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Conserving the ‘Container’ of Tantric Secrecy: A Discussion with Western Śākta Practitioners

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Abstract: Secrecy has long limited the possibility of gaining emic insight into the spiritual experiences of tantric practitioners. By sharing reflections obtained via semi-structured interviews, the present article examines how a contemporary community of Western Śākta practitioners not only interprets the functions of secrecy and the necessity of maintaining it, but re-defines it in a way that divorces it from the negative connotations that have commonly been ascribed to it. In light of the latter, this article also evaluates the scope of applicability that certain existing scholarly interpretations of secrecy in tantric traditions have in the context of present intercultural exchanges of such practices. Moreover, it identifies the conditions according to which this group of practitioners was willing to discuss practice-related experiences of both a challenging and transformative nature with non-initiates, including what motivated them to do so, and what benefits they expect might result from such bridge-building. In doing so, it demonstrates the negotiable boundaries of secrecy and the ground of possibility for dialogue, thereby providing an example of how future research on the spiritual experience and impact of tantric meditative practice may be further expanded and explored.

Keywords: Tantra; Śākta; *sādhana*; secrecy; esotericism; *yoginī*; *sādhakī*; *śakti*; *kula*; taboo



Citation: Perkins, Sophie-Anne. 2021. Conserving the ‘Container’ of Tantric Secrecy: A Discussion with Western Śākta Practitioners. *Religions* 12: 729. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090729>

Academic Editor: Terje Sparby

Received: 17 August 2021

Accepted: 31 August 2021

Published: 6 September 2021

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1. Introduction

The present article is intended to meet the significant need for more fieldwork on contemporary communities of tantric practitioners by addressing precisely that which has long obstructed the possibility of doing so, namely: secrecy. Tantra, which constitutes the most esoteric tradition within Hinduism and was later adopted by and adapted to Buddhism (Samuel 2005, pp. 57–68, 79–88; Samuel 2008, pp. 258–68), is best qualified as a religious paradigm whose heyday was between around 500 and 1200 A.D. It underwent various phases of assimilation and permutation through interactions occurring within its socio-cultural milieu, which led to its bifurcation into “left” and “right” expressions and its development into both monistic and dualistic directions. Initially, it would have referred to ritual systems developed by sectarian groups whose worship was focused upon gods who appeared as outsiders in the Vedas, such as Śiva, Viṣṇu and Śakti because of their potential towards enabling liberation or transcendence of the world (Wilke 2012, pp. 22–31). This study concerns itself with Śākta Tantrism, the meditative practices (*sādhana*) and rituals of which are centred on the worship of Śakti, the dynamic power that underlies and is expressed through all of creation and differentiation within the universe. Śakti is more directly knowable to humans in feminine form, as Goddess (Devī) and Mother (Maa), the different aspects of which (e.g., compassion, beauty, warrior-like strength, etc.) manifest as a variety of female deities. The discussion about secrecy that was conducted individually with twelve Western Śākta female practitioners (*sādhakī* or *yoginī*) belonging to Laura Amazzone’s *kula* (traditionally referred to as ‘family’ or ‘clan’, but also possible to regard as ‘group of practitioners’ or community) which this article presents is based on a much larger scope of doctoral research that will offer a comparative analysis of how deity (*devatā*) yoga transforms Vajrayāna Buddhist and Śākta practitioners’ manner of relating to self, world,

and others. In the case of Śākta *sādhana*, deity yoga refers to a process of self-deification that is meant to bring the practitioner to a liberating realization that their inherent nature is identical to that of Devī. Through a combination of meditative and ritual acts that include *japa* (recitation of mantras), *nyāsa* (installation of the power of mantras on the body), *mudrā* (symbolic physical gestures), *upāsana* (contemplative/meditative worship), *pūjā* (ritual worship), and visualization, a presencing of and identification with a given deity is meant to be achieved within one's experience. It is the effects of these practices that the term "practice-related experiences" is referring to in this article and that the possibility of openly discussing was negotiated with my participants.

Laura Amazzone is a *yoginī* (female tantric adept and/or practitioner of yoga¹) who holds a master's degree in philosophy and religion, with a specialization in women's spirituality, and provides academic lectures, especially on Hindu goddess traditions. She has been initiated into lineages (*paramparā*) of Trika Śaivism, Kaula Śāktism (broadly speaking), and what one of her gurus calls *miśra* (mixed) Śrīvidyā, which is a combination of both its Kaula and Samaya forms. Currently, her approach to teaching within her own *kula* combines elements of Kaula Śāktism and *miśra* Śrīvidyā. Samayins normally distinguish themselves from Kaula practitioners by carrying out all ritual and external forms of practice and worship internally, at a mental and symbolic level, which they consider to be superior, while Kaula practitioners engage in both forms, the external ones of which normally incorporate or at least refer to the partaking of certain taboo substances or actions deemed impure by traditional Vedic social standards (the heterodox nature of which distinguishes them as being *vāmamārga* or abiding by 'left norms'). Although it may thus seem contradictory to combine the two, Brooks (1990) has distinguished that "[i]n contemporary Śrīvidyā [...] this internal/external distinction along Samaya and Kaula lines is blurred" (p. 29). Indeed, besides being initiated into Śrīvidyā by the late Sri Amritananda, who takes a Kaula approach, Amazzone's Śrīvidyā guru, a female *yoginī* from northeast India, has also been initiated into Samaya forms of the tradition by others; hence, her approach has been qualified as being *miśra*. It is, however, important to distinguish that the views of secrecy espoused by Amazzone in this article and by her own *kula* do not necessarily reflect those of her gurus or lineages, as she specified that this changes on an individual basis.

Despite the fact that the esoteric identities and whereabouts of both Amazzone's female guru of Śrīvidyā and her Kaula Śākta one (who is a male shaman from Kerala, India and who was born into a lineage devoted to Kālī) remain concealed from the public, they insisted that Amazzone be a guiding light for *yoginīs* who may be in search of a more authentic, serious and dedicated practice than what most of the current Western buffet of commodified adaptations of Tantra has to offer. Yet, this instruction and permission to teach and form her own *kula* is not the same as being appointed a guru-successor; like most scholar-practitioners who "[...] seem to derive their authority to teach [...] from both their academic credentials and their lived experience of practicing the tradition" (Osto 2020, p. 96), she does not "[...] claim any special status as guru", but rather identifies as a "[...] teacher [] or spiritual guide [] for fellow practitioners" (ibid., p.90). Furthermore, her teachings are made accessible to everyone through scholarships, partial scholarships, work trades, payment plans and deferred payment plans.

The history of events that has led teachers like Amazzone's to conceal themselves is complex and detailed, but will be briefly touched upon here as it is related to the reason why there has been such a gap of insight within academia when it comes to the lived experience and realities of tantric practitioners and why this needs to be redressed. To begin with, the secret (*rahasya*) status of tantric traditions, which requires initiates to take on vows of secrecy, led scholarship on Tantra to be predominantly textual and interpretative, which in itself has been no less complicated by the fact that the contents of Tantras (tantric scriptures) are conveyed in highly cryptic, coded language (referred to as *sāndhyābhāṣā* or twilight language) to ensure that only the initiated understand them and can make use of their power (Brooks 1992, pp. 406–7, 412; Wilke 2012, pp. 32–33). Although the degree

to which textual content can be said to actually reflect how practices are carried out and what experiences they might produce is questionable,² especially due to the emergent and contingent nature of performance and ritual,³ this was not perceived as being problematic until recently. In fact, it reflected a tendency that was historically rooted in the Protestant inclination of the discipline of religious studies towards privileging the authenticity of text over ritual because it believed that the essence and foundation of any religious tradition ought to be, like its own, pinpointed in its sacred texts. Consequently, oral and popular forms of practice were deemed as corruptions having strayed from the original source and unrepresentative of what a given religious tradition actually was, involved, or should ideally be. By extension, rituals were associated with fostering superstition and in the tantric case, black magic, illicit behaviours and sex (King 1999, pp.166–67, 172).⁴ This was a fallacious position from which to begin the study of tantrism because it promoted the presumption that religious texts were blueprints which completely guided “correct” practice, whereas in tantric traditions, membership to lineages of practice and thus ritual was foremost, preceding organized doctrine, philosophy, and scripture (Brunner 1992, pp. 15, 18, 21, 25; Samuel 2005, p. 88; Samuel 2008, pp. 253–54). Since the majority of initiates and lay devotees would have lacked the education and literacy required to read scriptures themselves or understand on a semantic level what was being recited to them (Brooks 1992, pp. 418, 422; Brunner 1977, pp. 110, 113–15), the scholarly focus on texts mostly reflects the concerns of the elite few, such as highly-educated male priests, gurus, ascetics, monks or lamas who were skilled in Sanskrit and or Tibetan and for whom matters of exegesis and of the coinciding of ritual practice with doctrinal meaning would have mattered (Brooks 1996, p. 4; Samuel 1993, p. 226; 2008, p. 253).

Unfortunately, this perspective was adopted by the educated within Indian society who sought during the colonial era to establish *swarāj* (home rule) and autonomy from the British by nationally and culturally unifying Indians under the banner of a significantly deritualized Hinduism (itself a category created by Europeans) (King 1999, p. 176). The enduring legacy of the internalized British misrepresentation of tantrism as a foreign infiltration of backwardness, immorality and degeneracy (Urban 2003, pp. 71–72, 158, 160) has therefore meant that even today it remains for the most part stigmatized, feared, ostracized and considered taboo within Indian society.⁵ Due to this, for those who have not taken to an ascetic lifestyle retreated from society, membership is a very private affair in order to protect one’s well-being and reputation, which greatly restricts the scope of potential willing informants and our ability to assess how widespread such traditions remain (McDaniel 2000, pp. 78–80; McDaniel 2012, pp. 147–49, 153, 157–60). Within the West, the sensationalized view of Tantra was reified and selectively repackaged so as to be transmitted as an exotic means of achieving liberation from Judaeo-Christian norms and values via spiritualized sex, the indulgence in which tends to be worn as a badge of honour (McDaniel 2018, pp. 162–68).⁶ However, Western practitioners who are committed to more traditional and serious paths of practice do tend to also prefer anonymity for a variety of reasons, one of which is no less than to avoid being associated with the kind of stereotypes that such representations of Tantra have propagated, the misunderstanding of which can lead to negative consequences in one’s personal and professional life.

