



Immersion in Experiencing the Sacred: Insights into the Ethnography of Religion

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This article was inspired by an analysis of my interrupted conversion to Reconstructors in Prayer – a new Catholic movement – which took place during ethnographic research. My own experience of conversion, followed by my distancing, thus became ethnographic material to be studied and recounted. I shall narrate the ‘natural history’ of my meeting with the group and my interrupted conversion, touching upon the dilemmas and contingencies of my fieldwork; rather than dwell upon my autoethnographic methodology or my research findings, I shall discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the participant immersion ethnographical technique in studying religious phenomena. Thus I have a double aim. On the one hand, I shall show that the bodily engagement implied in autoethnography furnishes the researcher with a privileged perspective from which to examine religious experiences, especially when they become extraordinary experiences resulting from initiatic knowledge. On the other hand, I shall point out the risks, dilemmas and costs to a researcher of ethnography based on participant immersion. These reflexions will lead me to the conclusion that the researcher’s total immersion is not compulsory for the ethnography of religion, but is particularly useful in cases where the experiential component is central because spiritual knowledge-acquisition is mediated by the experience of the body. I shall then argue that the reflexive dimension of ethnographic accounts is welcome if, and only if, it enriches and problematises cognitive effort cultivating research.

Keywords: Autoethnography, participant immersion, extraordinary experiences, ethnography of religion, initiatic knowledge

1. From ethnography to autoethnography in the sociology of religion

This article was inspired by an analysis of my interrupted conversion to a new Catholic movement, which took place during ethnographic research. My own experience of conversion, followed by my distancing, thus became ethnographic material to be studied and recounted. I shall narrate the ‘natural history’ of my meeting with the group and my interrupted conversion, touching upon the dilemmas and contingencies of my fieldwork. I shall not dwell upon my autoethnographic methodology or my research findings¹: rather shall I talk about the advantages and disadvantages of the participant immersion ethnographic technique in studying religious phenomena. Thus I have a double aim. On the one hand, I shall show that the bodily engagement implied in autoethnography furnishes the researcher with a privileged perspective from which to examine religious experiences, especially when they become extraordinary experiences resulting from initiatic knowledge. On the other hand, I shall point out the risks, dilemmas and costs to a researcher of ethnography based on participant

¹ In this context, see Palmisano (2009).

immersion. These reflexions will lead me to the conclusion that the researcher's total immersion is not compulsory for the ethnography of religion, but is particularly useful in cases – such as the one described focussing on practice – where the experiential component is central because spiritual knowledge-acquisition is mediated by the experience of the body. I shall then argue that the reflexive dimension of ethnographic accounts is welcome if, and only if, it enriches and problematises cognitive effort cultivating research.

Autoethnography appears as a natural progression from already-ingrained elements in the ethnographic tradition. The history of ethnography reveals that ethnographers have always attempted to define their relationship with the subjects they portray. Their field notes have always included personal accounts of, and subjective reactions to, their fieldwork. In the past, however, these accounts rarely found their way into officially published ethnography (Van Maanen 1988; Coffey 1999). In the 1970s there was a change in emphasis from participant observation to the observation of participation, in the light of which more ethnographers focussed on their personal experiences of participation in their fieldwork. By the 1980s, more and more ethnographers were doubting the objectivity standard and allowing themselves to appear in their fieldwork accounts (Tedlock 1991). Contemporary tendencies in both postmodern and feminist theories add to the narrative and autobiographical exploration of field experience.

