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**The Self, the *guru* and the Absolute: the *bhakti* of the French 20th Century Indologist
Lilian Silburn**

Denis Matringe

Francis Xavier Clooney is a Jesuit priest, theologian and professional Indologist, with a specialisation in theological commentarial writings in Sanskrit and Tamil. He is also a leading figure in the field of comparative theology, and in this capacity, he delivered in 2003 the Plenary Address at the Catholic Theology Society of America. In a thought-provoking manner, he began his speech by recalling the deep religious experience he had when, visiting an old Hindu temple in Chennai, he stopped at the shrine of Lakṣmī. There, he felt “a kind of real presence” and says he “might even have worshipped” the Goddess (Clooney 2010, 86). The same kind of emotions and perplexity, he adds, comes to him from reading hymns to the Goddess (*ibid.*, 87). The way he finally proposes to cope with such encounters as a Christian theologian is to see them, just as everything, in Christ, “as if, he adds, it really is Christ seeing through our eyes” (Clooney 2010, 102).

The question such a reflexive narrative evokes for an Indologist studying Indian religious traditions is that of the effect his object of study may have on him, of the way his potentially “multiple self” (Elster 1985) can receive what he is looking at. If many an Indologist would claim a detached scientific attitude, some may feel that they are not, one way or the other, unaffected by their relationship to India, while others may be engaged in a personal quest, sometimes going as far as becoming scholar-practitioners, for instance studying and practising, as well as teaching, yoga (Chaple 2008).

The following pages are concerned with a leading French Indologist of the second half of the 20th century, Lilian Silburn (1908-1993) who, as we shall see, was a particular case of scholar-practitioner, unique in French Indian studies, and on whose life a book has been published in France in 2015 by Jacqueline Chambron under the title *Lilian Silburn: une vie mystique*, – a book to which, as will be evident from the quotations, the present paper owes much. More precisely, Lilian, as I shall now familiarly call her, was a pioneer in the study of Kashmir Shaivism on which she started publishing as early as 1947, but she also found in India a Hindu *sufi guru* under whose spiritual guidance she went through intense mystical experiences. This *guru* deeply helped her transform her Self or rather, as she would sometimes put it, get rid of her Self.

With time, while pursuing a brilliant academic career, Lilian became a spiritual master herself. She soon gathered around her, in her house in the French township of Le Vésinet, near Paris, a group of people whom she guided on the way which the author of the book on her life calls “a garland of *bhakti*” (Chambron 2015, 311). With this paradox as a starting point, what I shall try to do in the following, relying on the documents published by Jacqueline Chambron on the one hand, and on the scholarly works of Lilian on the other hand – in fact, mostly on her book entitled *La bhakti* –, is to show that in Lilian, the scholar and the mystic were not two Selves, but one and the same person, whose predefined social Self was completely transcended by the particular instance of the meeting and lasting relationship with her *guru*¹. In so doing, I shall pay due attention to Lilian’s very personal understanding of Kashmir Shaivism, to her relation to her *sufi* master, and to how she formulated her own spiritual way. With this in view, I shall first recount her trajectory, using for this Jacqueline Chambron’s very informative book, and insisting on the quite different milieus Lilian brought together in her quest.

¹ On the “various instances in which an individual transcends his/her predefined social self“, see Fuchs 2015, 334.

1. Lilian between Paris, Kashmir and Kanpur

According to all the persons who have known her, Lilian was a radiant, warm and cheerful personality, caring for others and always ready to help. She was born in Paris in 1908 from a French mother and a British father. She was particularly close to her father, who was a shipping line officer. She would off and on go on short cruises with him, thus getting accustomed to life on board, to traveling, and also to the pleasure of swimming in the sea. The family holidays too were usually on the seaside, in Brittany. As a child and an adolescent, Lilian was active, open, jolly, an accomplished swimmer, tennis player and cyclist, and she was well integrated in her world. But she was also quite independent, with a taste for vast spaces and for moments of loneliness.

Since her childhood, she had the feeling of divine grace and experienced moments of ecstasy. She once would write to her *guru*:

In the school and the convent school, people used to say that I was a saint, because I had unconscious ecstasies and I knew people's character (Lilian's journal, quoted in Chambron 2015, 15).

Let it be said here that later in life, Lilian claimed to be able to know people from their handwriting and from their face (Chambron 2015, 24).

