"How many know how to (make) love?"[1]

Semantic understanding of Bengali Bāul songs and politics of power in the lineage of Bhaba Pagla

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The songs performed by the Bāuls of Bengal are characterized by a charmingly enigmatic language by which terms and practices related to the dimension of sexuality and ontogenesis are concealed under the veil of intriguing metaphors. While the *orature* of the Bāuls has been widely explored from the literary as well as the religious point of view, the question of the semantic reception of the songs has rarely been considered. The semantics of these songs concerns the fundamental opposition between man and woman, as the only unborn difference Bāuls acknowledge in human beings. The foundation of such a difference lies in the sexually active body. Although, for a meaningful practice of ritualized sexual encounter (*yugala-sādhanā*), male-female identities (*svabhāb*) have to be transcended, and male practitioners are recommended to adopt a feminine nature (*nārī bhāb*). This article will focus on the problem of the interpretation and understanding of Bāul songs revealing how a diverse typology of listeners or performers can differently explain the meaning of a song and its allegorical images related to the microcosmic body of the practitioner.

The analysis of the interpretations of a selected sample of 'songs of practice' (*sādhanā saṅgīt*) composed by the saint-songwriter Bhaba Pagla (1902 – 1984) will show how the lyrics are understood and explained on different levels according to the social and religious background of the informant: a superficial, literal layer; a *bhakti*-oriented metaphysical layer; and an esoteric-Tantric layer, decoded and orally transmitted by living gurus. Combining the approach of the contextual theory of the study of folklore and verbal arts with the theories on the interpretation of metaphors and the semiotics of reception, I will try to show how different exegeses of the same songs – collected during an ethnographic investigation in the field – can at times encourage the institutionalization of a cult purified from its embarrassing 'Tantric' aspect or, in other cases, reinforce the system of beliefs about bodily fluids and sexuality of an esoteric community. The problem of the heterogeneity of oral interpretations and the polysemy of songs' meanings will lead to a discussion on the politics of power that entangle emerging Bengali cults and their negotiation between universalism and esoteric secrecy.

[1] *Pirīt karā jāne kayjanā*, a song composed by Bhaba Pagla and widely performed by the Bāul singers throughout West Bengal.

1. Introduction

The framework in which this paper is inserted concerns the problematic evolution of the literary repertoire of one particular oral tradition: the esoteric Bengali songs composed and performed throughout West Bengal by groups of mystic practitioners and/or itinerant musicians generally called Bāuls. The Bāuls are well known for their antinomianism and their strong belief in (and practice of) equality among human beings, castes and religions. It is a common saying among Bāuls that there are only two *jāti*s on Earth: males and females, being the only evident differentiation when one comes, naked, in the world[2]. Their *sādhanā* (practice for self-realization) is highly interiorised, it neglects exterior ritualism such as icon worship and pilgrimage, and involves a set of body-centered practices and techniques (*deha-sādhanā*, i.e. knowledge and control of breath and of bodily fluids and emissions) based on the control of the five elements of nature in their embodied, microcosmic form.[3]

The set of beliefs and practices transmitted through the songs of the Bāuls is centred around a soteriological use of sexuality and a comprehension of the dynamics of universal creation-destruction through the knowledge of ontogenesis and the control of human reproductive substances and processes (Salomon 1991: 180; 272). Similar Tantric-yogic practices represent a shared heritage that is common among several groups and lineages of Bengali esoteric cults that emerged from the same Sahajiyā-Nāth-Sufi confluence of ideas in pre-modern Bengal (Cashin 1995: 17). Thus different groups of practitioners, who may call themselves using numerous and heterogeneous self-definitions, such as *bāul, fakir*, *darbeś, baiṣṇab*, *kartābhajā, lālanśāhī,* etc. share a common cosmology, soteriology and a set of body-centred practices that are referred to, in the oral corpus of their songs, with a similar and overlapping terminology (Cashin 1995: 15; Cakrabarti 1985: 9-11; Lee 2008: 69-72).

[2] This strongly polarized view of the male and female gender seems to leave little or no space at all for a third gender or other, differently perceived gender identities. This is not totally true, if we consider that, for practitioners, even the fundamental opposition between *nārī* and *puruṣ* ultimately has to be transcended: expert practitioners ought to realize their inherently transgender identity in order to successfully conduct the practice of the union (*milan*). For this reason, a famous and controversial verse of the Kartābhajās, a sister sect of the Bāuls (Banerjee 1995), says: "the woman must be a *hijrā* [hermaphrodite] and the man must be a *khojā* [eunuch]". For an 'ethnography of meaning' of this sentence, see Urban (2001: 98-100). For a study of 'third gender' identities, homosexuality and androgynous elements in the Indian tradition, see O'Flaherty (1980) and Wilhelm (2008).

[3] It is not my priority in this paper to give a full account of the esoteric practices involved in the religious aspect of the Bāul doctrine. Furthermore, the literature on this topic is quite rich: see for example Jha (1995, 1997, 1999), or, in English, Openshaw (2004), Fakir (2005), Hanssen (2001) and others.

In this paper I am going to analyse the oral tradition of Bengali esoteric songs through the particular case of the songs of Bhaba Pagla (Bengali *Bhabā Pāg'lā*, or Bhaba "the mad"[4], ca. 1902-1984).[5] Born in Amta, a village in the Dhaka subdivision of Bangladesh, as Bhabendramohan Ray Chaudhury, Bhaba Pagla is known as a very talented musician, an ecstatic composer of religious songs (*sādhanā saṅgīt*) and an enlightened spiritual teacher, revered by his extraordinarily heterogeneous devotees as a *siddha* and an *abadhūta*, a realized saint and a perfected being with miraculous powers. He composed an enormous number of songs, some written down, and others developed extemporaneously while playing the harmonium. Some of his songs have been published by the most zealous among his devotees (Khetri 1989), and by amateur and professional researchers of Bengali literature (Bandhyopadhyay 1988; Cakrabarti 1995). A good amount of his handwritten compositions are preserved in the cupboard of his grand-son Sanjay Chaudhury in the main Kālī temple that Bhaba Pagla himself founded in Kalna (Bardhaman district). Nevertheless, the most vibrant and rich collection of Bhaba Pagla's songs is preserved in the memory of the performers, who may be both Bāul singers or disciples of the lineage of Bhaba Pagla, or even professional singers of *śyāmā saṅgīt* (devotional Śākta songs, like those of the famous saint-poet Ramprasad Sen; see Seely and Nathan 1982 and McDermott 2001) and Bengali folk songs. The notes of Bhaba Pagla's *sādhanā saṅgīt* resonate in the fairs and on the stages of almost every corner of West Bengal, where his songs are particularly diffused in the districts of Birbhum, Bardhaman, Bankura and Nadia. Played in a multiplicity of performative occasions, his compositions can be heard at Bāul festivals (Bāul or Bāul-Fakir *melā*), at the gatherings and fairs dedicated to Bhaba Pagla (e.g. at the annual *mahāpūjā*s at the temples and ashrams he founded, etc.), and at the intimate music sessions that take place in the evening among the disciples of the lineage, on the veranda of a little Kālī temple or an ashram. Due to the recent popularization and commercialization of Bāul songs and their triumphal entry in the realm of the recording and film industries (Ferrari 2012: 32-33), it is not uncommon nowadays to hear a song of Bhaba Pagla in a Hollywood-like production partly set in Kolkata (for instance, in a short scene of the

[4] Madness is seen, in both Siddha and Bhakti traditions, as a praiseworthy quality: rather than clinical madness, it refers to the condition of the self-realized, who is seen by common men as a madman. Attributes such as Pāglā, Khyāpā etc. are recurrent as epithets for important personalities of the Bāul realm. See Kinsley (1974), McDaniel (1989), Feuerstein (2006).

[5] For more information on the composer and his relationship to Bāuls in the context of religion and folklore in modern and contemporary Bengali history, see Lorea (2016).

film *The Namesake*, directed by Mira Nair, a couple of Bāuls sing one of Bhaba Pagla's songs) or in a commercial *masala* film made in Tollywood.[6]

Bhaba Pagla gathered a wide number of disciples during his lifetime and created a network of followers based around the ashrams and Kālī temples that he founded. As a memory of his message, he left a very cryptic and mixed repertoire of compositions in which he indiscriminately used a miscellaneous assortment of Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, Islamic, Tantric and *dehatattva*-related terminology. After his departure, his charismatic personality started to be revered in different ways by different strands of Bengali popular religiosity at the same time: on one hand, he is revered as a powerful and accomplished guru by the heterodox strand connected with the initiatic religion of Bāuls, or, more generally, by *bartamān panthīs*[7]. On the other hand, he is quasi-divinised and worshipped as a Śākta saint by a more conservative and orthodox strand, tinged with the philanthropic and reformist zeal of Vivekananda's "neohinduism" (Basu 2002; Sellmer 2007).