Although autoethnography has not yet become widespread in the sociology of religion, it is one of the most important novelties in this discipline, traditionally reluctant to cross the border and make the researcher the object of the research (Spickard and Landres 2002). Above all, it has stimulated the enthusiasm of sociologists interested in multi-sensorial approaches which go beyond the observation-participation mix, encouraging – as Pink (2009: 63) states – learning which is embodied, situated, sensorial and empathetic. Autoethnography may develop in this vein as a specific research method where the religious phenomenon is understood through the researcher's immersion in the field, and his/her body and experience of the study group. Some scholars (Goulet 1994; Liberman 2001; Palmer 2001a; Zablocki 2001) state that when researchers are willing to join in their hosts' religious and spiritual practices, they gain a deeper understanding of the culture being studied, above all when this involvement sees them opening up to unusual experiences. However, whatever form it takes, this involvement entails a cost to the researcher, often in terms of an identity struggle. Autoethnography transforms the researcher into the object which s/he studies: comprehension of the meaning attributed by the members of the culture being examined to their everyday actions evolves through identification by means of empathy where the barriers between public and private life are demolished. In the case of ethnography of religion, there can be very marked *displacement* because the researcher is often dealing with religious groups who mediate with the spiritual world, so while participating in their practices one may find oneself having extraordinary experiences. Palmer (2001) observes that experiencing altered states of consciousness or supernatural phenomena jeopardises the objectivity of the researcher and his or her analytical frame, but it is part of the path towards the truth of what the group wishes to communicate. On the other hand, Goulet pointed out, as early as in 1994, that in the process of anthropological fieldwork it is useful for the ethnographer to undergo the extraordinary experiences which natives do and to incorporate such experiences in ethnographic accounts because s/he can listen to other people's responses to the

account of waking dreams and visions experienced while living among them. Kimball (1972: 191) had previously claimed that, although 'there is no known device that measures the degree of penetration into an alien culture', one may assume that the deeper the participation in the new culture, the more one would expect changes at a 'psychic level in the patterns of cognitive and emotional response and in the unconscious manifestations through dreams and visions'.

As will become clear in the following sections, the above points have encouraged me to adopt participant immersion in my research into Reconstructors in Prayer (RIPs).

2. Entrapped in intimacy: How my interrupted conversion became a source of ethnographic knowledge

My first meeting with RIPs took place in 2003, when I began a yoga course at their centre in Turin². During the final yoga class, the teacher invited us to attend a course in deep meditation. It began to dawn on me that this place was more than just a gym. A course in vegetarian cooking gave me the opportunity to improve my understanding. Everything became clearer: this was not a proper health club, it was a community. The courses were located on the ground floor of a small block of flats, on the first floor of which lived the RIP. Fascinated by them, I decided to conduct an ethnographic survey. I started collecting information on their identity and I discovered that behind their ideals of healthy living there resided a religious community.

Carrying out the research was not easy. The community had to learn to accept and manage the presence of an intruder who was a 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1980). A proposal by its leader, Father Cappelletto S.J., was decisive: he engaged me as his 'biographer' and tasked me with recording the history which the community has been expecting for a long time. I was allowed to conduct interviews and move freely around the forty houses they have in Italy³. Cappelletto wanted to inform only the community members about my role as a researcher. The others, he told me, might be distressed, and this would jeopardise their full integration into the movement. Therefore, as far as the others were concerned, I was simply Cappelletto's biographer. During my research

² The group was founded in Italy in 1980 by a Jesuit named Vittorio Cappelletto after he had spent a period in India at the school of Anandamurti, a master of Tantric Yoga. This experience affected him so profoundly that he was induced to import the teachings received from the Indian guru into Christianity. In 1993 the RIP were approved by the Catholic Church. Many sacerdotal vocations have arisen within the group. Their ministry in the parishes alternates with their work at the centres which the movement had established Italy (40 houses). The internal hierarchy of the group is structured on three levels: the priests (22) and the 'community members' (150) constitute the higher levels; 'volunteers' (around 300) form the middle level; and 'sympathisers' (around 1500) the lowest level. Although the RIP describe themselves as a Catholic group, and although their membership of the Church has been confirmed by canonical recognition, they are distinguished by the syncretism of their doctrinal and liturgical structure, which has induced some members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to doubt their Catholic identity (Palmisano 2015). The RIPs' religious beliefs exhibit a close intertwining between the Tantric-Yoga teachings that Cappelletto received from Anandamurti and the Christian tradition.

³ Fieldwork was focussed on Piedmont, North-West Italy.

I wondered continuously whether the 'biographer' appellation masked his desire to enrol me among his followers. His laconic use of language, his sibylline statements and the rhetorical questions with which he invariably concluded our conversations led me to suspect that I too was being subjected to the 'becoming aware' pedagogy used by the group to attract converts.