When she was seventeen, she wanted to become a Catholic nun, and for that, renounced a love affair, by mutual agreement, with her boyfriend, who himself wished to become a Catholic priest. This would remain her attitude towards human love in her adult life. But as far as becoming a nun was concerned, her parents dissuaded her. Her father died one year later, and it was a shock for her: she left her home for Italy where she lived alone for several months.

Back in France, Lilian studied philosophy from 1938 to 1948. At each step, she felt completely engaged, always pushed forward by her thirst for the Absolute. She first turned towards western philosophers and mystics such as Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza, St. John of the Cross. She then oriented herself towards Indian thinking – there is nothing in Jacqueline Chambron's book about this choice –, learning Sanskrit and Pali, but also Avestan, and working under the guidance of the best Indologists of the time.

Under the supervision of Paul Masson-Oursel, Lilian prepared a PhD dissertation, defended in 1948 and published in 1955 as *Instant et cause: le discontinu dans la pensée philosophique de l'Inde*. In this Indological masterpiece, Lilian established a continuum from the Vedas to late Buddhism through a primacy given to the act conceived as linked to both the thought which causes it and the instant in which it arises against “the illusions of continuity and substantiality” (8). While writing her theses, Lilian developed a particular interest in Kashmir Shaivism, almost un-researched in those days, and she was entrusted by Renou and Filliozat the writing of the chapters on Kashmir Shaivism in their famous handbook for the study of Classical India, *L'Inde classique* (vol. I, p 634-640). Lilian entered the National Centre for Scientific Research in 1942, became senior fellow in 1962 and research director in 1970, – a typically successful academic career.

But in 1949, soon after defending her thesis, she left for India, where she would now spend much time until 1975. She went to Kashmir in order to study the texts of Kashmir Shaivism with Swami Lakshman Joo (1907-1991), the last representative of the Trika tradition, notably expounded by the exceptional master that was Abhinavagupta (late 10th –

early 11th century)². There, she lived in difficult conditions, not far from Swami Lakshman Joo's *āśrama*. In her journal, she told about her main goal:

I have come to India for this only reason: finding a Guru, a way, the largest possible, which would be in conformity with the mystics of all the countries, of all times, though not belonging to any religion, any sect (quoted in Chambron 2015, 31).

And she noted elsewhere:

Mistrusting autodidacts in mysticism, I would only admit masters from within an established tradition, but yet placing themselves beyond the rites and beliefs of religions and sects (quoted in Chambron 2015, 31).

Lilian had an intense work relationship with Swami Lakshman Joo, but he did not give her what she was longing for. It was in Kanpur, where she went apparently by sheer chance in 1950, that she was introduced to a Hindu *sufi* master, Śrī Rādhā Mohan Lāl Adhauliyā (1900-1966), a Kayastha by caste, who was to become for her the true master (*sadguru*, in her own terminology).

2. The spiritual genealogy of the *guru*

Having studied Persian and trained as a *munshī*, Rādhā Mohan Lāl was heading a sub-branch of the quite widespread Naqshbandī *sufi* order, whose eponymous founder, Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband, died in Bukhārā in 791/1389. Within the Naqshbandiyya, this sub-branch was part of the orthodox Mujaddidī current initiated in India by Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624), from Sirhind, district Fatehgarh, Panjab), posthumously known as the “renovator” (*mujaddid*) of Islam in the second millennium.³ Now – and we have to open a long parenthesis here to properly locate Rādhā Mohan Lāl in his spiritual genealogy –, within this current, Mīrzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān Šams al-Dīn Ḥabīb Allāh (1699-1781) from Delhi, known as one of the four pillars of Urdu poetry and also for his unflinching commitment to and imitation of the tradition of Muḥammad, established the branch called, after him, Mazhariyya Šamsiyya. This *sufi* order has been studied in detail by Thomas Dahnhardt (2002), on whose book the following sketch of the *silsila* (“chain” of the spiritual authorities) is based, to which Rādhā Mohan Lāl was heir.

Though Mīrzā Jān-i Jānān was a staunch Sunnī, his writings clearly show that he had the “capacity to reconcile the inner values of both traditions” of Islam and Hinduism (Dahnhardt 2002, 27). A door was thus opened through which Hindus could have access to his teachings.