The former strand is esoteric and non-institutionalised. The latter is exoteric and institutionalised; it strongly supports a path of devotion (*bhakti mārg*), charity and social "service" (*sebā*)[8] as a religious practice. This orthodox strand is led by affluent disciples based in Kolkata, who organize gatherings, "brotherhood marches" and religious debates at the famous Kālī temple of Dakshineshwar, and by the *adhikārīs* in charge of the rituals at some of Bhaba Pagla's Kālī temples; most of them took formal renunciation (*sannyās*) in the Giri order of the Hindu monastic tradition known as *Daśanāmī sampradāya*.

Between the two divergent streams lies a variegated multitude of followers, devotees, singers and performers of Bhaba Pagla's songs: they creatively negotiate between the unorthodox and the orthodox poles in a varied and rich continuum of religious creeds and behaviours associated with the historical figure of Bhaba Pagla as the founder of an incredibly ramified *parampara*.

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[6] During one of the last visits in the main temple, situated in Kalna (Bardhaman district), one of the oldest disciples of Bhaba Pagla was having me listen, from his mobile phone, the cover song of *Nadī bharā ḍheu* ("The river is full of waves"), a very popular song of Bhaba Pagla, in its disco-remake for the movie "Jio-kaka". The same song has been recorded in a hard-rock version by the fusion Bangla band "Bolepur Bluez" (the song is on You Tube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1cc_PzpEdo, last visit 20/01/2015).

[7] The term refers more broadly to adepts of the same body-centered esoteric religious practice who may not comfortably refer to themselves as 'Bāuls', a controversial definition that does not match any rigid identity (see Urban 1999). It has been largely used by Jeanne Openshaw to indicate the various lineages of practitioners that believe in *bartamān* (that which is experienced by one's own senses and direct experience) as opposed to *anumān*, inference derived from sacred scriptures and dogmatic prescriptions (Openshaw 2004: 113-117).

[8] On charitable activities and the connection between *sebā* and the institutionalisation of the Ramakrishna Mission see Pandya (2014: 89-114).

How can a single guru be the initiator of such a diversified number of traditions, and in such a short span of time? In this article I argue that the polysemy of Bhaba Pagla's song texts potentially allows the religious message of the same character to find a place in disparate religious currents. Bhaba Pagla's songs are inherently open to be interpreted in different ways according to the profile of the performer, the guru, or the member of the audience who is interpreting them.

Ascribing to the wider tradition of esoteric songs in Bengali, Bhaba Pagla's songs are similar to Bāuls' and Fakirs' songs for they are characteristically polysemic and multi-layered, and the widespread use of metaphors and enigmatic expressions allows them to be semantically understood according to different interpretative layers: a literal layer; a metaphysical-devotional layer, accepted and transmitted by the more orthodox stream of devotees; and an esoteric layer that decodes the metaphorical language according to the Tantric-yogic *deha-sādhanā* transmitted among the initiates.

The possibility of multifold interpretative lines is inherent in the linguistic strategy known as *sandhyā bhāṣā*, the twilight/intentional language (Bharati 1961: 261-265) that typically accompanied Bengali Tantric literature since its very beginnings, from Buddhist Sahajiyās' compositions of Medieval *caryāpada*s until the more recent and popular refrains of Lalon Fakir's songs.[9] Most of the scholars who discussed the literary devices and the functions of *sandhyā bhāṣā* were interested in the reasons why this code-language was employed. Many described the causes that brought to the necessity of using a secret language to conceal esoteric messages (Eliade 1958: 250-251), while others reasoned on its structure and on the connections between metaphorical worlds and cognitive processes (Hayes 2003, 2006). I will instead focus on the consequences of the use of a multi-layered symbolic language. Through the analysis of a selected set of interpretations of some of Bhaba Pagla's songs, I will focus on how the form and literary devices utilized in Bhaba Pagla's *sādhanā saṅgīt* justify the emergence of apparently contradictory cults and witness the increasing institutionalisation of a twentieth-century Bengali representative of "religious madness" (McDaniel 1989; Feuerstein 2006).

In this paper I will investigate:

- how the semantic understanding of the same lyrics changes according to the different context of reception and individual receptors.
- how we can explain the heterogeneity of meanings attributed to a single song or a single metaphor within a song.

[9] Practitioners do not refer to the language of their songs as sandhyā bhāṣā, but rather they describe it through various expressions: for example, the language of signs, saying through hints, or the upside-down language (see Section 4).

- the role of *sandhyā bhāṣā* in the emergence of considerably different *paramparā*s descended from the same founder-guru.
- how a methodology concerned with the study of local interpretations can improve our understanding of religious practices.

In order to explore the possible solutions to the problematic questions that I mentioned, I use the oral exegesis provided by my informants – mostly *dīkṣā* gurus (gurus who are authorized to give initiatory mantras), performers and disciples of the Bhaba Pagla lineage – and elaborate upon the oral and written sources that I collected during two years of fieldwork (July 2011 – August 2013) in West Bengal with the theoretical and methodological tools provided by the *contextual* and the *performance theory* of the study of folklore and verbal arts (Ben-Amos 1971; Abrahams 1972; Bauman 1984). This interdisciplinary approach is based on the assumption that the analysis of a folkloric production – a text – has to be understood within its performative context, taking into account its existence as an 'event' - rather than as a static 'product' - created by the dialectic interaction between performers, audiences, socio-cultural milieu and spatial-temporal settings. Combining the folklorists' perspective with the approach towards metaphorical language, meaning and interpretation proposed by linguistic theories on metaphor and the semiotics of reception (Lakoff and Johnson 2008; Eco 1990; 2004), I attempt to connect the existence of contrasting interpretations of song texts with the politics of power that affect emerging Bengali cults in their negotiation between universalism and esoteric secrecy.

2. A theoretical premise on the study of interpretation and meaning

> Attempts to explicate this poetry can easily go awry. If you ignore traditional lore, you're a fool. If you approach the material as a scholar pulling long lists of meanings and equivalents out of your pocket, you're a fool. If you don't have an intimate, immediate understanding of the poem, you have nothing. If you report your personal interpretation, why should anyone believe you? Even in assuming that there is a hidden meaning to be dug out, you may be playing the fool: who is to say you are not describing a naked emperor's clothes?
>
> Upside-down language should make you feel like a fool: that is part of its function.
>
> Linda Hess (1983: 314)

In her article on the "upside-down language of Kabir", Hess (1983) rightly points out that it is incredibly difficult to interpret the well-known Sant poet's songs, which abundantly use paradoxical

images, riddles and yogic jargon. In her struggle to find a coherent method for analysing Kabir's verses, Hess reveals a number of factors that make a serious study of esoteric songs extremely challenging, which may in fact be valid for the context of Bengali esoteric *orature* as well.

First of all, the scholar of esoteric literature has to face the ethical and epistemological problem (Urban 1998) of whether one can ever know with certainty the true substance of what is hidden, and then, supposing one can, the question of whether one should reveal it publicly, an issue that Hugh Urban has called the "double bind" of secrecy (1998, 209). Dealing with the interpretation of esoteric songs, songs that concern practices reserved to the insiders of a particular lineage, the researcher has to be aware of the limited access one may have to the concealed teachings; even if the researcher has received formal initiation into the lineage, one has to consider that certain truths may be accessible only to particular stages of advancement of one's personal practice. Moreover, the revelation expressed by an esoteric song is supposed to be understood through a practitioner's experience and intuition, and not by the means of a scholar's analytical and literary study. In this sense, as Hess cleverly suggests, it is basically useless to compile long lists of esoteric terminology and glossaries of esoteric metaphors in order to create the illusion of 'correct' interpretations of the 'songs of sādhanā', as some studies on Bāul songs have tried to do (Ray and Tat 2006: 24-30).

With this brief premise on the difficulty of analysing the *content* of the knowledge transmitted through song texts' interpretations, I suggest that a legitimate approach to the study of the songs' meaning is offered by a "phenomenology of songs' understandings," a comparative study of the *form* (Urban 1998: 218) of the interpretations that are given by those who have the authority to confer a meaning, i.e. the members of Bhaba Pagla's lineage and the cultural mediators of his religious message: Bāul performers. In this way we are eloping from the constrictive "double bind of secrecy," for we will not be concerned with finding out *the* correct interpretation of one song, but rather we will focus on how different interpretations look like, in which points they differ, why they differ, what sociocultural traits and religious affiliations are associated with each interpretative layer, and similar problematic issues.

The study of meaning and interpretation of Bāul songs would add an important dimension to the understanding of an oral tradition that has rarely been investigated from the point of view of its *reception*. While the academic literature concerned with Bāuls' tenets and texts has been widely explored from the literary (Cakrabarti 1990), anthropological (Hanssen 2001; Knight 2011 etc.) and religious point of view (Sharif 1973; Wahab 2011; Salomon 1991 etc.), very few tried to present an *emic* understanding of what Bāul *gān* – songs which constitute an encyclopaedia of beliefs, techniques, and codes of behaviour for the initiates – is all about from the "native point of view" (Geertz 1974). The

focus on individual interpretations, instead of a group's tradition, could add an important aspect in the study of esoteric cults and their "verbal art" (Bascom 1955) for multiple reasons.