Nevertheless, in the context of globalization and increased intercultural dialogue, the possibility of studying the impact of tantric practices and understanding these traditions on their own terms is beginning to expand. While Tibetan Buddhists find themselves engaged in conversation with Western scientists and undergoing laboratory examination,⁷ “maverick gurus” of Hindu traditions such as Śrīvidyā, like former nuclear physicist Sri Amritananda who established Devipuram in Andhra Pradesh, India, and his disciple Sri Chaitanyananda, who built and runs the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam in Rush, New York, have been abandoning secrecy altogether in the name of being socially progressive and granting universal access to the divine.⁸ In this atmosphere of unprecedented exchange, overlapping, and collision between the esoteric and exoteric spheres, it has become more relevant than ever to understand what concerns and values are held by contemporary

practitioners and how these are determining the negotiable boundaries of secrecy, so that research can proceed in the most ethical and conscientious way. In order to enter this rapidly evolving field, we must be willing to re-assess the suitability of our usual lens of analysis and approaches, and to actively involve participants in the process of establishing this new terrain. As [Ruff \(2016\)](#) has argued:

Ethnographically informed, ethically sound, and historically aware attention to the contemplative and esoteric communities (and their texts) requires of us a kind of close listening. It requires an attention to their own formulations of what they are doing and why. (p. 2)

For the past decades, the works of [Brooks \(1990, 1992, 1996\)](#) and [Urban \(1997, 1998, 2003, 2010\)](#) have been staples within the sphere of scholarship on the function of secrecy in tantric traditions, especially Śrīvidyā within a Brahmanical context. However, the extent to which their observations and analytical frameworks can still be generalized to the present context, both Indic and abroad, remains to be assessed. In that regard, scholars who have conducted extensive fieldwork, such as [Dempsey \(2006\)](#), [Kachroo \(2016, 2019\)](#) and [Rao \(2019\)](#) may be best suited to such a task. The present article does not intend to offer such a rigorous analysis, but simply to draw attention to those aspects of Brooks' and Urban's analyses, including [Timalsina \(2011\)](#), that my data are either in agreement with, or suggests a more nuanced understanding is required. As will be shown, what appears to be particularly problematic about applying [Urban \(2021\)](#) manner of defining the strategic ways in which secrecy is used to the *kula* I have interviewed, is how it frames the latter as being necessarily intended to serve elitist and exclusionary ends related to "[...] *acquiring, enhancing, preserving and/or protecting power*" (p. 10) of a social kind, whether that be to the benefit of the powerful or the downtrodden. As [McDaniel \(2018\)](#) has argued, the issue with such a focus is that

[s]cholars who value the study of power and conflict in religion often suppress other methods of inquiry, and with this suppression, the field can descend into yellow journalism, studying the sleazy underbelly of religion rather than its values and ideals. (p. 9)

Rather than viewing my participants' claims about power and secrecy with suspicion or dismissing them as being naïve or idealistic, I agree with [Ruff \(2016\)](#) that "[...] if we pay attention to what the communities of practice *say*, we might realize that they *mean what they say*" (p. 13). After explaining the conditions and approach that were followed to enable the interviews to proceed in the most ethical and efficient manner, this article will demonstrate how this group of practitioners interprets the role of secrecy as fulfilling three main functions, namely: that of protecting initiates and outsiders; that of maintaining the unique intimacy of what is experienced and practiced, as well as of the practitioner-deity relationship; and that of creating an environment that allows the integrity of the student-teacher relationship, the *kula*, and the *sādhana* to be preserved, thereby ensuring the efficacy of the latter. In doing so, [Urban \(2021\)](#) suggestion "[...] to shift our gaze from the ever-elusive "hidden content" of secrecy to the more visible *forms* through which secrets are concealed, revealed, and exchanged" (p. 16) will be taken up. This will be followed by a discussion of what motivations led my participants to be interviewed and what benefits they expect might result from such a dialogue between scholars or non-initiates and practitioners.

2. Establishing the Ground of Exchange

During my first interactions with Amazzone via e-mail, after explaining my intentions in detail, I displayed full transparency by sharing the list of semi-structured, open-ended interview questions I had prepared with her, and inviting her to suggest any revisions to ensure that the latter would not pry into secretive themes. However, she did not consider any alterations to be necessary in the end. After our first two-hour long exchange via *Zoom*, Amazzone placed her trust in both myself and her students. She distributed my

call for participants to her *kula* and participation was initiated on a voluntary basis. The length of the interviews varied depending on how much a participant had to share, from a minimum of one hour and a half, to six hours divided into two sessions. When in doubt of whether a question I posed was threading the boundary of what they could divulge, Amazzone's students respectfully suggested that I should ask their teacher about it. In any case, my promise not to publish anything before conducting member checking provided them with an extra sense of ease, which implies requesting their feedback on whether their statements and experiences have been accurately interpreted in my writing, negotiating requested alterations, and obtaining their final consent. Furthermore, besides from Amazzone herself, every participant's identity has been protected by giving them pseudonyms in this publication and ensuring that all audio and visual materials, as well as transcriptions of our interviews, are kept private and password secured.

While the 'boundary' was generally clear, restricting our conversations to practitioners' personal experiences and interpretations of them—meaning how they relate to various aspects of the practice of deity yoga, the impact that it has had on them, and the experiences that they attribute as unfolding from it—while leaving out any details of the practices that led to them (beyond what is publicly known), there were in fact times when the two appeared to be too closely intertwined in some of my participants' opinions to dive into. This was the case when I asked Sallie, a practitioner in Laura's *kula* for the past five years, for a more specific example of a striking experience that she may have had while engaging with a deity during visualization:

Yes, I can think of a couple of interactions that were eye-opening. I think that that would be more in the category of being secretive. I think if I were to share details about it, it would dissipate some of the *śakti* or energy. The visualizations are very specific to the practices, and so I think that would be that line not to cross.

This idea that the energy or power of what is experienced during the practice can be dissipated when spoken of outside of the *kula* will become understandable upon reading the subsection titled "Integrity" later, but it is an explanation that can be found in the Tantras themselves (Feuerstein 1998). Similarly, the reasons why the practices should only be spoken of at a rudimentary level that does not allow non-initiates to engage in them independently will begin to be clarified from the subsection called "Protection" onwards. Thus, the kind of detailed descriptions that I expected would be possible to obtain regarding experiences of visualization were not accessible to me, despite a number of my participants piquing my curiosity by stating that they have very vivid ones. Another theme that similarly did not yield much data was that of *bhūtaśuddhi* (purification of the bodily elements), when I would ask specifically whether the dissolution of the ego or normative identity that one normally finds attributed to it in textual sources ever triggered a fear of loss of sense of self in them. This was due not only to the experience being too closely connected to the process of the practice itself, but also to the fact that it was not as commonly practiced as I expected it to be.

As I found many of my preconceived ideas challenged, such as which practices and texts are fundamental to a given stream and for what purpose they are used, I realized even more poignantly how textually based scholarship of tantric traditions fails to reflect the dynamic, fluid and innovative nature of how the practices are actually being transmitted and engaged. Overwhelmed by the difficulty of drawing neat parallels between primary and secondary sources and what my participants were sharing, Sabrina, who has been in Amazzone's *kula* for the past four years, but maintains distant ties with a teacher of Trika Śaivism and a Śākta Kaula one in a Kālī *kula* of a *vāmamārga* lineage, both of whom initiated her in remote villages in India over two decades ago, frequently reminded me of the diversity of approaches and mixed influences that are out there:

India is a virtual feast of spiritual traditions, streams and lineages, all adding their own "masala" to some degree. I understand the important work of the scholar and I am grateful and fascinated to read the works of scholarship, and

yet I am immersed in a mainly oral lineage tradition, which through my travels and experiences of its people is very alive and potent.

This weakness and gap, the reasons for which have been briefly touched upon in the introduction, has been aptly questioned by [Rao \(2019\)](#) as follows:

[...] unless scholarship gets out of the libraries of canonical sources from several centuries ago and into the field, how will it address present concerns? How can categories and modes of worship from centuries ago continue to be the basis and template of scholarly understanding, when in the absence of contact with current practice? And how can there be meaningful contact with current practice without understanding the realities and concerns of practitioners? (p. 39)

Faced with these circumstances, I gradually eased into “[...] a willingness to be guided by (instead of guiding) the cultural phenomena that we seek to understand” ([Ruff 2016](#), p. 17), and I found myself loosening my stubborn adherence to the exact structure and aims I had intended for my doctoral research.

