with black magic; but mostly the fact that both in India and in Europe the *tantric* traditions have served as a screen on which to project a variety of different phenomena by the non-initiated outsiders. For example, from the seventies on we have witnessed a wave of publications reading the answers to sexual frustrations into the *tantras*. The eighties and the

¹ Ludwig, A.M. 1972, *Altered States of Consciousness*. In: C.T. Tart (ed.), *Altered States of Consciousness*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday. p. 11. It is not clear whether this definition includes emotional states among altered.

² See, for example, Ludwig, A.M. 1968. *Altered States of Consciousness*. In: R. Prince (ed.), *Trance and Possession States*. Montreal: R. M. Bucke Memorial Society, p. 71-75.

³ Statement made on the basis of my doctoral research, in which I compared the texts of the initiated (*śaiva tantras*) and the non-initiated (*śaiva purāṇas*) in relation to the transformative experiences related to *yoginīs*.

⁴ Under European I understand both European and American publications.

nineties brought about a new fashion, representing the *tantric* traditions as a valid and rapid path that can lead a European away from the rational world vision towards "direct experience". This "direct experience" is most often translated as altered states of consciousness. *Tantric* initiates are now being represented as those who master these states and who are able to induce them in other persons. (Svoboda, Bhairavan, Odier among others.)

These examples raise many questions when we read modern publications on the *śaiva tantric* traditions. How could the link between the *tantric* material and altered states of consciousness have appeared? Does it reflect the original *tantric* texts? What kind of changes in Europe could have influenced this particular vision of the *tantric* traditions? Can we really find altered states of consciousness in their European scientific representation in the *tantric* texts? How can we draw a correlation between various types of these states in their European representations and in the *tantric* discourse? Can we, on the basis of comparison of these representations propose a better category, which would modify or even replace that of altered states of consciousness?

These questions were not treated in the literature known to me. From the point of view of Indology, the problem of the understanding and of the translation of the categories related to consciousness and its states was already raised in the very first attempts to analyze the Indian yogic traditions, however, nothing has been done with regard to the *tantras*. In the anthropological and psychological studies, the Indian material was often taken as an example, but this material was not historically and culturally contextualized and it was made to represent particular cases of "possession", "trance", "psi-phenomena", etc., without proper questioning of these categories. The gap between these different approaches is evident and this present research is intended to fill it.

I shall demonstrate that European categories (altered states of consciousness, trance, possession and others) cannot be blindly applied to the analysis of the *śaiva tantric* texts. The main reason for this is that both Indian and European categories are historically and culturally conditioned. The clarification of these conditions shall allow us to see the *śaiva tantric* and the European scientific discourses on altered states of consciousness as two systems. These complicated systems of discourse, which each comprise many elements and which each have their respective aims and orientations, can be compared. This comparison shall clarify the conceptualization of the experiences and phenomena related to altered states of consciousness in both systems and shall allow us to ameliorate or even to reformulate the categories in question.

It should be noted that the actual research is not about how the Europeans misunderstood the *tantric* texts, but about how we can understand these texts at all, how can we find the links between the terms describing altered states of consciousness in two very different cultural systems, and about how the encounter between these two systems can benefit our understanding of what altered states of consciousness are in general.

These are the main questions for the present research and we shall try to answer them on the basis of chosen sources and methods.

Sources:

Two groups of sources shall be used: (1.) The old *śaiva tantric* texts (the 6th-10th centuries AD) and the Kashmiri commentaries (end of the 9th-13th centuries); (2.) The modern publications on *śaiva tantric* traditions, both Indian and European, which are relevant to our study of altered states of consciousness.

Methods and approach:

In the present research I shall privilege the approach proper to the Indology, which means that I shall follow the scientific tradition that pays particular attention to the historical and the cultural circumstances of the appearance of the phenomena, which in my case shall be the various discourses related to altered states of consciousness in the *śaiva tantric* traditions. I shall follow the principles of the textual criticism and philological and historical analysis described and applied in the works of Alexis Sanderson.⁵ However, the nature of the subject, the chosen sources

⁵ Explained in Sanderson, A. 2001. History through Textual Criticism in the study of Śaivism, the Pañcarātra and the Buddhist Yoginītantras. In: *Les sources et le temps. Sources and Time. A colloquium. Pondicherry, 11-13 January 1997*. Ed. by François Grimal. Institut Français de Pondichéry, Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, p. 1-47.

and questions favour an interdisciplinary approach, which appears to be more fruitful than historical or philological approaches would be alone.