Firstly, the study of the reception of song texts can reveal the lack of uniformity among "the folk" - an entity that has long been considered as the "anonymous masses of tradition-oriented people" (Dorson 1978: 23) - and the existence of conflictual dimensions among audience and performers of a same genre. In the words of Bonnie C. Wade (1976: 74):

> For folklorist John Greenway, one of the most important facets of this type of study of folksong texts is that it can reveal the lack of uniformity in sentiment on the part of "the folk" – a lack which he suggests might come as a surprise to those who have been educated with the rather unconscious assumption (reinforced by much folklore research) that "the folk" all feel the same way about things. Greenway feels that there is much to be gained from understanding conflicting points of view in song texts. The Denisoff and Truzzi studies illuminate Greenway's point that "the folk" do not all feel the same way about things. Studies of conflicting ideology in folklore further expand the functionalist argument on social function of song texts.

In fact, it is indeed through a functionalist study of the songs that we will try to explain conflicting understandings of Bhaba Pagla's songs according to different social and religious strata in the final section.

In the second place, reporting local exegesis of an oral repertoire gives us an account of what the folklorist Alan Dundes called "oral literary criticism" (1966), a dimension that reveals culturally relevant perceptions of a literary genre's aesthetic ideas, literary taxonomies and the uses of figures of speech according to indigenous criteria. If the oral repertoire we are dealing with is not only a folkloric literary production with an entertaining and aesthetic function, but also — and especially — a religiously significant utterance that accompanies a practitioner's *sādhanā* and delineates his identity within a religious group (Trottier 2000: 75-77), then we have what Frank Korom has called an *oral exegesis*:

> Because religious texts and oral utterances generate the possibility of many interpretations by a local community, an inquiry into individual understandings can enable a move outward from the individual to the community in order to address the larger question of the interdependence between "local knowledge," world-view and belief systems. Taken together these three engulfing cognitive domains dynamically inform and construct the indigenous conceptions that underlie religious practices. [...] The study of interpretation in small oral community might enable us to account better for religious change, since significant transformations may occur in very short spans of time. (1997: 154)

Korom has cleverly brought out the relation between contrasting interpretations and religious change, an issue that will turn out to be very resourceful in order to comprehend the diverging understandings of Bhaba Pagla's songs, contextualized in the framework of the relation between the impact of modernisation[10] in rural Bengal and the marginal sexo-yogic interpretations transmitted by a minority of esoteric practitioners.

Among the few scholars that applied the call for an "oral literary criticism" and an "ethnography of speech" (Hymes 1962) to the study of the metaphorical mode of discourse, it is remarkable and worthy of mentioning the study of Keith Basso (1976: 93-121), who investigated the modalities of interpretation of metaphorical speech among Western Apache and revealed indigenous semantic theories for the explication of implicit meanings. In the context of Indian esoteric literatures, it is legitimate to suspect that most of the scholars simply acknowledged the difficulty of making sense of local exegesis and promptly abandoned the task. Thus Kiehnle (1994: 306) sadly admitted that her work on the songs of Jñāndeva are full of "'may be' and 'might be'" that "show how insecure the interpretation is when exclusively based on the readers' acquaintance with the *Jñāndeva Gāthā* and related texts like those of Haṭhayoga [...] and not on any living tradition." In a similar way, Glen A. Hayes conducted an inspiring analysis of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā literature in the light of the most up-to-date linguistic and cognitive theories on metaphor but realized that for these "unsystematic Tantric groups" (2003: 167) we do not have a definite textual corpus to work on, and in the lack of "a written commentarial tradition [...] we are faced with many problems in hermeneutics – complicating an already difficult task. [...] For modern scholars to move beyond basic vocabulary to the analysis of metaphors is thus even more difficult" (Hayes 2003: 167).

I propose that the difficulty faced by the above-mentioned authors can perhaps be extricated if we rely on the interpretations that are orally transmitted among the disciples of a *paramparā*. This is especially important if we are concerned with religious traditions that give absolute priority to the

[10] It is necessary to clarify here that with the term "modernisation" I mean to refer to a concept that originated in the West (Patil 2002, 57), defined as "a process based upon the rational utilisation of resources and aimed at the establishment of a modern society [...] characterised by the application of technology, by extensive social interdependence, urbanisation, literacy, social mobility" (Welch 1971: 2). Agents of modernization in India have been identified as results of the British rule (Patil 2002, 60): rapid transport and communication, Western education, printing press, newspapers and periodicals, industrialization, cooperative societies and banking institutions, modern leadership. To these factors, it is important to add, for the understanding of this research context, the diffusion of Western science and medicine (P. K. Bose 2002) and the governmental support of healthcare based on biomedicine.

spoken word of a Guru rather than to the written text.[11] In this way we would rescue ourselves from the derogatory label of *adepti del velame* ("adepts of the veil") that Umberto Eco (1990: 89) attributed to those who *overinterpreted* texts, hunting for esoteric meanings where there was possibly none and obsessively looking for symbolic signifiers. In the next paragraph I will apply the proposed method for the understanding of a very little selection of Bhaba Pagla's songs and report the oral exegesis of some metaphors that are crucial in the "construction of sexuality" of some contemporary heterodox lineages of West Bengal.

3. The vulture of desire and the death of self-control: oral exegesis of Bhaba Pagla's songs

In this paragraph I discuss a small cross section of the oral exegeses and interpretations that I collected during a field-work conducted with the disciples and the performers of Bhaba Pagla's songs. The songs that have been selected for this article are *Maraṇ kāro kathā śune nā* ("Death pays heed to no one") and *Pirīt karā jāne kayjanā* ("How many know how to (make) love?" - the same verse that I chose as a title for this paper).[12] There are several reasons why I have chosen these two particular songs. First of all, they are very much alive in several performative contexts: they are not strictly reserved to initiates and thus are very well known and frequently heard in many different occasions, from Bāul melās to Kālī pūjās, from intimate gatherings of spiritual teachers and disciples (known as *sādhu saṅga*s) to recorded albums of Bāul songs. Consequently, it is more comfortable for local informants to interpret them. Secondly, both songs deal, in at least one of the proposed layers of interpretation, with the "construction of sexuality" that characteristically permeates the life of the practitioners: an anthropoietic sexuality based on the restraint of the senses, especially of sexual desire, and the identification of sublimated carnal love with divine love – values which lead, as a result, to the attentive avoidance of seminal discharge, and thus to an effective contraceptive method (Lorea 2014b).

The song *Maraṇ kāro kathā śune nā* ("Death pays heed to no one") is apparently a song of the category locally known as *maraṇ smaraṇ,* the remembrance of the inevitability of death in order to find out what is really important in life. The noun *maraṇ* though has different meanings according to

[11] A famous passage of the *Kaulāvalīnirṇaya* says "The fool who, overpowered by greed, acts after having looked up [the matter] in a written book without having obtained it from a guru's mouth, he also will be certainly destroyed" (Goudriaan and Gupta 1981: 12). Similarly, we read in the *Rasaratnākara*: "Neither sequence (oral teachings) without written sources nor written sources without sequence (are acceptable). Knowing the written sources to be conjoined with sequence (oral teachings), the person that then practices partakes of the siddhis." (White 1996: 161).

[12] An exhaustive selection of songs of Bhaba Pagla has been translated by the author (see Lorea 2016: 257-283).

the interpretation offered by informants belonging to different strands of religiosity, who are practicing different stages of *sādhanā*. The term superficially means "death" in its most literal and common use. But in the language of the esoteric songs it means "seminal discharge", an undesirable incident also referred to as "falling" or "breaking"[13], suggesting the failure in the practice of "the protection of the stuff", i.e. *basturakṣā. Bastu* indicates both the cosmic substance out of which the Creation is made and its equivalent microcosmic reproductive substance, which represents the highly valued fluids of the practitioners' body (Hayes 2003: 176). We can easily track the conventional association of the signifier "death" with the referent "seminal discharge" if we use the strategy of intertextuality, and therefore compare its occurrence with the whole corpus of Bhaba Pagla's songs, with the wider repertoire of songs of the same genre, and with the discursive metaphors that are used by gurus and practitioners of the living tradition, for "a single text cannot be fully understood as an independent, self-standing entity" (Finnegan 1992: 21). A common saying among Bāuls is that "one dies in the place where he is born". Accordingly, in one of Bhaba Pagla's songs we hear the verse "*mūlādhār ādhāre janma mṛtyu kāraṇ*": the vessel in the cakra at the base of the spinal chord, in which sexual energy dwells, is the cause of life and death. A number of Bāul and Fakir songs express the same concept using very similar metaphoric terms, showing that the connection between literal "death" and seminal emission as death in the context of *sādhanā* is a canonical literary *topos*. For instance, Sudhir Cakrabarti (1985: 28) reports the song of Duddu Shah: "Life and death are in your hands... life is in keeping your *bīryarasa* [seminal fluid]... one who spills his *bīrya* falls on the way of the animal". The first verse is strikingly similar to the one of Bhaba Pagla, and this reminds us that, in the absence of an indigenous concept of "copyright", authors are free to borrow and recycle previously composed folkloric material if it fits their poetic needs; this is not perceived as a lack of originality or inferior talent; it rather highlights the opposite, for the poet is showing his acquaintance with previously composed expressions, or even entire sentences, that are well-established in the oral memory of the practitioners.