The latter enabled me to deepen the intersubjective dimension of the research that I had already tried to establish from the beginning by being honest about how my own spiritual experiences had influenced the academic trajectory I have dedicated myself to. While such a confession tends to be a taboo step within academia, potentially disqualifying one’s credibility and ability to be objective in the eyes of others ([McDaniel 2018](#), p. 307; [Osto 2020](#), p. 80; [Wallis 2013](#), pp. 15–18), it appeared to be the most natural and effective means of gaining my participants’ trust and providing them with the necessary level of comfort and sense of being understood to open up about their intimate experiences, without fear of judgment or misinterpretation. This was not necessary with every participant, but when the emotional intensity and vulnerability of what they shared was particularly acute, or when a possibility to relate on experiential or intellectual grounds presented itself, I found this reciprocal sharing of personal narratives to be very productive, which also allowed the interviews to flow more conversationally and on equal footing. Furthermore, this was essential for overcoming a common assumption and source of skepticism that repeatedly challenged my ability to recruit participants from communities of tantric practitioners of both Buddhist and Hindu streams, namely: their conviction that speaking with a non-practitioner about one’s experiences is a completely fruitless dead-end. This is not entirely invalid, as it speaks to the perceived hubris of the standards of objectivity and distance within the field of religious studies, which can be humorously summarized as:

I personally have no belief or faith whatsoever in anything supernatural, or even transcendent for that matter, and so I thought myself eminently qualified for the difficult task of elucidating mystic states. ([McDaniel 2018](#), p. 307, quoting [De Chellis Hill 1993](#), p. 19)

Although [Lorea \(2018\)](#) has remarked that “[t]he 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” (p. 18), I have found the latter to be insufficient. Time and again, it was not my ability to articulate things in their terms or my academic credentials in the topic that opened doors for me, but rather my examples of how despite not having been initiated or done the practices myself, I had had comparatively similar experiences and insights throughout my life. This led both my Buddhist and Śākta participants, including those whom spoke with me but ultimately rejected my offer to be formally interviewed due to their vows of secrecy, to offer intriguing and sometimes helpful interpretations of my own experiences and even of the meaning and value of the work I am doing. For example, it was suggested multiple times that I must have done the practices already in a past life, or, in the case of my Śākta participants, that this research in itself is a valid form of practice that is in service of and connects me to Devī. Thus, in different ways, my experiences were deemed markers of being an insider, albeit indirectly, and they led me to be treated inclusively to a certain extent. It is by allowing this kind of mutual exchange, in which my participants had

the freedom to interpret my own story and not only I theirs, that data of an authentic and raw nature could be obtained. This highlights the significance of the following statement by Orsi (2002) regarding the intersubjective nature of research on religion:

Our lives and stories are not simply implicated in our work; they are among the media through which we encounter and engage the religious worlds of others. Research is a relationship, to paraphrase Sartre. This is no less so for historians of lived religion than for ethnographers. (p. 174)

Furthermore, opening up in this way gave my participants a sense of contributing to something that is not only serving my own research ends, but is also purposeful to them. In other words, even though not every intention and aim of my research is shared or valued by them, it did allow us to determine how some of our motivations intersected. This, in turn, was an important means of navigating through what Urban (1998, pp. 209–10; 2021, pp. 14–15) has called the “double bind of secrecy”, meaning the epistemological and ethical problems that are entailed in attempting to study and speak about esoteric traditions, such as: the fact that without initiation, whatever one can say about them is only ever incomplete; that if one *does* become initiated to gain full insight, then one is betraying the very tradition one studies by sharing the latter; or the fact that one’s presence influences the data obtained and is likely to result in a distorted representation. As Section 4 will demonstrate, the themes that were addressed throughout the interviews were accepted as being open to discussion because their content was deemed by my participants to be what is most important for outsiders to know about the tradition, and as incomplete as that may be, to be of significant value in and of itself. Although certain limitations and a degree of bias are inevitable, the very act of building this bridge of dialogue between scholar/non-initiate and practitioner occurred on the basis of a recognition that it is possible for both domains to mutually enrich one another. This constitutes what Varela et al. (1991) called an approach of ‘mutual circulation’, according to which different domains, despite having their

[...] own degree of autonomy—[their] own proper methods, motivations, and concerns—[...] also overlap and share common areas. Thus, instead of being juxtaposed, either in opposition or as separate but equal, these domains can flow into and out of each other, and so be mutually enlightening. (Thompson 2008, p. 232)

Such an approach is especially suited to the current context alluded to in the introduction, in which the esoteric and exoteric spheres are beginning to meet. In its complete form, my doctoral research intends to achieve a mutual circulation between first, second and third person perspectives, by articulating explanations that are informed by a balanced and fair overview of what practitioners interpret themselves to be doing and experiencing, how the tradition of their practice (as expressed within textual sources or by figures of authority) frames and proposes the latter occurs, and what researchers theorize is underlying the achievement of such states at a broader, universal level. Essentially, it is hoped that “[t]hrough back-and-forth circulation, each approach can reshape the other, leading to new conceptual and practical understandings for both” (Thompson 2008, p. 233).

Lastly, a common problem that any study of religious, spiritual, or mystical experience must contend with is that of their ineffable nature, meaning the experienter’s claim that ordinary language is insufficient for conveying a complete and accurate sense of what it was like to undergo it.⁹ This has contributed to the secretive appearance of esoteric communities that form around such experiences, as they often develop obscure means of expression, such as glossolalia, poetic figures of speech, paradox, or metaphors and analogies, to convey their experience of and relationship with the numinous and to evoke it within others (Lorea 2018, p. 11). For example, when I asked Sadie, who has been part of the *kula* for the past seven years, “Is there a way to put words on the experience of merging with the goddess in the practice?”, she replied: “No, there’s no way to really language the ineffable experience of it, you just have to feel it”, and proceeded to give

examples of how language can only convey an approximation, but never the unique essence of a subjective experience, such as the taste of a peach. However, in order to facilitate my participants' efforts to articulate their experiences during the semi-structured interview questions, I applied part of what I have learned through my training in the microphenomenological interview method,¹⁰ which is to say: working from the premise that even the most ineffable experiences are embodied ones, I drew my participants' attention to the pre-reflective and felt dimension of their experience, rather than to its content, such as by pointing out the bodily gestures they were unconsciously making while describing them and, without making any suggestions, asking them what these gestures imply was happening at the time and how it felt like. When possible and relevant, this was followed by questions related to the texture, stability, clarity, intensity, colour, sound, temperature, or location of what was being experienced (e.g., a mantra, visualization, or energy movement), including the position of their awareness. Although I was simply introducing elements of a microphenomenological interview, rather than following the formal procedure of conducting an actual one (I am still in the process of carrying those out), I was surprised by how the questions I asked were sufficient prompts to evoke the experience within the present for some of my participants, as many of them naturally tended to close their eyes and would admit upon emerging from that state that these questions did enable them to say at least a bit more about the experience.

While it is not necessary for the present article to delve into the latter in any depth, it is worth mentioning, as it offers a promising way of somewhat bridging the incommunicable gap, without overstepping the boundaries of secrecy by having them explain what they were doing in their practices. This is because although the interviewee is normally guided to explain what actions led up to the experience to help situate them, I have found that to be unnecessary, since most practitioners have repeated these processes so many times that they have internalized them in both body and mind, and are able to almost immediately retrieve and dive back into the experiences that they produce. Thus, this approach enables one to meet practitioners on terms they are willing to discuss. As Brenda, who has been an esotericist for the past forty years and part of Amazzone's *kula* for the past three years explained:

So, that's how I've always navigated it. I own my personal experience and my reaction to it, but I don't say this is the practice, this is how we did it, this is the specific mantra or visualization. That's not mine to give, it's Laura's to give.

It is also worthwhile to keep in mind that the issue of ineffability is one that leads many practitioners to stray from participating in interviews, as they believe that describing their experiences will only objectify or reduce them to something that is less than what they are, the value or contribution of which they find questionable, and the act of which may feel like doing an injustice to what is felt to be a very meaningful and sacred experience or event. In such cases, a distinction must be made between being strategically secretive or simply opting to remain silent. However, such a stance does reflect similar concerns to those that Urban (1998, pp. 209–10; 2021, pp. 14–15) notion of the “double bind of secrecy” highlights. Taking this into consideration, it is important to reassure those who *do* participate, that what they share is not going to be represented as being absolute, accurate, or authoritative in any sense, which was a concern that was frequently voiced by my participants. The latter stems in part from wanting to avoid contributing to any misrepresentation that might affect the integrity of what is being spoken about, which will become clear later in the article. However, it also extends to the fact that my participants stressed how no single experience should be taken as being representative of the breadth of what actually unfolds through practice. As Kaylah, who joined the *kula* six years ago, cautioned:

I can talk about my experience, but that's hard because (1) it's different with each *sadhana*; (2) it's different day-to-day. In other words, it's a living embodiment. It changes. It's never the same, for me.

In the end, when dealing with the issue of ineffability, I believe that as Ruff (2016) has suggested, “[...] we need to be surprised out of our expectations of meaning” (p. 14). Throughout my interviews with both Vajrayāna Buddhist and Śākta practitioners, I found myself surprised and delighted by how their creative use of metaphors and analogies repeatedly broadened my perspective and enabled me not only to understand themes I had grown overly accustomed to in a completely fresh way, but also to perceive new connections. Likewise, some of my participants enjoyed how being interviewed forced them to articulate their experiences because it led them to certain realizations and insightful connections freshly in the midst of the process, which further integrated their understanding of their own trajectory and relationship to the practice.