Discourse analysis is essential because we are not able to approach the experiences related to altered states of consciousness directly, they are always mediated by the texts. This means that the descriptions of these experiences are filtered by a particular tradition and encoded within the value system inherent to this tradition. That is why it is important to compare the discourses on these experiences done (a.) by the initiated; (b.) by the Indians and non-Indians who describe the experiences of which they were direct or indirect witnesses; (c.) by scholars of the Indian traditions and (d.) by scholars who study altered states of consciousness in general. Here again, the discourse proper to psychology, to the history of religions, or to neurological science will be different.

The comparative method and analysis constitute the basis of the present research. Comparative studies of religions have provided us with valuable reflections on the construction of a comparison, which would be valid from scientific point of view. I shall just list the names of the scholars who have influenced my understanding of the comparative method. With regard to its general understanding, the works of Marcel Detienne, Philippe Borgeaud, Jeppe Singen Jensen, Earl Miner, Jonathan Z. Smith and Ute Heidmann were my books of reference. In the domain of the construction of comparison on the basis of the Indian material, the works of Alexis Sanderson, Gabriella Ferro-Luzzi, Greg Bailey and the set of lectures given by Prof. Dr Maya Burger in the University of Lausanne in 2001-2003 proved to be the most useful for the present research. The work of Kenneth Pike clarified the difference between the etic and the emic approaches, which, in relation to the *tantras*, can also be retranslated as the positions of the initiated insider and the outsider.

As for the general approach to the analysis of altered states of consciousness and psi-phenomena related to them, the works of Mircea Eliade, Ernesto de Martino, Favret-Saada and Silvia Mancini are the starting point for the present research, although I cannot totally accept the positions of these authors and I shall clarify this in the course of my work.

Finally, the discourse on altered states of consciousness is but one element of the European and the Indian traditions understood as systems. I found the systemic approach described in the works of I. P. Couliano, Clifford Geertz and Peter Moore useful for the present research as it theoretically permits the linkage of a particular direction of the discourse on altered states of consciousness with the logic of development of the cultural system in question.

I acquired necessary training in described methods during five years of work with the *śaiva tantric* texts. I read the texts of the Krama tradition of the non-dualistic current of the Śaivism of Kashmir for my diploma of specialization and I considerably enlarged the corpus of my sources while working on the phenomenon of *yoginīs* for my doctorate dissertation. The representations of *yoginīs* in *śaiva tantric* and *non-tantric* texts of medieval India are directly linked to altered states of consciousness. This complicated phenomenon required not only a thorough training in Sanskrit, textual criticism and discourse analysis, but also familiarity with the methods proper to the history of religions and to psychology. This work became finally a Ph. D. thesis in Science of Religions. However, the indological part of it never lost its importance for me and I want to continue to work in this sense for my post-doc research.

Expected results:

This research shall be the first step in the conceptualization of altered states of consciousness in earlier *tantric* texts. It will not only provide the edition and translation of the passages that have never been translated before, but it will also show the historical development of the category of altered states of consciousness in older *tantras* and in later Kashmiri commentaries.

Comparative analysis of the European and the Indian publications on *tantric* traditions shall clarify the stages that can be distinguished in the understanding of the *śaiva tantric* traditions and shall show from which moment these traditions and altered states of consciousness became connected in European representations.

The analysis of the encounter of Europeans with the living *tantric* traditions and texts shall allow us to clarify the similarities and the differences in the conceptualization of particular states of consciousness in two different cultural systems, European and Indian (*śaiva tantric*). Comparative analysis of the European and Indian discourses on altered states of consciousness shall enable us to establish detailed classifications of these states and find the links between the

various types of the manifestations of these states (possession, trance, supra-normal capacities, visions, *kuṇḍalinī*-experiences, *samādhi*, etc.) in two mentioned cultural contexts.

Comparative analysis of different types of discourse shall allow not only to establish a set of categories better suited to the Indian material, but it will probably also enable us to replace the category of altered states of consciousness by a more precise one.