After the death of Mīrzā Jān, assassinated by Shī'a extremists, his spiritual lineage continued its existence in Delhi⁴ and was also implanted by certain of his deputies (*khulafā'*, Ar. plur. of *khalīfa*) in Awadh (Lucknow, Faizabad, Bahraich, Nasirabad). On the mystical plane, full instantaneous spiritual transmission (*tavajjuh*), bringing with a single glance (*dīdār*) a disciple to the highest station (*maqām*) of the path (*tarīqa*), became a landmark of the Mazhariyya. This ability would from now on remain a distinctive characteristic of the masters of the line to which Lilian's *guru* was heir. It would also work as a shortcut to initiate Hindus into the path, some of whom would finally be invested with spiritual authority and

² On Lakshman Joo, see the book of tributes edited by Bettina Bäumer and Sarla Kumar (2011).

³ On him – as a *sufi* basically interested in questions of mysticism – and on his image as projected from the 17th to the 20th century, see Friedmann 1971.

⁴ On the continuation of this Delhi branch, see also Gaborieau 1990.

with the mission to perpetuate the path independently, provided they had attained “the perfection of true faith” (letter of a master quoted in Dahnhardt 2003, 68). The same process and the same openness would also lead to the possibility of having Europeans initiated and even fully invested as *gurus*.

With Awadh’s urban centres gone under British control after the Great Rebellion of 1857-1858, the order survived mostly in rural areas, under the leadership of masters with a humble, indigenous background. It is one of them, Maulānā Śāh Faẓl Aḥmad Khān Rā’īpurī (1838-1907), who was the first to give full investiture to Hindus, and who represented for Lilian the first landmark in her spiritual lineage (see Chambron 2015, p 55-58). Śāh Faẓl Aḥmad Khān settled in Farrukhabad, teaching Persian and Urdu at the local mission school. There, he met two Kāyastha brothers who were the first Hindus he initiated: Rāmacandra Saksenā (1873-1931), and Raghubar Dayāl Saksenā (1875-1947), father of Lilian’s *guru*. Śāh Faẓl Aḥmad Khān finally retired to his native village of Rā’īpur, and shortly before his death invested two persons with the responsibility of perpetuating the order: his younger brother Vilāyat Ḥusain Khān and ‘Abd al-Ghanī Khān (1867-1953), who had settled in Bhogaon (Mainpuri district) and became the *guru* of Rāmacandra and Raghubar Dayāl.

The two brothers, who were the sons of a bankrupt customs superintendent, had grown up in a Vaiṣṇava household. Rāmacandra, after a basic education in Persian and Urdu, entered the Mission school at Farrukhabad when he was ten, and obtained an English medium degree in 1891. While studying there, he had also followed the teachings of a certain Svāmī Brahmānanda, who had initiated him into the Kabīrpanth. After his marriage and his father’s death in 1893, he found a job as clerk in the Collector’s office at nearby Fatehgarh, and took responsibility for his younger brother and for his cousin. In 1891, he had met Śāh Faẓl Aḥmad Khān, who initiated him in 1896 and, ten month later, conferred on him “full licence and deputyship” (Dahnhardt 2003, 87). Nevertheless, some time before his death, Śāh Faẓl Aḥmad Khān entrusted his disciple to the spiritual care of ‘Abd al-Ghanī Khān. Between 1891 and his retirement in 1929, Rāmacandra occupied various posts in three townships of the district, namely Aligarh, Kaimganj and lastly Fatehgarh again, where he lived until his death, organizing *satsaṅgs* and training sessions at his place, initiating Hindu disciples, and writing, in the last two years of his life, numerous books and articles in Urdu on the spiritual discipline he transmitted.

Rāmacandra’s writings bear testimony to his adaptations of traditional Naqshbandī teachings and practices into a Hindu context, and to his elaboration of a new code of outer discipline rooted in the Vaiṣṇava tradition of his Kāyastha milieu (see Dahnhardt 2003, p 89-90). It is striking to observe that Lilian did, as we shall see, the same in her own way, infusing the teachings she had received with the conceptual framework of Kashmir Śaivism as she conceived it. Similarly, while Rāmacandra’s influence remained largely confined to Kāyasthas, mostly in Fatehgarh and Farrukhabad, and in such neighbouring districts as Shahjahanpur and Kanpur, Lilian’s following would consist exclusively of Westerners gathering around her in Le Vésinet.