3. Functions of Secrecy

3.1. Protection

According to Amazzone and her *kula*, the primary role of secrecy is to protect people from experiencing what can be very unexpected or challenging physical reactions to and psychological outcomes of the practice, without the necessary guidance of the right teacher, context, or tools at one’s disposal to effectively interpret and navigate through them. While my participants and I did discuss the potential issues that can arise and which did in fact occur in their experience at length, they will not be addressed in this article. However, in a future publication, I hope to contribute to the growing literature established by Lindahl (2017) and Lindahl et al. (2017, 2019, 2020) on the challenging experiences and aspects of meditative practice that can arise in a Western context, by comparing the data gathered from my participants of both Buddhist and Hindu streams of practice. Suffice it to say that as Sparby (2019) has suggested, they can be precursors of beneficial and transformative shifts in the long-term. This is because the practice has a deconstructive side that can bring repressed or difficult emotions and memories to the fore, causing one to directly confront them. Acknowledging that the framework of the practice and the support that she offers may not always be sufficient for enabling her students to deal with the latter, Amazzone recommends them to have a qualified therapist and emphasizes the importance of having a support system. Rachel, who has been part of Amazzone’s *kula* for the past three years, expressed relief and gratitude towards the protective role that secrecy plays in providing a structured, gradual path:

[...] I’m barely scratching the surface and I don’t say that in a modest way [...] and if this is the power of barely scratching the surface, these should be secret practices [...] I don’t want to say these things [practices] are dangerous, but maybe there’s danger in them because they can destabilize your life, but also re-stabilize it [...] if I’m just scratching the surface, thank God there are all of these steps in place for me to sort of do this, understand it to the best of my ability, before I move to the next place. I don’t even know if I would understand some of the things I understood two years ago. I know I didn’t, when I go back to the practices or some of the recordings and conversations. I didn’t even hear what was being said. I interpreted it in such a different way and I obviously needed to ‘cause that’s where I was at. And that’s just something Laura always says, that the practices meet you where you’re at.

Here, the term ‘power’ is referring to the efficacy of the practice, which makes itself known in surprising ways through various types of multisensory, embodied experiences, as well as insightful shifts in outlook and behaviour, thereby solidifying Rachel’s conviction that the practice is in fact doing something. As she emphasized, “I’ve had experiences that I *never* would have imagined, that I *couldn’t* have imagined, they are *bigger* than my imagination [...] I’m a creative person, but not *THAT* creative”. Besides from its more modern and psychotherapeutic flair, this understanding of the need for secrecy is not at odds with what tantric literature has traditionally warned about. According to a Śākta understanding, this ‘efficacy’ or power that is generated is none other than Śakti, whose dynamic quality can be highly volatile when wielded without proper initiation, training,

and instruction from a guru, leading to “life threatening consequences, including disease and insanity”, causing “irreparable damage”, or resulting in chaos (Brooks 1990, p. 58, 65–66). Hence, “Tantrics stress the necessity of “protecting” the unqualified” (ibid., p. 65).

The above ties well into Elena’s (a practitioner for the past eight years in the *kula*) point that the practices are both prescriptive, insofar as they are intended to do specific things, and potent—just as a responsible doctor would not prescribe psychotropic drugs to someone simply because they are feeling sad, without understanding their history, or provide morphine to someone whose leg is merely aching, so too must the practices be carefully prescribed, she explained. Indeed, while some practices are taught and engaged in as a group, Amazzone also provides her students with practices that are personalized to their constitution and needs as much as possible. On the other hand, if we take the medical analogy further, it is not enough to administer the prescription—as patients, initiates also need to follow the practices as prescribed in order to fully experience their benefits and should not take short-cuts, which Amazzone compares to having to take a full course of antibiotics. As Kaylah emphasized, just like with anything else in life, a foundation first has to be laid:

It’s not that it’s solely secretive, it’s more that you have to earn your way into any kind of, just like an apprenticeship of a carpenter, you can’t build your first cabinet for a paying client with the other guy’s hammers and nails and never having built a cabinet and borrowing the wood and selling it [...] people have to understand that it’s not that it’s not for you, but it’s a path, you don’t jump from A to Z, you have to go through the alphabet, so you have a way of going through this process [...] One day, you don’t just wake up and say: “I’m gonna be a priest! Forget you guys, let me do the service today.” You know, there’s training, everything requires training, that’s life [...] If you don’t go through that process, you’re skipping parts and you won’t get the deeper meaning.

The above analogies provided by Elena, Kaylah, and Amazzone are reminiscent of themes that one finds in many tantric scriptures, including the *Kularnava Tantra*, which is dated from approximately 1000 to 1400 C.E. and offers a definition of Kaulism and its principles. For example, verse 10.46 of the latter states that “[l]ineage, scripture, levels of teaching, the practice of mantras, and such must all be obtained directly from the guru in order to bear fruit [...]” (Brooks 2000, p. 359), while verse 14.97 says: “O Goddess, for one who is without initiation there is no fulfillment nor true path [...]” (ibid., p. 360).

Yet, what is especially striking about these analogies is how they normalize the process that is required for gaining access to the teachings and practices, likening it to the same standards one finds within other mundane areas, thereby casting off any mysterious veneer. This suggests that while these practitioners’ statements can be interpreted as examples of “initiativ gnosis” (Urban 1997, p. 12), whereby the ability to read between the lines of double-coded meaning and gain access to power is dependent upon membership to an exclusive group and a “hierarchization of truth and controlled access to information” (Urban 2021, p. 17), the intention that Urban implies is behind such a structural use of secrecy does not seem to apply in this context. Firstly, although it is true that “[...] secrecy is an inherently triadic relationship [...] [that] defines relations between one who possesses a secret, another to whom it is revealed, and one or more others from whom it remains concealed” (ibid., p. 9), the intended outcome of that is not necessarily to emphasize a distinction between the haves and have-nots in order to elevate the social status, authority or power of some at the expense of others. Referring to the importance of protection, Elena emphasized that secrecy is “[...] not for any weird esoteric reason [...] it’s not like we’re trying to cut off access to this power, this isn’t the caste system”. Similarly, Sadie, stated that:

[i]t’s not meant to be creating some special exalted thing that’s like an in-group and an out-group. The point of the practices is to transcend those categories and to ultimately develop compassion, to make you a better human being. If it’s not making me a better human being, then I don’t want to be doing it.

As the section titled “Intimacy”, including the one describing my participants’ motivations for engaging in the interviews will show, there is a prominent desire among this group to increase accessibility to what they have gained through the practice so that it may be of benefit to others as well. Furthermore, while most of them believe that the practices can be used to obtain worldly ends and that *siddhis* (paranormal abilities) may develop as a side-effect,¹¹ they all emphasized that those are neither the aim nor what motivates them to practice. As Amazzone stated: “I *may* get a siddhi, I *may* become more clairvoyant, all of those—I *may* get a promotion, I *may* fall in love, but that’s not the goal”.

Secondly, while graded access to knowledge may make what remains unshared appear more valuable and powerful, it is not necessarily true that this increases one’s desire to obtain it for oneself (Urban 2021, pp. 12, 17). Although I found this to be a source of motivation for some of my participants, as it seems to offer boundless opportunities for self-realization and improvement, as well as more ways and increased depth of connecting to the divine, to some this may be intimidating. Amazzone referred to how despite determining that certain students are ready to receive the next teachings and practices and encouraging them to do so, sometimes the students themselves humbly insist on continuing to work with the ones they already have, either out of habit and comfort, a sense of fulfilment, or a fear of being overwhelmed, be that due to the expected ‘power’ of the practices or a feeling that having more to learn and work with would require more commitment and time. This was the case, for example, with Rachel, whom we saw provided a statement of relief about this gradual access due to otherwise being unprepared to handle and integrate the power of the practices. Although one might view this as precisely reinforcing a hierarchical view, emphasizing a difference in ability, my participants frequently brought up how the idea and experience of the divine being no different from oneself that is cultivated through the practice has the effect of instilling a level of self-confidence and acceptance that enables one to relax into whatever state and capacity one finds oneself in at a given time. Moreover, as the following sections of this paper will show, the special kind of teacher-student relationship that Amazzone cultivates, as well as the supportive function of the *kula*, make it such that as April, a practitioner in Amazzone’s *kula* for the past thirteen years, put it “[...] it doesn’t feel as top-down, even though it is top-down”.

Finally, while Urban (2021) emphasizes that secrecy and restricted access transforms knowledge into a form of “symbolic capital” (a term he borrows from Bourdieu (1994)), something of rarity and value that bestows prestige and status (pp. 11–12), Timalisina (2011) has proposed that “Tantra in the West functions not in its ability to remain ‘secret’, but in its ability to reveal” (p. 285), and that value within the latter context is rather generated based on marketability. Yet, this generalization once more does not seem suitable for describing Amazzone’s approach to transmitting tantric teachings in the West. While discussing the challenging aspects of the practice with me, she explained:

I joke with them [...] how can we market this? Because nobody’s gonna sign up [...] once you start doing it, what are side effects that it’s working? You get rashes, you get fevers, you have diarrhoea, you get your period when you haven’t had it for ten years, or you get your period irregularly.

Along similar lines, Brenda explained that secrecy is necessary as the practice can [...] really take you into places that are difficult and dangerous to manage, so you don’t want to just throw that out in the world, like “Here! Here’s something that can make you psychotic!” Laura’s talked about that. She’s like, I see a mantra on the Internet that says ‘this is going to lead you to bliss’, she goes EVENTUALLY, eventually it will lead you to bliss, but before that, it’s going to be really intense.