Death pays heed to no one;
It can attack anywhere, at any time!

[13] Seminal discharge is seen as detrimental for men's health in a number of South Asian medical traditions. It is then of crucial importance that the *sādhaka* becomes skilled in the techniques of preservation of his semen. In the ancient classics on religion, medicine and sexology, Haṭhayoga as well as Āyurveda, emphasis has been laid on the preservation of *śukra*. The relation between semen preserved in the body and strength, power and longevity has been transversally remarked, from the Āyurvedic treatise *Suśrutasaṁhitā* until Bengali medical journals of the Renaissance period (see P. K. Bose 2005: 148-164).

That Death cheats you spreading out the net
that Mahāmāyā carries in her lap.
People do nothing but talk,
No one remained whom I could call "mine".

You are still surviving, that's surprising!
Nobody is keeping brahmacarya:
if you could keep a patient detachment,
Infatuation wouldn't have caught your body.
Keep in mind you are going to die
You'll see you'll live longer.
Learn the proper sayings
and the day of death will be known.

Life and death are in your own hands,
this is Bhaba Pagla's true word.
If you had taken shelter in Him/Her,
you wouldn't have died before time.[14]

Most of the adepts of Bhaba Pagla's lineage and the Bāul performers with whom I was discussing this song recognized and explained the song as a recommendation to keep one's *brahmacarya*. If in the classic sense the word indicates a stage of a Brahman's life dedicated to the study of sacred scriptures and strict celibacy (Parmeshwaranand 2000: 249), within the lineage of Bhaba Pagla – as well as in Bāuls' speech in general (Openshaw 2004: 211) - *brahmacarya* means to retain one's *brahma*, the substance responsible for (pro)creation, without abstaining from sex. A *kabigān* singer[15] publicly interpreted the meaning of *brahmacarya* from the stage of a festival dedicated to Bhaba Pagla with the following words (see Fig.2):

[14] The Bengali original text has been published in Cakrabarti (1995: 222). The same version is available on the online database of Bengali folk songs at http://www.iopb.res.in/~somen/lokgiti.html (last visit 20/01/2015). A quite mediocre performance of the song can be watched on You Tube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QqYFRyCOpk (last visit 20/01/2015).

[15] *Kabigān* is a form of debate between two professional poets/singers who improvise their verses and sing with musical and choral accompaniment. He who fails to answer the riddles or is outwitted by the logic of the opponent loses the contest (see Hussain 1997: 493).

> The most important thing is to recognize that the *pitṛdhan* (the 'wealth of the father') preserved in men's head[16] is equal to *param Brahma,* the Supreme Brahma, that which is responsible for creation, and one should always preserve it and control it so that it is not discharged unnecessarily[17].

Bolay Ray Baul, a professional Bāul singer originally from the Jessore district of Bangladesh, who was performing at the same festival, gave a similar interpretation: "This song is to remind us that since we are born we will also die. Death could happen at any time, but it is also in your hands: since we are born we keep on distressing and damaging our body. If I don't preserve the strength that is inside of my body, and I spoil it, I lose it, that is *maraṇ.* It means that one has to maintain his *brahma*"[18]. Bijayananda Giri Maharaj, the priest of the Kālī temple of Badkulla (Nadia district) founded by Bhaba Pagla, who took formal *sannyās* from a Hindu monastery, gave the following interpretation: "Life and death is in your hands... The death he is talking about concerns the body-centred doctrine (*dehatattva*). The loss of *bīrya* (semen) is *maraṇ.* Protect your *brahma* and you'll not die unnecessarily[19].

From the interpretations given so far we can realize that the metaphorical "death" of Bengali esoteric songs is not at all a crystallized literary topos that is conventionally used in a fixed repertoire of themes: far from being a "dead metaphor" (Stern 2000: 28), its metaphorical referent is immediately recognized in the semiotic reception of the listener/performer/practitioner. Far more than a linguistic mode of expression, as Hayes has noted in the context of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās' metaphorical language (2003, 165), the *sandhyā bhāṣā* employed in these compositions works together "with bodily experience and image schemata to create coherent metaphoric worlds". What Glen A. Hayes has pointed out in his investigation of metaphors of life and birth (2006: 59-61) are equally valid for the analysis of this sexual metaphor of 'death'. The signifier *maraṇ* simultaneously indicates a real-life experience - literal death - and a bodily experience – ejaculation – connected through an indigenous perspective on bodily health by the reason of which seminal emission is weakening and detrimental for men's health. Ultimately, in the non-dualistic vision that the practitioner aspires to

[16] It is a common belief and a deeply held Hindu notion that semen is stored in the brain. See Carstairs (1967: 84); O'Flaherty (1980: 45). The last verse of one song of Bhaba Pagla says: "the diadem of the brain / I tied it very well" (in T. Bandyopadhyay 1988: 136).

[17] The performance has been recorded in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district) in occasion of the "Bhabār Bhābnā Festival" in memory of Bhaba Pagla, 28/01/2013.

[18] Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district), personal collection of field-work recordings. Otherwise differently specified, all the oral sources used for this paper are available on request and belong to the personal digital catalogue of field-work recordings of the author.

[19] Interview dated 29/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

acquire, the two are not different, and "it is precisely the paradoxical identity of those two ontological opposites which the songs wish to stress", as Per Kvaerne (2010 [1977]: 42) has remarked in respect to the function of polysemy in the language of the Medieval Tantric songs *caryāpada*s. In fact, "real" death and "microcosmic" death find a place side by side in the interpretation proposed by Gosain Amulya Ratan, one of the eldest disciples of Bhaba Pagla, and a *dīkṣā* and *śikṣā* guru[20] of a heterodox branch of this lineage:

> If you acquire the power of *brahmacarya* you can fulfill everything. First "learn the proper sayings" [see third stanza], words of Hari, words of *sādhanā*: it means, learn from the practitioners how to work with your breath [*pracak, kumbhak, recak,* lit. inhaling, retaining the breath and exhaling]... So life and death will be in your hands, and you will live life after death being remembered, being alive on the mouths of the people: your body will die but your attainments, your actions (*karma*) survive[21].

Some other members of the community of Bhaba Pagla's lineage proposed very different interpretations. While the above-mentioned oral sources were referred by Bāuls, teachers of *deha-sādhanā* and initiatory gurus at least acquainted with body-centered practices, the disciples who belong to the more institutionalized side of the lineage preferred very literal interpretations. Gopal Khetry, an ardent devotee belonging to the urban milieu of middle-class Marwari businessmen, is the spokesman of the "exoteric" facade of the lineage. He manages the website www.bhabapagla.com and organizes periodic gatherings in honour of Bhaba Pagla at Dakshineswar (the famous temple of Kālī, in Kolkata, connected with the religious activities of Ramakrishna) with the support of several religious and political groups. After the annual *mahāpūjā* of Digha (East Midnapore district) celebrated at the Kālī temple in his property, he introduced the custom of visiting hospitals and orphanages, bringing fruits and cloths to the sick and the poor. He feels that his mission is to propagate the message of his guru, which he does by stressing the universalistic aspects of equality and philanthropy contained in Bhaba Pagla's message, and assimilating his path with the successful antecedents of Ramakrishna Paramhamsa and Vivekananda[22]. In his interpretation of the song, "life and death are in your hands" in the sense that "a man that preserves *brahmacarya* and is truthfully

[20] It is quite common among Bāuls to have a guru for the initiatory mantra and a different guru for the teaching of esoteric body-centered practice. See Openshaw (2004: 140-146)

[21] Interview dated 3/12/2012, in Jugpur ("Dhaka Colony", Nadia district).

[22] Interviews dated 28/04/2013 (at the interviewee's residence in Kolkata) and 12/02/2012 at Harbala Mandir in Digha (East Midnapore district). Gopal Khetri is also the editor of the magazines "Jaba Bhaba" and "Bhabamrta" and of several books, CDs and videos, of which a complete list is provided at http://www.bhabapagla.com/journals.html (last visit 25/01/2015).

involved in the way of *sādhanā* becomes *trikāldarśī*, he knows past, present and future and he exactly knows on which day he is going to die"[23].