Among the disciples Rāmacandra invested as spiritual authorities was his brother, Raghubar Dayāl, whom he also got instructed by ‘Abd al-Ghanī Khān. It is only after the death of his brother that Raghubar Dayāl started accepting disciples (Chambron 2015, 63), soon leaving Fatehgarh for Kanpur. He also entrusted his son, Lilian’s future *guru* Rādhā Mohan Lāl Adhauliyā, to ‘Abd-al-Ghanī Khān, who gave him investiture as a master in his own right.

3. Lilian and her *guru*: intersubjective interactions and self-surrender

We can now close this long parenthesis on the spiritual genealogy of Rādhā Mohan Lāl and come back to Lilian’s relation with him. Interacting from heart to heart, as she would put it,

with her *guru*, Lilian went through a mystical experience which completely transformed her Self. In 1950, she wrote in a letter to a friend:

It is as if before, one was always shaking with cold, hungry, horrified, shivering with misery, and all of a sudden, one bathes in peace, one has found a warm bed forever, and calm, and tenderness (Chambon 2015, 38).

But Lilian nevertheless tested her *guru*, put him to trial, teasing him, joking – a trial which he overcame with what Lilian called “a deep sense of humour” (Lilian’s autobiographical statement, quoted in Chambron 2015, 49). Leaving the *guru* after a few days, she went to the Kumbh Mela at Hardwar. On the third day, suddenly she was lost, seeing nothing of the *melā* (religious gathering) anymore. “A new life was beginning, she says, (...) this was the real day of my birth.” Good swimmer as she was, she jumped into the Ganges, particularly swift at Hardwar. She wrote, in a letter to another friend in 1950:

I was swimming in the Ganges when I was plunged into *sānti* (...): incredible softness of the contact with one’s own self, end of all worry, yogic sleep of body and thought, but which leaves the consciousness of an appeased plenitude.

Such was my happiness that I wandered for fourteen days without drinking nor eating in the forest full of big cats, which in fact I never encountered, sleeping beneath the trees, under blossoming white thorn bushes. I remember, I could not speak anymore; nothing can give an idea of this state (...).

I have since lived in ecstasy, *samādhi*; my contemplation is perpetual; one is absorbed into a marvellous presence which one can call God, which is such that it is not possible to think of anything else (Chambon 2015, 41).

Lilian was thus at once projected with extreme intensity at a very high level of spiritual experience, and she expressed it in this highly oneiric and symbolic speech. Nevertheless, her *guru* caused her to cover again step by step the whole path, in order to make her capable of transmitting what had been given to her.

For Lilian, interacting with the *guru*, spending time with him, plunging with him into *dhyāna* (meditation) and attaining through him what she called *samādhi* (complete absorption in undifferentiated consciousness [which she often calls *nirvikalpa*], or God, or Śiva) was a transformative experience. She wrote in her journal:

The Guru indeed is the way, and he stresses this aspect of being instrument of God. In order to reach God, I go through him. But true, he would very much like me to go directly to God, because the progress would be faster.

The Guru has told me to always plunge into him, so that each time he sinks deeply, he would carry me with him. This is of utmost importance, hence the necessity to continually plunge into one’s Guru (1950 and 1952, quoted in Chambon 2015, 292).

(...) Only one thing: silence and love. No effort is required, the Guru is the way. All gets done spontaneously, effortlessly. You only need to plunge into the Guru.

(...) If the Guru loves you and if you too have love for him, here is the most important, the rest follows automatically. It is more important than *samādhi*, for this love is the drive of mystical life (1956, quoted in Chambon 2015, 308).

Lilian’s theism, her devotion to the *guru*, her recognition of her master’s spiritual superiority, her stress on love, all this can undoubtedly be characterized as *bhakti*, as we have seen it is by Jacqueline Chambron (Chambron 2015, 311).

In a very striking passage of her diary, Lilian spoke of the year 1963, when she was writing her book precisely entitled *La bhakti: le Stavacintāmaṇi de Bhaṭṭanārāyaṇa* (Silburn 1964), to which I shall come back:

In 1963, I was in Paris, writing my work on *bhakti*. I wrote to my Guru to send me a good dose of *bhakti*, which he did (...).