Furthermore, both Amazzone’s public lectures and the practices that she transmits within the *kula* tend to focus on fierce manifestations of Devī to begin with, such as Kālī and Durgā, as she believes that giving people what they want and expect (i.e., what is marketable), namely benevolent-looking goddesses like Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, and Lalita, who

are said to confer abundance, creativity and beauty, respectively, would be of a disservice to them (unless something indicates to her that it is really necessary for them). She explained that this is because such popular goddesses are “[...] so refined that you can’t even feel into their essence if you’re so conditioned and identified with the body and the mind, if you’re still in the ego too much”. By working with fiercer manifestations in one’s practice, one is made to first contend with one’s own less desirable qualities and habits in order to work through one’s conditioning and obscurations. As this requires a significant amount of dedication and work, most people who are browsing the Western marketplace of spirituality in search of a quick fix are unlikely to be drawn to her approach, which is actually an effective way of ensuring that those who request to enter the *kula* are serious in their intentions. This point was made by Sadie, as she remarked that the protective function of the lineage “[...] weeds out people who can’t tolerate not having everything be instant gratification”. Thus, secrecy and its graded access to teachings and practices is thought to protect not only initiates, but outsiders who may not be sufficiently aware of what they might be getting themselves into, which by extension, will be shown to also maintain the integrity of the *kula* and practice

3.2. Intimacy

Many practitioners are reluctant to discuss their experiences with others due to the intimate nature of the practice. Since identifying with Devī is ultimately an act of coming into contact with one’s own inherent nature, Kaylah stated that “[...] it is hard to share it because it’s like the deepest part of your soul. To bare that out is really hard for some people.” Closely connected to this is the idea that by openly sharing one’s experiences too much, one might influence another’s experience by indirectly causing them to have certain expectations, which in turn may lead to comparison and self-doubt. The lineages to which Amazzone has belonged have heavily encouraged practitioners to tune into the unique felt dimension of what is unfolding in their practice and to avoid prematurely seeking external sources of meaning, which she has extended to her own *kula*. Such an approach is in accordance with tantric doctrine that emphasizes the liberative efficacy of knowledge or insight that has been obtained through direct experience (*bhāvanajñāna*), independently of what the guru and texts have instructed (Brooks 1990, p. 49; Timalina 2011, p. 281). As Brenda suggested, it is thus important that every practitioner be enabled to have their own experience. This is all the more essential to those who approach the practice from a devotional stance—the issue of intimacy takes on another level of meaning as many find themselves entering and cultivating a relationship of love towards Devī, which involves naturally developing a sense of surrender and trust over time. As Rachel expressed, whereas she formerly found herself frequently needing to hear others’ opinions about her own experiences when she engaged in other practices, a shift has since occurred through her committed practice in Amazzone’s *kula* the past three years. Now, she is at ease with the sense that “[...] somehow, they’re [the experiences] mine [...], they’re off-limits, even to the people closest to me”.

Besides, the practices may sometimes engender blissful experiences of an ecstatic and erotic nature, the intimacy of which is not something that practitioners necessarily feel a need to share. It is worth noting that while some of my participants reported full-body orgasmic experiences, these were not precipitated by engaging in practices that involve physical or imagined sexual union. Despite the Kaula side of Amazzone’s *kula*, it does not ritually partake of all of the *pañcamakāras*,¹² the five traditionally taboo ‘substances’ of Hindu society, namely: wine/liquor, meat, fish, parched grain and ritualized sexual union. Within a Hindu context, the transgressive act of partaking of these in secret can give the tantric practitioner a sense of superiority, as it proves themselves able to transcend the laws and restrictions regarding purity and impurity that non-initiates find themselves socially bound to (Urban 1997, pp. 18–19). The goal of such practice is to manifest the bliss of God or Goddess at the embodied level and exist as absolute reality does, in a state of both transcendence and immanence. Ultimately, if one can maintain higher awareness during

heightened sensation rather than allowing it to predominate one's experience, duality becomes dissolved through the very direct experience of one's mind (Śiva) and body (Śakti) consisting in one single blissful state together (Brooks 1990, pp. 69–70; Wilke 2012, pp. 41–44; Wilke 2018, p.138, 166). However, within a Western context that is accustomed to freely partaking and even abusing of these substances, they are less likely to be effective mediums for mediating spiritual experience. Since Sabrina, as previously mentioned, has also been initiated into a *vāmamārga* lineage that makes use of these, she remarked that:

For the *pañcamakāras*, of course as a Westerner, drinking and having sex and eating meat, for the most part, that's not going to be used very effectively in a practice for liberation because we don't see them as taboos, so they're not acting on the psyche as they would for an Indian in a Hindu society. So, they might not be so transgressive.

While wine and menstrual blood may sometimes be given to certain goddesses during *pūjā* (worship) of their *mūrti* (image, statue or idol) as an offering (*prasād*) to please or honour them in Amazzone's *kula*, it was explained to me that only the consecrated wine is afterwards consumed by the practitioner as a means of internalizing the energy and vibrations of the practice. Meat is normally not offered, as vegetarianism is recommended with the aim of practicing *ahimsa* (non-violence), especially for higher levels of initiation.

Furthermore, although it has been argued that the perceived power of using menstrual blood in Śākta ritual in a Hindu context lies in its being an act of proving oneself able to manipulate its destructive as well as its creative potential, as opposed to maintaining a separation from it as orthodox Brahmanical society upholds, this implies that Śāktas in the first place acknowledge not only its auspiciousness as a substance, but also its "impurity" (Urban 2010, pp. 55–56), which Amazzone does not. She argues (Amazzone 2010, pp. 163–76) that before such patriarchal overlays occurred and animal sacrifice came to replace the first blood sacrifice, namely the non-violent offering of menstrual blood, agricultural societies recognized the alignment between women's cycles and those of nature as being sacred. In such contexts, seclusion was not intended to prevent pollution, but rather to allow women to effectively harness that climactic release of power and regenerate their cycle. As evidence that such views continue to exist in India outside of Brahmanical influence, she cites Apffel-Marglin (1994) fieldwork in Orissa and how her informants explained that menstrual blood is not dirty, as one's blood is when sick, but specially granted by the local goddess, as well as the positive view of menstrual blood and its power that was espoused by the culture of her South Indian Śākta teacher who came from a matriarchal village (Amazzone 2010, pp. 170, 173–74). The significance of this is that it demonstrates how limited it can be to view secrecy as a means of necessarily concealing practices that are of a transgressive nature, and of ascribing the power that practitioners believe and experience themselves to be cultivating through practice to the breaking of taboos. While this may be the case among Śākta practitioners whom come from privileged backgrounds in India and as Brooks (1990, pp. 135–36) claims, make up the majority, it is not as much of a useful lens to apply when analyzing less systematized and more local expressions of Śākta Tantrism. As Lorea (2018) remarked during her fieldwork in West Bengal and Bangladesh,

[...] secrets are not ranked for their anti-social or subversive character: the most secret teachings may be actually extremely simple, and socially acceptable [...] They are secret because they are considered to be very precious [...] the equivalence "secret = scandalous" is not always correct. (p. 8)

In Amazzone's *kula*, menstrual blood is cherished and incorporated into meditative and ritual practices because its underlying generative and destructive energy is something that female practitioners share in common with Goddess and as such, is an additional means of achieving identification between self and Goddess. Yet, this power is experienced as being inherent and can be accessed even without the presence of actual blood. As Brenda explained, despite being post-menopausal, "[...] when I do the practices, I feel the same

energy as when I menstruated". In this sense, menstruation figures as a theme that enables the female practitioner to rediscover her relationship to an aspect or state of herself and tap into its power. Although menstruation has still not been completely de-stigmatized in the West and working with it may thus, as Sabrina explained earlier, have a stronger impact on some students' minds, many within the *kula*, including Amazzone herself, shared that they had always been fascinated by it in a positive sense. If some choose not to disclose their use of it, it is not due to any internalized sense of shame about it, but rather that it is part of a personal exchange between self and the divine, the integrity of which can be negatively impacted when external disapproval and judgment are invited, which will become clearer in the section on integrity. What is important to distinguish here is that although the act of reclaiming the power of this relationship to the sacred nature of female bodily processes through practice and choosing to speak about it or not is an act that defies social taboos in a Western context as well, the premise and efficacy of this act, including the reasons for its secrecy, do not stem from a position that necessarily affirms those taboos in the first place, nor is the sense of power derived through this dependent on the latter. Although using menstrual blood instrumentally rather than immediately disposing of it may not yet be socially acceptable, Amazzone and her students do not perceive themselves to be doing something scandalous—on the contrary, they consider it to be very natural and intuitive. The divine status or what [Timalsina \(2011\)](#) calls the "religious value" (p. 279) of menstrual blood in this case is not dependent on menstrual blood being conventionally rejected or inaccessible, nor is its concealment predicated on its being transgressive.

According to [Timalsina \(2011, pp. 278–79\)](#), it is precisely because the *pañcamakāras* are not taboo in Western society that the latter has mostly abandoned their use, as they do not lend themselves to commodification—those with less shock value can be dropped, while those with counter-cultural appeal like the seeming marriage of sex to spirituality in Tantra and the promise of orgasm can be profitably marketed in a context of Judaeo-Christian sensibilities.¹³ However, Amazzone stands strongly against this tendency that has been associated with the Neo-Tantra movement and sees this as being precisely the area where, as [Urban \(2021, p. 13\)](#) has suggested, secrecy can be used as a vestment to protect those who are inflicting physical violence or abusing their power. It is not that she does not recognize the liberating potential of sexual ritual, but rather that she believes that handling the intense power that it generates requires advanced levels of training ([Amazzone 2010, p. 24](#)). Over the course of their lives exploring the world of yoga, meditation and Tantra in the Western context, both Amazzone and her students have witnessed and experienced first-hand or heard about numerous instances of sexual advancements and misconduct that were justified on account of tradition and practice.¹⁴ This is partly what led some of them to Amazzone's *kula*, which while not closed to men, is predominantly made up of women and focuses on female experiences. The sense of safety and support that Amazzone's students reported feeling within their *kula* brings us back to the protective function of secrecy. While discussing the latter, Audrey, a practitioner within the *kula* for the past three years, stated: "[...] the secrecy I think is ultimately someone's fear that something's gonna be misused and taken in a way that takes power from people, rather than gives power".