Furthermore, although my position as biographer made the interviewees more willing to talk openly, I was soon assailed by the doubt that the pact I had entered into would compel me to betray the scientific aims of ethnography. I found myself having to manage the problem of 'historical intervention' signalled by Palmer (2001), who advises ethnographers not to let themselves be manipulated by the New Religious Movement of which they are guests, not even in exchange for guaranteed access to the field. I was considering how I could release myself from the pact when the meditation course began. I learned to dance the *kirtam*, to chant the *mantra* in Sanskrit, and to meditate. I also participated in Cappelletto's Sunday Masses and the community's monthly retreats. For a couple of weeks I visited several of the houses belonging to the RIP in the countryside of Piedmont, where I adapted to the requisite lifestyle: cold showers, vegetarian food and fasting; no TV, smoking or alcohol; and, above all no, mattresses for sleeping. Everybody welcomed me with warmth and enthusiasm, and all were willing to be interviewed. Their opinions conveyed a 'holy' image of Cappelletto: a living saint, endowed with thaumaturgical powers and the purveyor of visions and prophecies; everybody accepted that it was his mission to reconquer souls for Catholicism.

I, however, had the impression of being confronted by a syncretic version of Catholicism. As Leatham observes (2001), one of the most crucial tasks of a researcher in the field is negotiating his or her personal identity within the community being studied. In my experience the difficulties derived not from religious distance but from proximity. I had to overcome all the resistance raised by my Catholic upbringing against dancing the *kirtam*, chanting the name of Christ in Sanskrit, and seeking communication with angels. However, the discomfort passed rapidly. Liberman (2001) states that researchers who study other cultures should be open to intellectual and personal transformation. Chancellor (2001) is of the same opinion when he observes that those who conduct research in an NRM should be willing to undertake a personal journey filled with intellectual, political, moral, and spiritual dimensions shaping one's personal history as well as the movement about which one writes.

Perhaps because of the liberating message of reflexive ethnography (Bromley and Carter, 2001), or perhaps because of my spiritual curiosity, the *bricolage* between *tantra*, yoga and Christianity suddenly no longer troubled me. Instead I was intrigued. I no longer took part in the rites of the RIP by emulation but experienced the promised effects (gift). Carried away with enthusiasm for this new experience, I found myself a voluntary accomplice in a process of enrolment among Cappelletto's disciples. I spent most of my time with them and, when I could not, I sought to ensure that my daily lifestyle complied with the discipline of the community. Identifying with RIP members, practising meditation and living by ascetic rules gave me direct experience not only of their daily lives, but also a foretaste of the extraordinary experiences described by the interviewees (I experienced sensations of light and sounds, but not clairvoyancy, hypnosis or telepathy, which I nonetheless heard accounts of). Above all I committed myself to protecting the community. I was troubled by the 'dilemma of

contextualisation' (Palmer 2001) when giving an adequate description of their life and culture without exposing them to external judgement. On the personal level I was being converted, while on the working level I was struggling with the problem of 'going native' (Goulet 1994; Palmer 2001; Bromley and Carter 2001; Buckser and Glazier 2003). I was becoming my own research object: what is the explanation of conversion to this group? What role do extraordinary experiences – a gift of meditation passionately desired by all practicants – play in encouraging total commitment to serving the RIPs' mission?

While I was still plagued with these questions, Cappelletto, without any explanation, deprived me of my role of biographer. This act, performed in front of his closest collaborators, hurt me deeply. Reading between the lines I had the intuition that what I had written was not as congratulatory as had been expected. I also wondered whether that act was the result of Cappelletto's recognition of his failure to enrol me in the group. We did not have time to discuss it. I thought I noticed that he was profoundly disappointed: he had entrusted me with the role of biographer, compatible with my profession, with the intention that it would provide a launching-pad for my conversion; but in return, I turned out to be lukewarm. Soon afterwards I found out that they had contacted an Italian publisher and that the task of writing the history of the RIPs had been entrusted to a member of the community. I felt hurt because that gesture took place during the deep crisis which I was undergoing as a researcher, following the dream of concluding the research in order to take the step for which I was 'really' there – to convert. On the other hand, many of Cappelletto's collaborators confessed to me that they had received messages from heaven revealing that my arrival had been providential: rather than my research leading me to them, it was the Holy Spirit bringing me 'home' again.