These months were marvellous (...).

During the phase of *La bhakti*, constant moans. I had to press my breast against the table as if my heart was about to explode (quoted in Chambron 2015, 176, without any reference).

Lilian went back to France in 1951 as a changed person. Between that year and 1966, she shared most of her time between Le Vésinet, where she did her academic work, and her stays in Kashmir, to study with Lakshman Joo, and in Kanpur, where the *guru* called her. She was very busy with her research, writing four books, but also absorbed in her mystical life, which she lived in inner union with the *guru*. Besides, she devoted herself to the mission the *guru* has entrusted to her, with those who came and rang at her door in order to benefit from her spiritual radiance. In 1953, the *guru* had written to her (letter quoted in Chambron 2015, 111): “You are given full investiture over there. You are free to do everything you want for the sake of the people”, – a statement reiterated in a letter in 1956 (quoted in Chambron 2015, 135): “The best for a human being is realising the Self. You are invested over there. Please try to guide them towards peace and felicity.”

A group of faithful followers did indeed gather around Lilian, following her way, and the same goes on today, around the persons to whom she gave full investiture.

4. Blurring the boundaries

Having followed Lilian from her formative years at the feet of her *guru* and up to being invested with full spiritual authority, we can now formulate three sets of remarks concerning, first, the way her individualisation as a scholar and as a mystic blurred in her person the boundaries between traditions of thought and practice otherwise quite separate (see Fuchs 2015, 339), – second, the overlapping between her scholarly work and her spiritual quest, – and third, her practice of writing about her experiences and her mystical path in a journal and other non-academic texts.

In a rather extraordinary and kaleidoscopic way, Lilian brought together four social milieus quite separate from each other, two in France, and two in India. In France, various esoteric currents were active in first half of the 20th century in the fields of traditional sciences, Christian theosophy, gnosis, anthroposophy, and Primordial Tradition, with such famous names as George Gurdjieff (1877-1949), René Guénon (1886-1951) or the poet René Daumal (1908-1944)⁵. Lilian did not belong to any organized group, but one cannot deny the kinship between her spiritual quest and the vast and quite diversified milieu of esotericism. As already stated, though, this did not prevent her – and her case was then unique – to make a career in professional Indology, despite the barrier separating the world of the spiritual seekers from that of the academic researchers in France at that time.

With this already composite background, Lilian went to India, where, again, she got deeply engulfed in two completely distinct spheres. The first one was the *āśrama* of Swami Lakshman Joo, who came from a well-off family, lived a celibate life, studied Sanskrit and Śaiva scriptures with a reputed master, and became a Śaiva *yogī*, a teacher and an erudite scholar. Lilian reached the *āśrama* shortly after the Independence and Partition of India. An

⁵ See Faivre 2012, 101-115.

idea of this place and of the daily life there, of the prevailing atmosphere of simplicity, saintliness, meditation and scholarly study, and of the life and personality of the Swami can be gleaned from the contributions of Jaideva Singh, Jankinath Kaul “Kamal” and Prabha Devi to the collective volume *Samvidullāsaḥ* edited by Bettina Bäumer and Sarla Kumar (Singh 2011, “Kamal” 2011, and Devi 2011) and from the photographs in that book (Bäumer and Kumar 2011, 79-88 and 147-156).

Lilian’s second Indian milieu, in Kanpur, was a completely different one. Her *guru* lived with his family in a simple house with a garden located in a northern district of the congested city of Kanpur, not far from the Ganges – a house of which we find glimpses in the published diary of another Western disciple of Rādhā Mohan Lāl, Irina Tweedie (1907-1999) (Tweedie 1986, 7). There was nothing there of the *āśrama* life style. Irina Tweedie writes (6th October, 1961):

There seems to be no glamor of a Great Guru, a Great Teacher, about him, as we used to read in books ... He was so simple, living a simple ordinary life. Clearly, he took his household seriously. I could see that he was the head of a large family, six children, and his brother and his family living also in the same house, all sharing the same courtyard. And I saw also other people there, a few other families – the place was full of comings and goings, full of all kinds of activities, not to count his disciples of whom there seemed to be many (Tweedie 1986, 15).