Another literal interpretation was given by Dhulu Dhulu, the grand-daughter of Bhaba Pagla, a young woman who was participating as a member of the audience at the festival in Barrakpur: "Since we are born, we know we have to die. Death is sudden and unexpected. But we can control our life to a certain extent: we can avoid accidents, if we are cautious. That's why Bhabā is saying '*marbe bale mane rekho*', keep in mind that death is there, so you'll beware and be more attentive"[24]. It might seem surprising that this exegesis was given by a disciple who has been growing up with the family of Bhaba Pagla himself, and, moreover, whose father is a *dīkṣā guru* of the lineage. After Bhaba Pagla's death, though, the descendants transformed the main ashram of Kalna into the centre of an institutional cult that revolves around the divinised character of the founder. The sons and grand-sons of Bhaba Pagla became the hereditary priests in charge of the Kālī temple of Kalna, acquiring a biologically-based spiritual authority which is quite alien to Sahajiyā religiosity and which is responsible for the institutionalization of the cult, as it has been the case with the Kartābhajā sect in Ghoshpara (Nadia district). Among the other factors that brought to the transformation of the Kartābhajās from an esoteric lineage to a well established exoteric sect, Sumanta Banerjee (1995) suggests a series of elements that we may compare and indeed recognize in the development of the young *paramparā* started by Bhaba Pagla, left in the hands of the grand-sons residing in Kalna:

- specifying a particular spot as the permanent headquarters of the sect;
- dynastic succession of gurus who claimed that the authority of the first guru was bequeathed on them;
- organized priesthood, consisting of a network of preachers in different villages and towns in charge of the converts whom they had proselytised;
- collection of money on a regular basis from the converts to the headquarters;
- a repository of written texts (mainly in the form of songs) explaining the religion of the sect, and "the rituals to be practised; and the continuity of the charismatic image of the founder [...] turned into another god by his immediate pupils who in order to perpetuate their personal authority over his devotees, build up an institution" (Banerjee 1995, 30).

[23] Interview dated 28/04/2013 in Kolkata.

[24] Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

Before we discuss further considerations about the relationship between the institutionalisation of the lineage and the rejection of the esoteric interpretations of Bhaba Pagla's songs, let us consider the second lyric and its contrasting oral exegeses.

How many know how to (make) love (*pirīt karā*)?
In the rules and norms of love
the fluid of desire (*kām rati*) is not only one.

Śyām-love and Kṛṣṇa-love
like the lightening playing between cloud and cloud.
In that way if love becomes your ally (*suhṛd*),
that love is not going to break.

If the fire of love is flaming,
burn the three qualities of your body into it.
If the vulture flies by the three boundaries
the vulture is not going to sit there.

Make love with her/him
in the way the magnet attracts iron.
Be united soul to soul
nobody can split you.

Love has two eyes
one is Rādhā and one Mohan.
If there is one fluid, one passion,
then don't let Bhaba's father go[25].

The song is about *rati-sādhanā*, the ritualized sexual intercourse that reiterates the dynamic of cosmological creation enacted by the principle of divine love (see Fakir 2005: 202; Hayes 1989: 31; Jha 1999: 345; Openshaw 2004: 216-224). It involves a particular use of male and female seed during the menstrual period of the woman adept, which we are not going to focus on for the purpose of this paper. Nevertheless, by the means of intertextuality we can recognize the pervasive occurrence of

[25] The lyric has been published in Cakrabarti (1995: 214). A beautiful performance of the song has been recorded in the album "Bāulanīr Gān", UD Series (2010).

the term *pirīt* and its connotative aspect as a "cosmogonic love" and, mirrored in the microcosm of the practitioner's body, a practice of love-making as taught among the esoteric lineages of Bengal[26]. Here as well we can observe the widespread practice of re-using and freely employing previously composed formulas or entire sentences already established in the repertoire: the verse "*yeman meghe meghe khele taṛit*" ("like the lightning playing between cloud and cloud") immediately recalls in the oral metaphoric storage of the listeners' mind the famous verse of Lalon Fakir "*mergher bidyut meghe yeman...*" ("like the cloud's lightning is extant within the cloud")[27]. The divine principle is extant within the human body, but it is not visible: like the lightening hiding within the clouds, it makes its appearance only "when positive and negative meet", "when two clouds rub against each other"[28]. Such is the interpretation given by Gosain Amulya Ratan, the old disciple and *śikṣā* guru of the Namaḥśūdra caste who lives in a little village of Nadia known as Dhaka Colony, mainly inhabited by ex-refugees from East Bengal, and populated by a majority of low-caste Māhiṣya who worked as fishermen in their motherland, before the Partition brought them to the other side of divided Bengal. His exegesis gives a complete perspective on the kind of love, and consequently of love-making, that is sought after by a couple engaged in *sādhanā*:

> *Kām* is the satisfaction of the senses. But Love, *pirīt*, is not selfish. Śyām and Kṛṣṇa [first stanza after the refrain] are the same, both are *samān* (equal), Śyām is Kṛṣṇa, Kṛṣṇa is Śyām: if love is made in this way, it doesn't break (there is no seminal discharge). Burn the three *guṇas*, be without qualities, without *ahaṃkār* (sense of ego). Or you'll not get pure love. The vulture [...] is destructive desire (*kām*). It is the *kām* that leads the matter to be wasted. [...] *Patan* ("falling") happens when you realize you are a duality, you are making love with somebody else, somebody you are craving for and you want him/her to be yours. But if you remain stuck together as if through a magnet [see third stanza] to form a single unity, there is no 'I' and 'you', and this love cannot break. The two persons

[26] The appearance of the term *pirīt* as a principle of Creation appears, for instance, in the cosmology of Ali Raja, one of the most representative authors of pre-modern "Muslim Yoga literature" (Haq 1975: 397-422; Stewart 2001: 267; Hatley 2007: 365) in Bengal: in the English translation of David Cashin (1995: 93-94), we read: "The Lord by enjoyment of union gained the highest sentiment of love (*prema rasa*). In an undivided form he had not been controlled by passion (*rati*). In the absence of the pair (y*ugala*) the mind does not grasp identity (*nām*). Without the pair identity and action are not revealed. Without union (*yuga*) the highest state (*siddhi*) is utterly ineffable. Niranjan became devoted (*bhakta*) to the love (*pirīt*) of the pair..." The concept of *pirīt* is central to the doctrine and practices of a wide range of esoteric lineages in Bengal, as it is evident if we look at the consistent frequency in which the term appears in their lyrics. See, for examples, the songs collected in the anthology edited by Jha (2009: 47-50). The song "*Piriter bhāb nā jene*" is very similar in form, content and symbolism and may well be compared for a deeper understanding of the teaching transmitted in its verses (the full lyric is on the database of Lok-Giti at http://www.iopb.res.in/~somen/cgi-bin/Flk_sng/gen_pdf.cgi?porbo=Bāul&ganernam=225, last visit 20/01/2015).

[27] The verse belongs to the second stanza of the song *Milan habe kata dine*, (for the full text see Ahmad 2002: 345).

[28] Interview dated 04/12/2012, Jugpur-Dhaka Colony (Nadia district).

> in union [last stanza] are like the two eyes of a single individual [...], then *Bhabār bābā chāṛbe nā*: Bhaba is not letting his father, Śiva, go away. Śiva is semen: from Śiva and Śakti everything is created...[29].

The love that connects the human experience to the divine experience is embodied in an elevated psycho-physical love that aims at uniting the polar principles of Śiva and Śakti as human beings: a homologous interpretation of this 'love-song' was provided by many informants who define themselves as Bāuls[30]. A completely different understanding arises from the interpretation of the renunciate Bijayananda Giri from the temple of Badkulla (Nadia). For him, the whole song is describing the ideal relation of the devotee (*bhakta*) towards *Īśvar* (God). This relation is completely free from carnal desire, *kām*, and it is impossible to experience by worldly human beings: "The divine love towards God is *aprākṛta*, it doesn't exist in nature, men cannot experience it: that is why the song says '*jāne kayjanā*' (how many know?)"[31]. The same devotional level of interpretation was perpetuated by Sukumar Mistri, a very close direct disciple of Bhaba Pagla who lives a celibate life in the temple of Kalna with Bhaba Pagla's grand-sons. According to him as well, the only "*milan*" (union) the song is talking about is the union between *ātmā* and *paramātmā*, between individual and universal soul. "It is not a union of *yugala*, which is a union of bodies: it is an inner union". Moreover, he considers those who interpret the *pirīt* discussed in the lyric as a human love to be experienced between a woman and a man to be "disgusting... they are the worst kind of Vaiṣṇava, their *sādhanā* is just an excuse to justify sexual desire. There does not exist in the world any sādhu who can perform *yugala-sādhanā* without involving sexual desire. The greatest sādhus are all renouncers, they don't unite with a woman"[32], and thus he goes on listing a number of well-known religious figures who practiced strict celibacy, such as Caitanya, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

In the first kind of semantic understanding of the concept of *pirīt*, the esoteric level of interpretation connects the divine love described in the songs with an embodied love experienced by a couple of practitioners, which is identical to the selfless, pure Love experienced by a Creator. In the second modality of semantic understanding, the song is interpreted according to a devotional-metaphysical layer, and the only pure love conceivable is the a-corporeal love of the devotee toward

[29] See previous note.

[30] For example, Satyananda Das Baul, interviewed on 19/04/2013 in Sonamukhi (Bankura district); and Gopinath Baul, interviewed on 16/01/2013 at Pāgli Mā Ākhṛā, Jaydev (Birbhum district).