The fact that Amazzone has told her students not to relate to her as a guru and warns them that in the beginning, they are likely to unconsciously transfer and project feelings onto her, is a transparent attempt at disclosing the kind of dangers that can unfold from the imbalanced power dynamics of a teacher-student relationship. While some of her students confessed to me that they had first placed her on a pedestal, idolized her, or projected onto her, they all came to eventually relate to her on somewhat of an eye-to-eye level due to how down-to-earth and relatable they said she is, which is not to say that they perceive her ability to transmit and embody the teachings to be any less remarkable or powerful. Thus, by relating to her rather as a "spiritual friend", a confidant, and someone on the path who simply has more experience and expertise to share in this domain and guide them, the possibility of deceptively using the power of secrecy respective to the intimate relationship between teacher and student is minimized. This, in turn, prevents the kind

of commodification of the guru into an object of worship/fetishization or stand-in of the deity that [Timalsina \(2011, p. 279\)](#) is critical of in the West. Although the nuances of our discussion of the teacher-student relationship cannot be further delved into in this article, the following extract from my discussion with Sadie summarizes these points well:

It's interesting because I *have* idealized and put on a pedestal my teachers in the past and imagined that they had some secret to the universe that I wanted. And they did in a certain way, but I think that was dangerous for me [...] I think it's very problematic in a Western context for a person to claim some kind of divine power, authority or embodiment. I think the truth is that we're all embodying the divine. Nobody is embodying the divine more than anybody else. We're just taking on different roles, we're putting on different costumes. And Laura is completely devoted to her path and I admire that devotion, I think it's beautiful. And I trust her expertise. I think she's someone who has expertise in a subject matter that I'm interested in and so when I want to learn about psychology, I go to psychology school and when I want to learn about the Goddess, I go to someone with expertise in that subject matter. That's more how I look at it.

In a sense, Amazzone's warning to her students engages them in a process of critical reflection that involves mutually redefining the guru-disciple or teacher-student relationship and its boundaries over time. This kind of innovation is not something that is an exceptionally modern or Western phenomenon, but part of a wider one that has spanned Indian history owing to the freedom that Hinduism's lack of centralization has afforded. As [Dempsey \(2006\)](#) has explained: "[...] guru-disciple relationships, unhindered by Brahmanical ritual prescription, have been a consistent and potent source of regional transformation and innovation" (p. 98).

Overall, the above thus far has pointed out that what may seem like a deliberate attempt to withhold information and retain secrecy from an outsider's perspective can actually simply be the exercising of a personal choice regarding the sharing of a private dimension of one's life that is cherished, or a means of safeguarding the integrity of intimate relationships, such as the one between deity and practitioner or practitioner and teacher. Even when secrecy about one's practice-related experiences is functionally encouraged in relation to intimacy, as a means of not influencing others' experience or allowing one's own to be influenced, it is by no means strictly enforced. Within the *kula*, after transmitting a new teaching or practice, Amazzone regularly follows up with her students and allows them to discuss and compare the experiences they had together if they desire to. The *kula* also uses a Slack channel, where they can turn to each other for mutual support or with inquiries when needed. Holding in mind the teaching that "there are as many paths as there are people, all of which are expressions of Devī", somewhat serves to diffuse the potential dangers of comparison and expectation in their group.

Nevertheless, some have struggled not only with having to censor the extent of what they can say about this personally meaningful and transformative part of their lives with close friends and loved ones, but also with determining how they might eventually be able to apply and transmit part of what they have gained into the exoteric sphere to help others, without transgressing their vows. This was expressed by Sadie, as she is a former research scientist who is now pursuing a doctoral degree in clinical psychology:

I feel like I'm living a double life. I'm in this normal kind of academic world and then I'm doing all these wild practices in secret that nobody knows about, and yet it's the most intimate, important part of my life in many ways. So, there is the drive to want to share that and offer it in a way that can be helpful to people.

Likewise, Margaret, an independent social worker and lawyer, stated that she is "[...] really keen to make sure the Goddess is accessible." Such testimonies demonstrate that it is not in every context that the secrecy of tantric practice is intended to function as what [Urban \(1997, p. 23\)](#) has called a "dual-edged strategy", whereby one develops a "dual or Janus-faced identity" that enables one to comfortably enjoy the benefits of outwardly

maintaining one's status and conforming to social norms, while inwardly relishing in the exclusive power of transcending them. At least, this does not seem to be what is desired among contemporary communities that are guided by teachers who value social activism and perceive the empowerment that is gained through practice as something that can be extended to benefit more than just the individual practitioner, but the wider social sphere¹⁵ and nature itself. Remarking on the limitations that certain health conditions have imposed on her, Amazzone shared that she frequently asks herself: "how can I be an activist at my altar?" When the *kula* gathers, they 'dedicate' the power that they have cultivated together in practice (meaning they intentionally direct it) to whatever global cause or conflict appears to be in need of upliftment or resolution, and they do the same for fellow members within the *kula* who may be going through a hard time and unable to practice themselves. This is something that they are also encouraged to do in their private practice and mirrors Dunn (2019) observation that the *yoginīs* and *tāntrikas* whom DeNapoli (2009), Denton (2012), Hausner (2005) and McDaniel (2012) encountered during their fieldwork "[...] used their *śakti* in the service of others" (p. 301).

Moreover, the kind of intention that is implied by Urban (1997) notion of maintaining a double-norm does not align with the prosocial effects of the practice that were commonly described by my participants, the behavioural and affective changes of which have guided some to be more engaged in certain causes, while considerably improving all of their relationships and interactions. As Cheryl stated: "It's beyond the individual and into the collective that the practices open me up to." In other words, the idea that the splitting of one's identity into a public and hidden form, which results from secrecy, is something that is desirable because it enables one to divorce one's hidden behaviours and actions from the social sphere, thereby making them inconsequential to the latter, is not applicable in this context as it contradicts the integrative impact that the practices have had on my participants. As Sadie explained:

When you are doing these *sādhana*s, there starts to become a point where there's not a separation between life on the cushion and everything else that's happening outside [...] the *sādhana*s start to integrate all the different parts of yourself, so you're not splitting in all these different places and you're not compartmentalizing, you're not putting like "oh, this is this part of my life and that is that part of my life, and these are two things never to meet". It's just like everything is everything and everything is part of a cohesive whole.

While this may sound contradictory given her previous statement about feeling like she is living a double life, it is not and is rather part of the paradoxical state that tantric practice enables one to cultivate—over time, the practitioner who remains active within the world inhabits and experiences both mundane and absolute reality simultaneously. This means that when one experiences a sense of fragmented self, it does not by default eclipse the overarching experience of in fact being integrated. Although the practices are done in secret, they work directly on and through the self; thus, what is cultivated during them gradually constitutes a 'habitus', an embodied disposition that becomes like second-nature (Csordas 2011, pp. 140–41) and is enactively carried out into the exoteric sphere through one's interactions with others and the world. This shift from temporarily inhabiting a perspective and state of being within the practice to being able to consistently maintain it so as to perceive and act through it within the world figured among the most cited aspirations of my participants. In this sense, the esoteric self of this context is not a transgressive escape from the demands of the exoteric social domain, but rather an intimate exercise in forming a self that is better suited to responding to the challenges of the latter.

However, with regard to this altruistic desire to somehow extend the benefits of the practice to others, Kaylah cautioned that one must exercise humility and realize that as much as one may be proud of one's trajectory and want to empower others in a similar way, it may not necessarily resonate with or have the desired effect on them. As this path of practice takes one on an "internal journey", people must find their own way towards it, or as Elena put it, find the practices stepping towards them. If people have not gone

through the process themselves on their own terms, misunderstandings and prejudices about oneself and the tradition are likely to arise, akin to those that we have seen have already long stained the reputation of Tantra, namely that it is crazy, backwards, and superstitious. As Kaylah explained:

We're so passionate about it, we want to talk and we want to help everybody [...] [But] [i]f you shared this with everybody, they wouldn't get it. They wouldn't get the benefits because they wouldn't understand where they're coming from because they haven't done the work to get there, to go through this birth channel. Being birthed into this new realm, this other world, is hard work. All can find Maa's Grace, but not all are ready for this path. Not everybody is meant to go through Maa, that channel.

Ultimately, the ability to discern who is qualified for this path and when an initiate has adequately internalized what they have learned or cultivated the necessary competence to receive further teachings and practices is up to the guru (Weber 2010, p. 68), which is based on a careful assessment of the "individual's moral, intellectual, and personal qualities" (Brooks 1990, p. 71). However, Amazzone admits that even her own sense of judgment has sometimes been off or insufficiently aligned with her intuition. When she finds herself struggling or unsure, she calls upon the assistance of the ultimate guru, Devī, in her endeavours, such as by communicating: "Maa, I trust that you're gonna bring someone who will respect the lineage, the practices, who will be able to hold the energy, bring them to me." This placement of faith is not unusual, as the process of granting *adhikāra*, the right and qualification to practice the rituals of the lineage (Weber 2010, p. 68) within tantric traditions, often traditionally involved recognizing signs that it is the god or goddess (depending on the tradition) themselves who has selected the disciple as being worthy of entering the line of transmission—a confirmation of having received this *anugraha* (blessing or divine grace) was said to be *śaktipāta* (descent of divine energy), an awakening experience that is said to manifest through a series of physical signs (e.g., spontaneous trembling, jolts, tears), altered states of consciousness (e.g., mystical feelings of bliss and union), or shifts in disposition (e.g., aversion towards mundane pleasures) to varying degrees of intensity. The latter were taken to signal not only that the initiate is susceptible, connected to, and able to act through their inherent divinity, but also that the divine within is particularly active and cognizant of the latter's devotion and longing (Padoux 2010, pp. 111, 218; Wallis 2013, pp. 321–31). Although one might interpret this as yet another esoteric exclusionary strategy, Wallis (2013) has argued that

[...] to reserve initiation only for those who had this awakening experience was an attempt to create authentic spiritual community, groups of people for whom religion was not civil or cultural or political, but a deeply felt experiential reality. (pp. 324–25)

Throughout our interviews, Amazzone and many of her students often referred to signs by which they could gauge the manifestation of Devī in their lives and their connection to Her. Thus, these signs were perceived as an affirmation of both the efficacy of the practices and their progress along this path.