No scholarly activity went on there and the *guru* did not explain nor edit texts. He held spiritual gatherings (*satsaṅgs*), telling stories in Hindi at times, singing sometimes, instructing his disciples at other times, often in silence, from heart to heart, and giving them advice. But with him and in him, Lilian found what she was aspiring to, and not with Lakshman Joo: she found a love to which she responded with a surrender of her entire being, body and soul. In December 1960, Lilian was in India and took part in Bhogaon, at the shrine of ‘Abd al-Ghanī Khān – her *guru*’s *guru* whom she calls “the Sufi” –, in the annual festive gathering called *bhandārā* (lit. “meal provided to holy men”), dedicated to the remembrance of all the saints of the spiritual lineage, a ritual whose practice she would continue in France with her own disciples (Chambron 2015, 233-235). On that occasion, she wrote in a letter (quoted in Chambron 2015, 162):

My Guru has resplendent eyes: he is really very handsome and what was rare years ago is now permanent: it is not only beauty and radiance, but kindness and suffused love shining out from everywhere; needless to tell you that I am moaning day and night, constantly, my throat is paining.

One could thus have the impression that on the one hand, Lilian’s Indological interests led her to the milieu of Kashmir Shaivism, whose luminary was Lakshman Joo, and that on the other hand, her spiritual quest somewhat magically made her land inside a very particular Hindu *sufi* brotherhood in Kanpur, where she found what was to remain her way. But the situation is more complex, and I am now coming to my second point, the “transculturality” (Fuchs 2015, 330) of Lilian’s Self, the overlapping between her academic research on Kashmir Śaivism and her spiritual practice, a point itself subdivided into two remarks: one, shorter, about her attitude towards Kashmir Shaivism, and the other one, longer, about her book entitled *La bhakti* (Silburn 2003).

First, Lilian tried to find a Guru in Lakshman Joo, but this proved an impossible task.

In Kaśmīr, she wrote, Lakshman Brahmācārin helped me explain some difficult problems of Trika philosophy. He is a good erudite as well as a yogin. I have tried *prāṇāyāma* under his control, and I succeeded in producing warmth and shining lights which never disappeared since. But he was not a Guru, as he lacked the power to give *śānti* and *samādhi*. One day, for six hours, I tried hard to concentrate, but I couldn't even stop for three minutes my mind's activity. During the five months I resided alone in the mountain, I did not get any result (Lilian's autobiographical statement, quoted in Chambron 2015, 47).

Here is one of the indications that Lilian was, so to speak, taking Kaśmīr Śaivism seriously as a way to the Absolute.

But, and this will be my second and more important remark, we have already seen that writing her 1964 book on *bhakti* gave Lilian intense spiritual emotions. And this book is quite extraordinary indeed. It is the translation of a Sanskrit text consisting, Utpaladeva's *Śivastotrāvalī*, of 120 *ślokas* praising Śiva as the Supreme Lord, "undifferentiated in differentiated objects, undivided in divisions themselves, (...) the Form common to all that is *sarvasāmānyam rūpam*" (*śloka* 6). The introduction written by Lilian in 90 dense pages, however, doesn't practically say a word about the text. It consists in a vibrant, intensely felt, and quite personal introduction to Śiva-bhakti as "the quick way to high perfection":

Illuminated love which now forms 'the mystic's' most intimate substance must at this stage pervade his whole person and the whole universe. (...) Then, fully impregnated with God, his will now divine, 'the mystic' reaches loving equality (*samātā*), all that is being now for him nothing but love, universal and divine (Silburn 2003, 88-90).

The whole introduction of *La bhakti* is constructed as an ascending spiral culminating in the above-quoted passage. All through the pages, Lilian refers again and again to the most celebrated *bhakti* text of Kaśmīr Śaivism, Utpaladeva's *Śivastotrāvalī* (10th century), still widely used in worship. She also quotes abundantly from Lallā's *Vākyāni* (14th century), and now and then cites such *sufi* poets as the Persian Ḥallāj (late 9th - early 10th century), who used to say in Baghdad, in Arabic, "*anā l-Ḥaqq*" ("I am the Truth"). And lastly, she refers off and on to St. John of the Cross. But, as already stated, she hardly mentions the Sanskrit text praising Śiva as the Supreme Lord whose translation she is introducing.