[31] Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

[32] Sukumar Mistri, interviewed on 09/05/2013 at the temple of Kalna; and on 12/08/2013 at Jugpur-Dhala Colony in occasion of the annual *mahāpūjā*.

a theistic recipient. The embarrassing Tantric-yogic interpretations of the same concept are labelled as filthy and illegitimate and thus promptly rejected. This interpretation is in line with the religious teaching propagated and encouraged by the more orthodox subgroup of the lineage, which strongly promotes Bhaba Pagla as a representative of the *bhakti mārga*, the salvific way of devotion: in the words of the *adhikārī* of the Kālī temple of Badkulla, "Bhaba Pagla mainly recommended the way of *bhakti*. He himself was a yogi, a very powerful yogi. In fact, he could walk in the sky and appear in many places at the same time with his subtle body. [...] But he didn't teach any yogic practice. [...] because nowadays modern devotees do not find it compatible with their life-styles. Instead, Bhaba Pagla made people close to God through devotion"[33].

The theistic model of religious practice is the most successful among the urban middle-class and it definitely provides the interpretative pattern approved by the institutional backdrop of the lineage. Dhulu Dhulu, the already mentioned grand-daughter of Bhaba Pagla, ascribed this song as well to the devotional layer of interpretation and explained that the song is talking about "many kinds of love, the maternal and paternal love towards a son, the love between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa... the divine love that Bhaba Pagla experienced toward the Goddess"[34]. Like Dhulu, the majority of the members of the lineage adhere to the most exterior level of interpretation, ascribing to the devotional strand promulgated by the institutional authorities of the lineage. Even if they regularly attend religious gatherings and festive occasions such as *mahāpūjā*s and religious fairs, they are not aware of the esoteric meaning of the most common metaphors and allegories, and do not seem to acknowledge the existence of a parallel transmission of esoteric teachings. This can lead us to think that:

- *Deha-sādhanā* teachings and the language through which it is discussed in the songs is an heritage scarcely shared among the members of the lineage of Bhaba Pagla and proficiently mastered by a scarce minority.
- The strategies of concealment of esoteric beliefs and practices, and thus of the esoteric layer of songs' exegesis, are extremely efficient.

In the next sections, we are going to try to make sense of all these discrepancies among the different oral exegeses provided by members of the same lineage, initiated with the same *dīkṣā*

[33] Bijayananda Giri, interviewed on 06/04/2012 at the temple of Badkulla (Nadia district) in occasion of the annual *mahāpūjā*.

[34] Interview dated 28/01/2013, in Barrakpur (North 24 Parganas district).

mantra, practising the same rituals for exterior worship and sharing the same occasions of congregational festivity.

Previous works that reported conflicting oral interpretations of religious songs did not attempt to investigate the complex sociocultural dimensions and processes involved in the semiotics of reception. In most cases they simply acknowledged the intricate question of analysing the indigenous understanding of an oral tradition from the point of view of the insider, and then quickly turned to a different aspect of the literature under examination.

The songs of Bhaba Pagla that have been presented are interpreted in strikingly different ways; the devotees of the "orthodox branch" tend to idealize each metaphor uplifting the content from a "materialistic" (*bastubādī*) to a domesticated metaphysical level (for example, substituting the reproductive substances of *Puruṣ* and *Prakṛti* microcosmically represented by semen and menstrual blood with the Vedanta theological categories of *ātmā* and *paramātmā*). Similar situations of contradictory interpretations of body-centered lyrics by different spokesmen of a religious community have been experienced – in the context of Indian esoteric literatures – by Catharina Kiehnle (1994: 301-323), David G. White (1996) and Hugh Urban (2001).

In the paragraph "Songs of lust and love" (2001: 97), Urban presents some Kartābhajā songs that revolve around the theme of love, in both spiritual and sensual form. He had to face a relatively similar dilemma when he noticed that

> The manner in which these songs are expressed is so vague and murky that it has left them open to radically different interpretations within the Kartābhajā community. Among the more esoteric disciples, these songs have been read in an explicitly left-handed Tantric sense, referring to explicit acts of sexual intercourse, whereas among the more orthodox majority, they tend to be read in a far more conservative, non-Tantric symbolic sense, referring to the symbolic relationship of the human soul with Lord Krishna (2001: 97-98).

Oversimplifying a living panorama, otherwise richly nuanced and difficult to grasp, the main divergences in semantic understanding consistently follow the opposition conservative/orthodox/devotional versus esoteric/heterodox/Tantric. The former guide-line for textual exegesis is supported by an establishment of socially powerful members of the community who aspire at an institutionalization of the lineage within the mainstream religiosity supported by the dominant culture; the latter represents a minority of practitioners who resists the incorporation of mainstream religious practices and protects its beliefs under the code-language of metaphoric teachings and prescribed secrecy. David G. White found a similar situation in the context of the contemporary exegesis of Nāth literature. Regarding a poem in which Gorakh Nāth compares the

subtle body to goldsmithing, White refers that the interpretation provided by the commentary of Srivastav and the Nāth Siddha editors is "overly spiritualized", "to the neglect of most of this poem's concrete referents" (1996: 506).

Both Urban and White omitted to discuss the problematic coexistence of heterogeneous interpretations and in fact disregarded the possibility of "interpreting interpretations" for a deeper understanding of social change and politics of power in the field of esoteric religious cults. In the case of the manifold hermeneutics of Bāul songs, contrasting points of views fundamentally reflect divergent opinions on the religious use of sex. Outsider listeners and exoteric devotees do not recognize the erotic content of metaphors, and sexuality does not interfere with the religious dimension at all. Orthodox disciples and *sannyāsī* members of the community recognize sexual metaphors and interpret them as an encouragement to chastity: the soteriological use of sex lies in abstaining from it and cultivating divine love of an a-corporeal kind. Heterodox disciples and esoteric gurus interpret metaphors on sexual *sādhanā* as teachings on the blissful experience of divine love through the union of bodies. This union is possible through a sophisticated training in numerous sexual techniques as well as emotional and psychological identification with the partner. *Sādhaka*s' main modality of sexual intercourse is akin to what has been called *coitus reservatus*, a well-known yogic short-cut for liberation (Green 1972: 4), and a recommended practice in the "Art of Love" (Ellis 1937: 327-328) as well as in few experimental utopian communities in the United States (i.e. the Oneida community founded by Noyes; see Noyes 2001). In the practitioner's perspective, salvific sex, devoted love and conjugal love are no different.

In the concluding section of this essay, I wish to advance further considerations on the study of oral traditional lore and local exegesis. I am going to present at first an "emic" hermeneutics of song texts[35], and a local range of strategies used for interpreting Bāul songs. Then I will employ a functionalist perspective on the study of folklore in order to suggest some hypotheses that may explain why there is no univocal understanding of the songs called *sādhanā saṅgīt*.

4. Making sense of hermeneutical heterogeneity: "interpreting interpretations"

> I'm very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense. Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a

35 On the emic-etic distinction for the interpretation of texts see Cuneo (2011) and Benigni (2011), both a result of a previous Coffee Break Conference (held in June 2010 at "La Sapienza" University of Rome).

> great deal more than the writer means. So, whatever good meanings are in the book, I'm glad to accept as the meaning of the book. (Lewis Carroll)

As I mentioned in the introduction, while several authors focused on the reasons that led esoteric composers/practitioners to employ a metaphorical and enigmatic language, I am more interested in discussing the consequences that such a form of linguistic expression entails. As we have just observed, the ambiguous language of *sādhanā saṅgīt* is subject to openness, polysemy and hermeneutical difficulties. As a result, we have divergent interpretive lines, and each layer of semantic reception is preferred by a particular subgroup of the lineage. As a brief, additional example, let us consider the fact that one of the most famous verses of Bhaba Pagla, inscribed at the very entry of the main ashram in Kalna, recommends to seek liberation within *saṁsār*, as laymen and householders, and discourages formal renunciation (*sannyās*)[36]. In the lines of another song though, we hear the composer saying "*Brahmacārī sarbaśreṣṭha mānab*": celibate Brahmacārīs are the best among humans, or, as interpreted by heterodox disciples, humans are the best creatures to approach *brahma*[37]. The Giris in charge of Bhaba Pagla's temples justify their choice for a life as renouncers quoting the mentioned verse, in which *brahmacarya* is interpreted in its most conventional sense of non-married life of religious discipline and sexual abstinence. For members of the esoteric lineage, *brahmacarya,* as we have seen, signifies the practice of a psycho-physiological discipline that fulfills the goal of avoiding unnecessary ejaculation, and therefore, in the light of this layer of exegesis, they condemn the renouncers' decision of taking *sannyās* and regard it as a sign of disobedience and betrayal of the guru's word.

How do the local community of adepts, singers, and listeners of the songs of *sādhanā* make sense of the heterogeneous meanings attributed to the same metaphorical expression?