3.3. Integrity

But, what does "holding the energy" in the above statement by Amazzone mean? The point that sharing with non-initiates may lead to both misuse and misunderstandings is connected to yet another notion of power, namely, that of energy and karma. Although Amazzone does not claim to be a guru, she explained that the process of conferring initiations and transmitting teachings does put her in a "guru seat" vis-à-vis her students, which involves taking on or inheriting their karmas and has an energetic toll on her that can manifest in physically unpleasant ways, such as exhaustion, sickness, or headaches. In this case, karmas refer to the cumulative effects resulting from an individual's deeds and behaviour that may continue to ripple across multiple lifetimes. Since committed

spiritual practice is thought to gradually halt the perpetuation of karma and uproot its imprint, thereby enabling one's journey towards liberation or a better reincarnation, the act of prescribing such practices brings the guru in relation with their student's destiny and its karmas or baggage, one might say. Thus, the impact that this can have on the teacher's own life places the student in a position of accountability towards them. In this sense, maintaining the vow of secrecy becomes a question of integrity, discipline, commitment, and respect.

The notion of integrity is one that was brought up by many of my participants belonging to Amazzone's *kula*, for whom it held a double meaning. In one sense, integrity refers to the self, in terms of behaving honestly, morally, and responsibly, while in another, it can refer to maintaining the quality and condition of wholeness respective to what they have called the 'container'. While Amazzone used the term 'container' to refer to the supportive function of the *sādhana* itself, others used it to additionally and interchangeably imply the supportive capacity of the *kula*, or the protective role of secrecy itself. As Sabrina explained:

[...] you will create negative karma for yourself [...], not so much as a punishment, but just that when you let things leak, you bring in the energy of others and that really gets tied to you energetically, all their thoughts about what they've been told or exposed to [...] to build the most energy, to extract the most energy, and to digest the most energy, you have to have the sacred container [...] there is a need to "keep the container (the *kula*/and or the practitioner) closed" so the power does not leak out, dissolving its potency due to the interfering energies of speculation, criticism, misunderstanding and incorrect usage of the practice.

In this example, the concept of a container is even used to refer to the practitioner themselves, as a receptacle of power, which brings us back to what Amazzone means by "holding the energy." In her *kula*, the latter is closely connected with the concept of "holding space". When I asked Audrey what this meant, she explained that Amazzone has established a sacred space for the community that is free of judgment and filled with immense presence and love, which consequently makes it easier for whatever needs to be processed through practice to emerge. In her own words:

It's like there's a mastery of having this really pregnant space and it's fertile for whatever needs to come forward from you for healing. And it's not always that you're there specifically for healing, like you show up with whatever you've got, we all have a lot of stuff to figure out. Whether we're in immense pain in that moment or not, it could just be a pattern that you have that really doesn't serve you. You're not thinking about it, but it's still there and has a time and place for bubbling up to be transmuted.

By holding space in this way for her *kula*, Amazzone's students learn how to establish this space in an empowering way for themselves (to 'extract' the energy), and to contribute to maintaining that space in a supportive way for their fellow community members (to 'build' the energy). Thus, cultivating such space is carried through and reinforced within the lineage via practice, which explains why the 'container' can be understood as being simultaneously the *sādhana*, the *kula*, the individual, and secrecy itself—there is a dynamic interplay between each element, as they mutually reinforce each other. It is through creating and maintaining such space that it becomes possible to hold or allow for and experience the energy or the power of that which emerges and is transformed through practice, without being overwhelmed by and unable to contain it (to 'digest' it). As Kaylah specified:

When you're working in a *kula*, you're holding space for each other. So, it's not about being a secret to the world [...], it's more 'cause you're disrespecting not only the work you've done, Goddess and self, but you're disrespecting your *kula*, you're sharing the energy that we've been working to contain to hold each other, to contain each other. So, it's about holding space for the people you're with.

In this case, secrecy fulfills the function of preserving the degree of presence and lack of judgment that is required for the practice to be efficacious and the experiences that unfold through it to be manageable and reach their maximum potential. Recognizing the collective effort that this takes to achieve is once more, an important step in integrity and humility, which also highlights how practitioners are not only accountable to their teachers, but to fellow members of their *kula*. This explains what Amazzone means when she says that she is “[...] trying to create an environment that isn’t hierarchical, but giving hierarchy a value in terms of a container and experience”.

According to Brooks (1990),

[t]antric secrecy [...] is a complex religious category that binds tradition (*sampradāya*) and lineage (*paramparā*) together into a socioreligious community. Secret transmission of tradition is the way in which Tantrics create a communal or “family” (*kula*) relationship [...]. (p. 65)

However, this section has shown that it is not only secrecy itself that solidifies loyalty to the lineage or the *kula*, but the apparent results it has in enabling direct experience and transformation. In other words, a sense of identification with the community and lineage does not unfold merely by virtue of sharing a secret with others, but rather through the environment that secrecy makes possible to repeatedly establish and maintain on an intersubjective basis. That is an environment which, as much as it is contained, is open and receptive to possibility.

4. Motivations and Perceived Benefits of Dialogue

In light of the risks involved, I asked my participants what their motivations were for engaging in the interviews with me and what beneficial outcomes they expect might result from it. The main reason that was provided by a majority of them was that of improving accessibility. They acknowledged that while a ton of published material on Tantra exists, very little has provided insight into the lived experience of contemporary practitioners, which is what is most likely to resonate with readers, be relatable, and draw them towards the path, as finding Amazzone’s book *Goddess Durgā and Sacred Female Power* had done for many of them. The latter was not meant in a proselytizing way but regarded as particularly important for the second most cited reason to participate, which was to help those who may be in search of meaning or a means for alleviating their suffering. In this regard, Sabrina stated that:

Tantra is a precious jewel that was given to me. A gift of a wild and beautiful and daring path for a seeker who desires to explore Life and its mysteries and also, very simply, to relieve suffering that exists in so many forms, both known and unknown, within the body and mind. A way of discovery of the age-old question ... “Who, what am I”? This dialogue may be a way to extend that gift to another who is seeking when they read your research and see it as a guidepost to a path that may call to them. Honestly, I am not concerned what the academic community as an entity thinks, only that it may reach someone else like me who has a deep longing or who may be suffering.

In fact, Sallie specified that details such as the secretive aspects of the practice are not necessary for an individual to resonate with the tradition in the first place. As Amazzone emphasized, the opportunity provided by publication of such research is that it offers a platform through which commonly under-represented voices and conversations can be heard, and it is through creating spaces in which entering into dialogue about spiritual experiences can take place that people who may feel isolated and alone in their manner of relating to the world, who follow what she terms “not a consensus reality path”, can find one another. She admitted that the opportunity to have such conversations with others is what she needed and would have liked to have earlier in her life, which was a sentiment shared by some of her students of a more advanced age, who said they wished they had

found their way to the tradition and practices sooner, seeing as it is a life-long commitment that has so much to offer.

The above ties into another recurring reason cited by my participants, which was the importance of representation and by extension, testimony. There is a sense in which granting a platform for the expression of certain kinds of experiences and allowing them to be understood on their own terms confirms them as being valuable and valid, or at the very least, serves another closely related role that mattered to my participants, which was to dispel misunderstandings and taboos, all of which can enable others to feel more comfortable in opening up and sharing their own stories. As April put it,

I think there's definitely an importance to spreading the word and saying it's valuable and this is why it's valuable [...] Having a presence or saying no, this is real and this is happening and it's another part that we don't see and is important to see.

Similarly, while commenting on the importance of representation, as well as confirming the practices' efficacy and clearing away misunderstandings to enable more respect between cultures, Brenda stated:

I think that's something that people need to know about any of these practices—they work! But they will lead you through your psyche and it's not always going to be exciting, it's not blissful sex, that's not what it is! [...] I think that's the most important to me: that the Mother religion exists and that we're practicing it and that it better our lives and we also think about other people and work to better the world for other people too.

Another way of interpreting this is that bringing such conversations to light can also be empowering, which was a theme frequently highlighted by Amazzone and her students, especially from a gendered perspective. As the following statement by Brenda pertaining to a need for more female scholarship on spiritual traditions shows, this also connects back into the question of improving accessibility:

Something that's said about women is that if one woman does it, then women are encouraged to do it. If you don't see that any woman has done it, it's much harder to be a pioneer. So that's why it's really important for women to be represented.

By sharing narratives of how the practices have transformed their lives, they also hope to empower other women to engage in and carve their place within the tradition. They explained how the world of meditative and yogic practice has been very male-centred, with relatively few examples of how these practices are to be experienced or carried out through a female body. That is a valid observation, which mirrors the actual scarcity in yogic and tantric texts of references to the position of female initiates and what benefits they can expect to acquire from practicing or participating, as the texts were written from a male perspective (Urban 2010, pp. 133–34). Even the *Devī Māhātmyam*, which is the earliest known text¹⁶ “[...] in which the object of worship is conceptualised as Goddess, with a capital G” (Coburn 1991, p. 16), is written with the assumption that the reciter is male, as its preparatory ritual prescriptions guide the devotee to protect their penis and semen (ibid., 106). As this is the main ritual and devotional text of Amazzone's *kula*, she commented that at least Shree Maa's organization has come to offer an adapted version of it that is gender inclusive.¹⁷ Moreover, due to the textual bias of scholarship that was referred to in the introduction, which Dunn (2019) has qualified as “past androcentric tendencies in Indology” (p. 289), very little is known about the historical reality and extent of female presence in tantric traditions and their roles as consorts (*dūtī*), practitioners (*sādhakī*), transmitters of doctrine and supernatural powers (*yoginīs*), and gurus. As Törzsök (2020) has cautioned, early Śākta texts only allow an examination of how women were represented, but their content

[...] cannot be taken to represent historical or social facts. Just as most religious writings in India, these texts are normative and describe an ideal state of things, which can sometimes appear even fanciful. (p. 341)

Interestingly, she also mentions how the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* refers to certain practices of its tradition being transmitted orally by women and not written down (ibid., p. 361). Since I could not directly ask questions about the practices themselves, I attempted to contextually situate Amazzone's approach by asking her about which texts both she and her teachers predominantly base the practices on. However, this was not very insightful in the end, as she emphasized that her lineages have been heavily based on oral transmissions and that "[...] there's secrecy of where the practices come from, the people who give them don't want to be traced and known." A similar explanation was given by Elena, which once again, highlights the importance of representation to this group:

These are oral histories that never got written down because they were embodied and prescriptive. There has been secrecy around them, so we have a responsibility, now that it's been established that writing isn't going anywhere, to be able to just add to that history of things that have been left out and also kind of reclaim the reason for why they were left out [...] It's taken them centuries to be able to acknowledge that there's a history before writing.