What is striking is that there is indeed a great similarity between this quite personal introduction to a scholarly book and what she writes in her diary, in her notes, in her letters to her *guru*, to her disciples and to her friends. In these writings, in order to convey an idea of her mystical experiences and of her way, she massively refers to the conceptual and mystical frame of Kashmir Śaivism, then to a much lesser degree to such Christian figures as St. John of the Cross, St. Katherine of Genova or Master Eckhart, and sometimes also to various *sufi* authors: such is the case in a fundamental text in which she aims at "underlining the importance of the void in the spiritual experience of all the ages and all the countries" (Silburn 1981, 16).

Let us now go back to her *guru*. Throughout her writings, Lilian insists on the fact that Rādhā Mohan Lāl, who was a channel for divine grace for each of his disciples separately, used to teach not through words, but through silence, and from heart to heart, – hence the possibility to communicate with him even *in absentia*, from France, for instance. This is indirectly confirmed by the fact that the letters the *guru* used to write to Lilian appear rudimentary and pedestrian in tone and content, and that they are quite conventional as far as spirituality is concerned. One is thus led to three considerations:

Firstly, Lilian found in Kashmir Śaivism as she conceived it (very far from the detached and discriminatory picture Alexis Sanderson and others would construct from the 1980s onwards⁶) the adequate expression of what she had intuitively experienced since her childhood.

Secondly, she nurtured her scholarly writings on Kashmir Shaivism with her own mystical experiences, producing a deep and highly personal reading of the texts. A striking example of this process is found in a letter she wrote to a friend (quoted in Chambron 2015, 154). Having compared the contemplation of the ultimate Reality that proceeds from the concentration on any feeling or object to the contemplation of the blue sky as seen through a single hole while the rest of the meshwork vanishes, she noted that she would use this comparison, which just came to her mind, in the introduction of the book she was writing (and she did it: see Silburn 1961, 15-16).

But, thirdly, the role of the *guru* was fundamental. Rādhā Mohan Lāl, indeed, by what Lilian experienced as the specific power of his silent heart to heart channelling of divine grace, allowed flashes of spontaneous mysticism to lead to what she called, in her own Kashmir Śaivism terminology, “undifferentiated consciousness”, and to a new way of being present in this world.

Lilian concludes her introduction to *La bhakti* with these words:

Having casted all his diverse modalities, having become immense and limitless, ‘the mystic’ joins with the undifferentiated (*nirvikalpa*) God and identifies with him. Having reached the Divine Majesty’s triumphant love, he spreads this love gratuitously as he resides in the efficient Centre, in Śiva’s will, in complete grace, drawing from it the gifts he generously distributes.

Such is the cosmic banquet where only sits Paramaśiva (Silburn 2003, 90).⁷

Lilian was a prolific writer, and as we have already seen with the quotations from her autobiographical statement, her journal, her letters, and her contributions to *Hermès. Recherches sur l’expérience spirituelle* (a journal she revived after the demise of its founder Jacques Masui [1909-1975]), she wrote abundantly, in a direct manner, about her mystical experiences and her spiritual way. And here is the last point I intend to make: just like many other mystics, there is an apparent contradiction in Lilian’s discourse between, on the one hand, the silent modality of her way, the speechless heart to heart of its transmission and the ineffability of the ultimate experience, and, on the other hand, to use the language of the French poet Paul Éluard (1895-1952), the “uninterrupted poetry” of their expression. In a text which Lilian once distributed to her Le Vésinet visitors, she wrote (quoted in Chambron 2015, 309):

⁶ Not without sharply criticizing her work and “her homiletic method which, careless of history, of the diversity of lineages and sectarian affiliations, has seemed to model itself on the Śaiva maxim that the whole (in this case the literature gathered under the modern rubric of Kashmir Śaivism) is equally present in each of its parts (*sarvaṃ sarvatra*)” (Sanderson 1983, 160).

⁷ The Sanskrit term which is behind this concept of “banquet” is in fact *mahotsava*, as evidenced by the fact that on page 77 of *La bhakti*, Lilian provides this equivalence while translating *śloka* XIII.7 from Utpaladeva’s *Śivastotrāvalī*. The usual translation of *mahotsava* is “supreme festival” (e.g. Rhodes Bailly 1987, 77), *utsava* being, in tantric terminology, a temple festival (Brunner, Oberhammer and Padoux 2000, 228). One thus gets the impression that there is an overlapping here between *mahotsava* and *bhaṇḍārā*, i. e. between Lilian’s experience of her spiritual path and her reading of the Śaiva text.