In the perspective of "oral literary criticism" (Dundes 1966), the existence of multifold possibilities of song interpretations is not perceived as problematic at all: the "unlimited semiosis" (Peirce in Eco 1990: 55) of the songs' metaphorical language is rather seen as an inherent characteristic of this mode of discourse.

First of all, what I am referring to as a "metaphorical" language is not discussed by the local community in terms of *upamā* and *rūpak*, the classic aesthetic terms that refer to these canonical

[36] The main door of the temple complex in Kalna bears the message of Bhaba Pagla: "I am not a sadhu, I am not a *sannyāsī*, I live within *saṁsār*. [...] Bhaba says, do your duty in this earthly word, and whenever you have time, call Bhagabān's name."

[37] The verse belongs to the song "There can be no *sādhanā* in weakness" (*Dūrbalatāy hay nā kono sādhanā*), which has been published in Cakrabarti (1995: 120).

literary devices and figures of speech (*alaṁkār*, lit. 'ornament'; see Gerow 1971: 9-22). They rather describe the language of the songs with the expression "*iṅgite baleche*", of which a rough translation would be "he said through hints". This suggests that there is a rooted awareness of the fact that the enigmatic language is indeed concealing a deeper level of understanding underneath the superficial-literal layer. Some informants, in fact, explicitly use the word "*gopan*", secret, referring to the actual content of the songs:

"Bhaba Pagla's songs are *ati-gopan*, extremely secret: not all the disciples would be able to explain them", stated the already mentioned guru Amulya Ratan.[38]

The disciples who preserve the esoteric side of the transmission underline the importance of distinguishing between the *bahiraṅga* and the *antaraṅga* (the exterior aspect and the inner aspect) of Bhaba Pagla and his message. In his *bahiraṅga,* he maintained a respectable orthodox facade, performing daily *pūjā*s to the icon of Kālī and showing himself as a Śākta adept so that he could be accepted by mainstream society. His *antaraṅga* teachings are secret and reserved to a few worthy initiates. At this level, exterior ritualism has no meaning; the divine has to be recognized within the body and coincides with the substances responsible for procreation. Accordingly, most of the songs of Bhaba Pagla can be interpreted in their *bahiraṅga* and in their *antaraṅga* aspect. The exterior/exoteric coating of his lyrics is the one related to the *bhakti*-oriented devotional layer of interpretation; the inner/esoteric decoding is restricted to few disciples and coincides with the *dehatattva*-oriented body-centred interpretation.

The disciples who are aware of the secretive core teachings often lament that nowadays nobody is interested in learning this aspect of the religious practice: most of them complain about the lack of seriously engaged disciples who can go deeper than the exterior, devotional and ritualistic worship:

> "Nowadays there is no such disciple who wants to learn these techniques. People are disgusted, scandalized to hear about these practices on the use of the body. Where could I find such a disciple? Today people are too busy with *bahiraṅga*. They don't want to hear inner things. See how many disciples I have: only in this village, forty households are my disciples. But I cannot find a Disciple as such"[39].

In sum, the multiplicity of oral exegeses is understood as the interpreters' different acquaintance with different sides of the religious message. But the "oral literary criticism" goes on showing an even more complex and sophisticated taxonomy for the hermeneutics of the corpus of

[38] Interview dated 04/12/2012, in Jugpur ("Dhaka Colony", Nadia district).

[39] Interview dated 02/02/2013, in Jugpur ("Dhaka Colony", Nadia district).

songs. The disciples that define themselves as Bāuls, and those who are well versed in the tenets and practices of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās, remark that *sādhanā* is divided into four progressive stages (namely *sthūla, pravarta, sādhaka, siddha;* see Urban 1998: 236; Jha 1999: 472; Openshaw 2004: 206-207). Each practitioner belongs to one of these four subdivisions of *sādhanā* (further divided into four: the *sthūla* of the *sthūla* level, followed by the *pravarta* of the *sthūla* level, and so on) and performs different practices according to his *deś*, his "country", a metaphor employed to refer to one's level and, correspondingly, one's attainments. Following the structure of the spiritual-bodily *sādhanā*, the compositions of *sādhanā saṅgīt* are also divided into levels of understanding that match the level of psycho-physical experience achieved by the practitioner: each song belongs to a certain *deś*[40]. At the same time, all songs are interpretable according to every single "country of origin". This 'emic criterion' of religious songs hermeneutics involves two basic ideas: the verses of the esoteric songs will have a divergence and a plurality of interpretations, for not all of the listeners/receptors belong to the same stage of spiritual progression; the interpreter that legitimately attains the authority to correctly interpret a song is the one who belongs to the same stage for which the song is supposed to be addressed. If this is not the case, then the listener would not be able to make sense of the song, or he would interpret it relying on its external/exoteric meaning. The local hierarchy at work in the semantic understanding of the songs is often discussed using the metaphor of school education and the division into classes:

> Not all songs are performed in front of all people. Human beings are not all the same. They are divided into levels (*star*). You simply cannot explain certain things to everybody. If you give a child that studies in 'class four' a book for a kid who is in 'class eight', he won't understand anything![41]

In his clear explanation, Gour Pagla – the octogenarian disciple of Bhaba Pagla of the Namaḥśūdra caste who resides in the little ashram of Tehatta (Nadia) – introduces a very important point, which cannot be explored thoroughly in this short paper: I showed so far that 'not all songs are understood by all people', but furthermore 'not all songs are performed in front of all people'. Different themes and topics treated in the esoteric songs are destined to different audiences and different performative contexts. The performer who is knowledgeable in the actual content of the

[40] Among the disciples who perform Bhaba Pagla's songs, this typical categorization was referred to in the interviews of Dibakar and Rina Das Baul (dated 26/11/2012, at Puruldanda, Santiniketan, Birbhum district) and Gopinath Baul (interviewed on 16/01/2013 at Pagli Ma *Ākhṛā*, Jaydev, Birbhum district, personal collection of field-work recordings); see also Jha (1999: 413).

[41] Gour Pagla, interviewed on 09/07/2013 at his ashram in Tehatta (Nadia district).

songs has to be competent in addressing the right teaching according to the audience he is playing for, an operation which the sociologist Clinton Sanders would call "psyching out the crowd" (1974).

In the last pages I reflected upon the typologies of the interpretations offered by the community represented by the multifaceted lineage of Bhaba Pagla and I considered its point of view on the modalities of transmission of meaning. As a final consideration, I will now step back from the specific case of Bhaba Pagla's repertoire, using it as a prism to look through the broader context of contemporary esoteric cults. The reception of Bāuls' folkloric production reflects mechanisms of innovation, decline and change, if contextualized in the framework of rural Bengal, a modernising landscape under the impact of the dominant culture of a globalising nation (Islam 2006). Redeeming its validity from a socioculturally imposed and arbitrary notion of "East", the case of the exegetical acrobatics of Bhaba Pagla's songs can reveal recurrent patterns of creativity, evolution and *devolution* (Dundes 1969) of an esoteric tradition. In this perspective, I will try to delineate a series of arguments to make sense of the discrepancies among interpretations of a repertoire of esoteric folk songs and hope this will be useful for further research in the wider field of Tantric literature and for the "anthropologists of meaning" (Basso and Selby 1976).

In sum, why is a univocal semantic understanding of the songs of *sādhanā* not possible?

- Heterogeneity of orally transmitted knowledge.

The teachings expressed by the language of *sādhanā saṅgīt* are orally transmitted from guru to disciple: the numerous lineages of Bāuls, Fakirs, Vaiṣṇavas etc. who employ that language do not recognize a single founder or a single textual corpus which could be regarded as a sacred canonical scripture (see Jha 1999: 13; Das 1992: 415). Being relegated to the situational teaching of a living master, practices and customs often vary from lineage to lineage, and so does the semantic referent attributed to a metaphorical utterance.

- Exclusiveness and elitist character of esoteric knowledge.

The interpretation of the metaphorical language of the songs is meant to be accessible for a selected "secret society" of disciples (Jha 1999: 469 and 471). The secretive symbolic capital represented by the esoteric knowledge is discussed through a code-jargon (an idiolect, as France Bhattacarya would say, 2002, 266) that protects its content from the outsiders. Ergo the use of a chameleonic language, which takes different connotations according to the status of the interpreter, serves as an instrument of self-defense and a subaltern strategy of self-empowerment (Stewart 1990; Urban 1998) for marginalised groups of low-caste and low-class practitioners facing social pressure and moral reproach by orthodox religious establishments.

- Politics of power and institutionalisation.