Yet another implication of such representation to Amazzone and her *kula* is spreading awareness that there are other paths available, including what she termed indigenous ways of knowing, that carry the potential for restructuring society in a matrifocal way that would be restorative as far as our treatment of nature and each other is concerned. What was being implied by this is that we currently find ourselves in an era in which circumstances necessitate and justify bringing the teachings and practices more into the public light. This sense of urgency was especially poignant since ten of my participants were American, one was Canadian and another was British, and the interviews were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as escalating civil tension amidst the Trump administration, and concerns about Brexit and the election of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. However, such views, as exemplified by Amazzone (2010) statement that "[c]learly Taleju, Kālī and Durgā are powerful Divine models for our resistance efforts in the West" (p. 163), are neither modern nor historically unique—during India's struggle for independence from the British, politically active figures such as Sri Aurobindo Ghose perceived Śākta rituals and worship of goddesses like Kālī as being particularly amenable to inspiring the kind of unity and retaliation that was deemed necessary to usher in renewal and regeneration in India (which itself was represented as the embodiment of the Mother/Goddess/Śakti) and put them into action for that cause (Bolle 1965, pp. 80, 82, 86; Urban 2003, pp. 88–104). Moreover, the Tantras and their teachings themselves were said to have been initially revealed out of necessity, for enabling liberation at an expedited rate due to the absolute degeneracy of the *kali-yuga*, the final cycle of the world before it is reset (Urban 1997, pp. 12–13). In each case, the question of for whom the teachings and practices ought to be made secret or accessible is one that has been negotiated and adapted according to the circumstances of the context and whatever notion of the 'greater good' was guiding the person in a position to reveal them at the time.

In Amazzone's case, the 'greater good' is achieving a more sustainable way of life and the hope is that having conversations like these will at least build bridges that draw people with similar needs, intentions, and goals together, thereby enabling such a way of life to gradually become a reality that *is* the consensus and *can* benefit everyone. As the benefits that one cultivates through practice directly affect one's manner of relating to the world and others, so too then are the latter nudged into a positive direction. This idea was also expressed by Audrey as follows:

I don't feel like I have an ultimate goal. I do want to be the best mother that I can be, since I've chosen to mother two little goddesses. So whatever work I do on my self, I feel like benefits them in the world and I feel that the more time, well it's not about time, but the more time and energy I spend in this energy, the more I'm bringing not just to me in this lifetime, but to the world. And I feel like that's a helpful raising of the level of consciousness on the planet [...] I'm not gonna tell everyone else how to fix themselves, but the more fixing I do of myself,

the more fixing I can affect in the world. Fixing is a funny word for that, but . . . alignment.

Although the nuances of how the members of Amazzone's *kula* interpret the meta-physical themes of the practice in different ways were not possible to address in this article, it is worth mentioning that her teachings are accessible to and effective even for agnostics and atheists, as three of her students whom have been with her the longest identify as such. As Sadie emphasized, "I want it to be understood that you don't have to be a believer to follow this path. It's not about belief, it's about direct experience." Among those who identified as being more cerebral and scientifically inclined, it was emphasized that were it not for the fact that they had first had anthropology courses in university that familiarized them with the social function of myths (which includes the concepts of gods/goddesses) or encountered Amazzone through her academic lectures on goddess traditions, this pathway may have never opened to them. April explained how unlike the Indic context, where practitioners may inherit the practice through their family, those within a Western context, with no prior socio-cultural exposure to it, may feel a need to intellectually grasp it before they engage in it and therefore desire the liberty to directly ask 'why' questions, which an academic environment allows for. Thus, she perceives teaching and publishing about these topics in an academic context to be important for generating interest and understanding, as well as assisting people in making more informed choices. In a similar vein, the following statement by Sadie provides an apt way of bringing this section to a close:

[if] scholarship helps people who are really intellectually-minded to open to a pathway that is experiential and that actually goes beyond the intellect, then maybe that's our role. I kind of feel like scholars are translators from one realm to another.

At a time when the academic criteria of objectivity for studying religious or spiritual traditions are beginning to be questioned, which is to say the expectation that scholars take no personal interest in that which they study, lest their status as "believers" compromise their ability to think in an unbiased and critical way (McDaniel 2018, pp. 307, 310), and scholar-practitioners are paving the way to more authentic insight by narrowing the gap between etic ("outsider") and emic ("insider") perspectives (Osto 2020, p. 80; Wallis 2013, pp. 15–18), this may become increasingly more common.

5. Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that while it is helpful to have frameworks, such as Urban's set of strategies, by which secrecy within esoteric communities can be examined, caution must be exercised in assuming what ends they are intended to meet. In the case of Amazzone's *kula*, it was shown that conscious efforts have been made to diminish the kind of unequal and hierarchical distribution of status and power that can result from the structural and strategic application of secrecy in various ways. Although the notion of power was certainly present throughout our discussion of secrecy, it was more so in terms of the *śakti* and actual transformative efficacy of the practice, including how secrecy, as a 'container', sets the necessary conditions in place to effectively experience, manage, direct and maintain these. The latter was shown to be achieved through a structure of graded access, as well as a set of intimate social relations, such as that between student-teacher, practitioner-deity, and fellow *kula* members. Moreover, secrecy was spoken of less as a means of protecting power, but rather of protecting initiates and non-initiates alike from abuses of power in a social sense. Taken together, these findings reflect Hausner (2013) argument that

[t]he yogini embodies power as a tool, not an end. What that power is meant to effect—and the set of social relationships, hierarchies, and the interests for whom it is mobilized—will be historically and culturally located, dynamically shifting. (pp. 15–17)

Ultimately, it is hoped that by providing insight into emic articulations of the definition, functions, and experience of secrecy, that a broader and more nuanced range of possibilities will be up for consideration by researchers who intend to navigate this field of exchange that is gradually expanding. An understanding of what must be kept secret and what exactly matters and is at stake for practitioners of a given tradition in maintaining secrecy will enable researchers to proceed in a more ethically sound way and produce data that represent their participants more authentically. At the same time, an awareness of what values, motivations, and perceived benefits underlie participants' willingness to engage in dialogue with outsiders and negotiate the boundaries of secrecy can enable researchers to better formulate their questions, widen the range of themes addressed, and make the purpose and outcome of their research less one-sided.

Although the findings of this study represent only one group of practitioners (namely, only twelve out of approximately sixty actively engaged members of Amazzone's *kula*) within a specifically Western context and may be unique to them, it was shown that certain features traditionally found across Hindu streams of tantric practice are included in its approach. An analysis that compares the views presented in this paper with those of Western Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners is still underway, as part of my doctoral dissertation. Some of the issues that were neither examined nor possible to address within the scope of this paper include: whether the feminist perspectives of members of Amazzone's *kula* and the empowerment they derive from deity yoga are related to the social function and power dynamics of secrecy; whether the fact of entrusting the interpretation and sharing of what knowledge is exchanged in dialogue to the field of academia does not in itself constitute an elitist act; and how the issue of cultural appropriation was found to be tangentially related to secrecy, insofar as two participants cited it as being a reason for concealing the fact that they engage in Hindu practices from others.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This project has undergone ethical review and has been approved by a Chair of the Working Group Ethics of the German Anthropological Association (DGSKA) at Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg's Institute of Anthropology.

Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent has been obtained from all participants to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: I am deeply grateful to Jared Lindahl for his suggestion of entering into contact with both Terje Sparby and Ulrich Ott and his team in 2020, and for all of the doors of opportunity that this has opened for me. I would also like to thank Amazzone and her students for making a significant part of this research project possible and being so supportive about it.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ See (Hatley 2019) for a historical overview of the meanings of the term '*yoginī*'.

² See (Brunner 1992; Sanderson 1995) for examples of this within tantric traditions.

³ See (Bell 1992, pp. 72–74; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Ishii 2012) for explanations of this.

⁴ See (Urban 2003) for an entire book on this topic.

⁵ For examples of Tantra's marginalization and association with "irrational" and "sinister magic" even prior to this Western influence within India, see (Burchett 2012).

⁶ See (Urban 2012) for a complete chapter on this topic.

⁷ See (Cabezón 2003) for a complete chapter on this topic.

⁸ See (Dempsey 2006) for an entire book on this topic.

⁹ See (King 1978) for a complete article on this issue.

¹⁰ See (Petitmengin 2006) for an exposition of this method.

¹¹ For examples of this from within yogic and tantric traditions, see (Jacobsen 2012).

- 12 For explanations of how this dissociation has occurred and been negotiated historically, see (Brooks 1990; Wilke 2012).
- 13 For examples of how this has been done, see (Urban 2012).
- 14 For some examples of major scandals, see chapter 7 of Osto (2020).
- 15 For an example of this which even led to a complete abandonment of secrecy, see chapter 4 of Dempsey (2006).
- 16 Dated more accurately from the third to fourth century C.E., according to Joshi (2002, p. 47).
- 17 See (Saraswati 2002) for the adaptation in question.

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