The system is based on silence and the intimate life of the heart, which everyone discovers at his own rhythm and which takes, with everyone, different modalities; therefore, comparisons are fruitless, chatter useless.

So how are we, not to solve, of course, but to try to understand this duality? Two considerations may help us here, which have to do first with the recommendations, perhaps even the injunctions, of the *guru*, and second, with what it means, for a mystic, to write a journal, an autobiography, notes and letters.

The *guru* did indeed request Lilian, shortly after she had become his disciple, to pause and publicly take stock of her life. Lilian refused, but the *guru* persisted in his demand, and Lilian wrote and then publicly read the spiritual autobiography translated in French by Jacqueline Chambron in her book (Chambron 2015, 44-54). The *guru* also asked her to write in general “on ‘her’ experiences, so that his father and his own Guru be known”, and he encouraged her, saying: “You can write whatever you want, as you like” (letter dated 25/07/1964, quoted in Chambron 2015, 183). So, Lilian did write, but there again, in a 1950 statement, she claimed it was against her own will: “My *guru* wishes me to regularly take note of my impressions, but I have no desire to keep a journal. Why should I write?” (quoted in Chambron 2015, 30).

The *guru* requested the same from another Western disciple, Irina Tweedie, who quotes him saying (Tweedie 1986, ix):

Keep a diary, one day it will become a book. But you must write it in such a way that it should help others. People say, such things did happen thousands of years ago – we read in books about it. This book will be a proof that such things do happen today as they happened yesterday and will happen tomorrow – to the right people, in the right time, and in the right place.

And to this, Irina Tweedie adds (*ibid.*):

I preserved the diary form. I found it conveys better the immediacy of experience, and for the same reason I use throughout the first person singular: it happened to me, I am involved in it day by day.

However, considering all that Lilian wrote, including her huge scholarly production, it is hard to believe that the *guru*'s wish was the sole impulse for her to keep a journal. Lilian wrote again and again in an elaborate and elegant style, with a vivid and varied tone, inventing a sophisticated philosophical and theological language of her own, using all sorts of images and metaphors to convey the clearest and deepest possible idea of what her experiences were, and detailing her most intimate feelings and physical reactions. In the fragments given by Jacqueline Chambron, we follow Lilian through the years in an exploratory journey of the “matrix jail” (Didier 1976, 116) of the journal in which she freely shaped her mystical Self, both in terms of her progress on the path, of her internal debates, her doubts sometimes, of her inner relation with her *guru* or of the evocation of her meditations and her spiritual states. The same applies to her notes, her letters and her articles in *Hermès*.

5. Conclusion

Lilian thus proceeded just like other great mystics of diverse traditions, many of whom she often quoted, who claimed that their experience of God or the Absolute was ineffable and incommunicable through human language, and who nevertheless wrote poems, treatises, journals and letters, some of them of the highest literary quality, manifesting the typical dyad

so appropriately formulated by the Benedictine monk Dom Jean Leclercq (1911-1993) in the title of his erudite book on Medieval monastic culture, *Love for Letters and Desire of God* (Leclercq 1957).

Lilian once wrote, in 1965: “The Guru told me in January: ‘When true love appears (*bhakti* or *mahabba* [sic]), the faithful remains nowhere, and then he is everywhere.’” And Lilian commented: “‘He remains nowhere’: everything is here. Though it was attenuated little by little throughout the years, in the end, the Self collapses at once. ‘It is everywhere’: the limits being abolished, it merges in the Whole” (quoted in Chambron 2015, 189). Here is, in a way, a striking summary of what, according to Lilian, happened to her Self after she met the *guru*. In her, an inborn mysticism typical in some ways of French esotericism in the first half of the 20th century found, thanks to her academic involvement, its language in Kashmir Śaivism, and its accomplishment and channelling under the guidance of a Hindu *sufi guru*. At the same time, the complete reconfiguration of her Self Lilian went through in her *bhakti* experiment led her to understand as if from inside the Sanskrit texts she was studying and translating, and to comment them in the most personal way. Writing had become for her a spiritual exercise, be it in her scholarly practice or in her journal, her notes, her letters and her non-academic publications.

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