The emergence of divergent textual interpretations is entangled in the dynamics of social prestige, power and authority within the folds of a recent religious cult: for a more successful proselytism among well educated Hindus from the urban middle-class and upper-middle-class, the embarrassing esoteric and yogic-Tantric aspect of the metaphorical language is systematically removed, while the devotional interpretation is encouraged (Dold 2005: 41; Gupta 2005; Urban 2003: 134-164). The more conservative Śākta devotionalism tinged with philanthropic and universalistic aims satisfies the religious taste of those who promote the exotericisation and institutionalisation of the cult. This responds to a well-known dialectic process commonly at work in the history of both "Eastern" and "Western" esoteric movements: as a strategy of repression of esotericism, apart from the more explicit attempts at persecution, ostracism, scorn or reprisal enacted by a dominant culture, the esoteric word is "misrepresented, reinterpreted, modernized, reconstructed: its secret and sacred aspects are emptied and finally abandoned. Instead of denying, or accusing esotericism, [...] it is simply not discussed at all" (Riffard 1996: 39).

- The functionality of esoteric teachings: modernization and effacing practices.

Functionalist studies on folklore argue that when some elements of a tradition stop being functional, typically they are not perpetuated for the sake of habit and custom: they simply cease to be preserved and disappear (Herskovitz 1946: 97; Bascom 1954; Nenola-Kallio 1981: 139-145). The fact that the esoteric interpretation of song texts is marginally preserved and, supposedly, decreasingly transmitted, may be read as a symptom that the esoteric practices are no more functional for a broad part of the society of adepts, because of social and economical changes. The progressive diminution of semantic understanding may have its historical reasons in the diffusion of modern science and education (Lee 2008: 200-201) and, consequently, of new behaviours and beliefs on the body, its health and vitality. Esoteric practices like those transmitted in the Bengali songs about *sādhanā* have a functional role in the field of folk-medicine and sexual education. For instance, the gurus of the tradition we examined are regarded as "masters of conception and contraception" who explain the mysteries of creation in rural areas and transmit effective methods of family-planning among villagers (Openshaw 2004: 207; Fakir 2005: 70 and 80; Knight 2011: 40 and 153). With the diffusion of governmental healthcare, allopathic medicine and modern contraceptives, the pragmatic aims of the esoteric *sādhanā* may have lost their crucial importance; accordingly, the metaphorical language that accompanies the transmission of *deha-sādhanā* is understood and taught by a progressively little

percentage of adepts. It is important to remind that the practice of *coitus reservatus* can be discussed as both a contraceptive technique and simply as a different idea of lovemaking, i.e. not necessarily as an instrumental stratagem to stop childbirth. If we apply cultural relativism to the social constructions around sexuality, uninterrupted heterosexual coitus is only one possible form of sexual activity, but this form was made paramount and all others repressed (McLaren 1990: 7). The *sādhaka*s' society represents, in this view, a sexual counterculture, which accords a primary importance to the gratification and satisfaction of women, in the context of a patriarchal society.

- Technology, new media and loss of interpretations.

Changes in the modalities of transmission and understanding of the texts may also have to do with the "technologizing of the word" (Ong 2012). With the diffusion of new audio-visual technologies for songs reproduction, such as radio, cassettes, CD and DVD players, voice recorders on mobile and smart phones, the listeners and performers of esoteric songs, traditionally taught orally by a guru, may learn new song texts by simply playing a track. In this way, performers just learn the songs and the melody by heart without learning the veiled meaning discussed through the metaphoric language (Lorea 2014a: 69-73). The parallel and simultaneous transmission of both form and content of a song pertains to the role of a guru, but this may have been partially substituted by new technologies of audio reproduction, with a consequent risk of homologation of both song melodies, song texts (Manuel 1993: 55 and 169), and their interpretation.

This was but a short overview of the factors that can explain the variety and fluidity of interpretations, which I have discussed at length in the study of Bhaba Pagla's *sādhana saṅgīt* presented as my doctoral dissertation[42]. Here I briefly demonstrated that the study of meaning and interpretation involves an all-round and comprehensive insight into a culture. Analysing local interpretations on "oral traditions and verbal arts" (Finnegan 1992), we can embrace wider phenomena of social transformation, intercultural conflicts, and diachronic change within a sociocultural constellation. As the words of Wade have anticipated in the first section, the study of conflicting interpretations of folk songs can inform us about the functionality of a folkloric repertoire within a society; furthermore, it gives us an insight into the conflictual relation among different functions of a folk genre as they are distributed among different social strata and religious milieus. Additionally, as Frank Korom suggests (see first section), the focus on oral exegesis brings to light

[42] "Learning to swim in the river of desire: the songs of Bhaba Pagla in their performative context", PhD diss., Institute of Oriental Studies, La Sapienza Università di Roma, April 2015.

issues of religious change that take place in short spans of time, and powerfully serves as an instrument of inquiry into religious developments and social change.

5. Conclusion

The study of local voices about esoteric songs surely gives us a different point of view on the semantic theories about interpretation and meaning, it poses new questions and requires different investigative methods. At the end of the day, is there anything like *the* correct interpretation of a Bāul song? Is every interpretation equally correct, in an unlimited semiosis and an uncontrollable proliferation of meanings? Is the text a "picnic in which the author brings the words and the reader the meaning?" (Iser 1979: 19).

In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Umberto Eco discussed at length the problems involved in the esoteric reading of texts, and he stated that his goal was not to legitimise 'good interpretations' but to delegitimise bad ones (1990: 35). I hope I made it clear enough that my intention, instead, is neither to legitimise good interpretations nor to delegitimise bad ones, but rather to ask why all of these interpretations arise, and what function they fulfill.

Is there any formal criterion to establish reasonable limits to the range of legitimate interpretations? Possibly not (Eco 2004: 22-23), and in the lack of it, on one hand I have relied on local criteria and "oral literary criticism" in order to understand what is perceived as a "good interpretation"; on the other hand, I looked through the lens of the functions of folklore and tried to discover the mechanisms at work in what Eco calls the "cultural Darwinism" of interpretations (2004: 23): in the course of time, certain interpretations establish themselves as more satisfying for the larger part of the community (or, I would add, for the most powerful part of the community of interpreters), while others progressively disappear. Far from adhering to a *devolutionary* view on folklore (Dundes 1969), I remind the reader that we do not have any proof of the fact that, in the course of history, the more profound level of interpretation is slowly disappearing due to pressure from the superstructure, though this is the feeling of local interpreters who have a role as esoteric teachers.

Looking at the case of Bhaba Pagla's songs-in-context, I showed how a tradition that is esoteric in its substratum can present itself as a devotional cult for successful proselytism and the progressive institutionalisation sought by some of its followers. The study of Bhaba Pagla's lineage reveals much on how an esoteric cult presents itself in the twenty-first century and which are its strategies of transmission and self-protection from social disapproval; at the same time I remarked how a particular branch of followers tried to convert the "secret society" into a mass cult. This was made

possible by emphasising the ethical message of fraternity, equality and devotional love, and by getting rid of the hidden signifieds of Bhaba Pagla's metaphors – those pertaining to a socially reproachable and scandalous body-centred *sādhanā* – for the creation of a religious cult that has Bhaba Pagla as a divinised, supernatural founder. This institutionalised cult is engaged in charitable actions and public inter-religious discourse and it is closely associated, spatially as well as iconographically, to Ramakrishna Paramhamsa and to Swami Vivekananda's institutions.

Finally, from the perspective of function-oriented folkloristics, I have proposed some ways to contextualise the meaning of Bhaba Pagla's lyrics and to explain the lamented disappearance of disciples well-versed in the esoteric deciphering of the songs by inserting their significance in the broader sociocultural reality. I found that to be the most effective way to discover why some metaphors of Bāul songs' *sandhyā bhāṣā* are becoming standardized *topoi* of a 'Bāul canon', while in different performative contexts the same metaphors, far from being de-semanticised images, are still productive semantic realities in their reception, understanding and interpretation. My hypothesis is that it is the belonging to a certain social group that inspires a religious orientation and, accordingly, a certain line on songs' exegesis. That esoteric exegeses are shared by a marginal minority of adepts is well expressed in the story told by the old Gosain Amulya Ratan:

> ...It's like the story of the market: the shopkeepers, at the end of the working days, take the account book and see how many kilos they sold. The potato-seller and the flour-seller of course sold more than everybody else, kilos and kilos. But the gold seller sold only a little bit. The most precious things are not sold to everybody.[43]

For an ethnography of metaphorical speech, we went to ask the potato-buyer what is a potato, and to the gold-buyer what is gold. But at the end we know that both goods are needed in a society and both are extant, in different quantities and differently distributed among social groups, to satisfy different functions. The eclectic words of Bāul and Fakir composers show the intrinsic capacity of being read as potatoes, flowers or gold according to the needs of the interpreters; paradox and contradiction is their *alaṁkār,* and the playfulness of their infinite reservoir of metaphors allows them to be continuously negotiated and actualized as a mirror of Bengali culture and society.

[43] Interview dated 02/02/2013, in Jugpur ("Dhaka Colony", Nadia district).

Fig.1. The singer and disciple Narayan Singh Ray performs at the annual *mahāpūjā* in Jugpur (Nadia district) (photo: Carola E. Lorea).

Fig. 2. Amulya Ratan Sarkar, a *kabigān* artist and guru of the lineage of Bhaba Pagla, performs at the annual *mahāpūjā* in Kalna (photo: Carola E. Lorea).

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