This was a turning point, not only for my research, but also in my life. My relationship with the 'guardians' was no longer the same. Except for a few members, those who had been my 'favourite informants' started to refuse to co-operate. The pact of trust no longer existed. My conversion had impeded my investigating fundamental issues for fear that I might cause embarrassment among my informants. Consequently, the information that I had managed to gather was incomplete. I was confronted with the 'paradox of intimacy': a high degree of trust achieved early in an investigation may curtail a researcher's freedom to seek and enquire. How could I continue my research? I was disappointed by Cappelletto's act, but this gradually gave way to relief at being freed from my tasks as biographer. The initial inspiration which had induced me to become complicit in enrolment among the sympathisers of the movement began to subside.

At this point, I had to find new interlocutors from whom to obtain information. I consequently tried to approach the sympathisers, but although they were clearly willing to help me, I was unable to gain any new information from them. This situation continued until one day I received a telephone call. A woman with a hoarse voice asked me to meet her. She told me that she had left the RIP a couple of years previously and wanted to help me, as she had been told about my research by a mutual acquaintance. This was the first of twelve interviews that I conducted with former RIPs. The classic methodological problems posed by working with ex-members as informants were present from the outset (Bromley 1998; Zablocki 2001). There were considerable differences between accounts of the movement furnished by hostile

former members and by committed ones. While the RIPs extolled the saintliness of Cappelletto, the former RIPs emphasised his authoritarianism, his inclination to spiritualism and his disputes with the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Although their stories were centred on the 'captivity narrative' (Bromley 1998b) typical of apostates (Carter Lewis 1998), they were a valuable source of information for study of the esotericism of the RIPs, their 'dark side' as the apostates call it, and their relationship with Anandamurti the founder of the Ānanda Mārga, an NRM which appeared in Italy in the 1960s.

It was from the first informant that I learned of the relationship between Cappelletto and Anandamurti. Many of the practices taught by Cappelletto, the woman told me, had been inspired by the doctrine of the Ānanda Mārga. She also told me that, like the Ānanda Mārga, the RIP were custodians of arcane knowledge. I cast my mind back to the first interviews, and I remembered that Cappelletto had told me about the meeting with Anandamurti. However, he had side-stepped my request for further details by claiming that it had been a marginal event.

I decided to visit an Ānanda Mārga community. I discovered that there was only one in Italy, near Verona. According to an agreement made by telephone, I would meet only four of the ten *acharya* (teachers who furnish rules on practice) who lived in the community, because many of them were abroad during the summer. However, when I arrived, there was only one person to meet me. Fearful that I would lose this last contact as well, I presented myself as a rather undisciplined member of Cappelletto's group. It was perhaps for that reason that the *acharya* gave me his opinion on the Jesuit's work. He told me that Cappelletto, after becoming Anandamurti's disciple, had re-crossed religious borders in order not to be condemned by the Roman Catholic Church. Eventually, in reply to my questions, he revealed that the Ānanda Mārga were the custodians of an arcane doctrine that was only accessible to initiates. In the shop at the Ānanda Mārga centre, I bought *Sixteen Points: Our Fundamental Duty* (Anandamurti 1960), a book containing the essence of Anandamurti's message. Reading this text was illuminating: not only had Cappelletto drawn his inspiration from Anandamurti's 'doctrine of sixteen points'; he had also become an 'interpreter' of an innovative translation process which imported into Catholicism practices, rituals and languages peculiar to Tantric Yoga. The whole Ānanda Mārga system is found among the RIPs, the difference being that *mantra*, *mudra* and *kirtam* are accommodated in order to be dedicated to Christ.

The second informant told me about the esoteric nature of the group and about Cappelletto's supernatural powers. She had joined the group when she was nearly eighteen years old, and a few years later, encouraged by him, had married a male member of the movement. 'To Father Cappelletto', the woman told me, 'you must give utmost obedience. There are some oaths which seal certain promises'. She told me about her initiation, but did not want to disclose the contents of the secret ceremony. She said that she was frightened about what might happen when Cappelletto read my mind and 'saw' our meeting. She was convinced that the Jesuit had the power of clairvoyance, one of the *siddhis* that had been transmitted to him in the initiation received from Anandamurti. She recounted episodes when he had guessed her thoughts during their group meditation, but also during her confessions, which took place once a month and which she never missed.

The interviews with former members, which did not interrupt my visits to the community, helped me to see the RIPs in a new light. When I mentioned my meetings with the former RIP who was the only community member still talking to me, he seemed neither surprised nor angry; nor did he ask me to whom I had spoken, or what they had said, and I certainly did not volunteer to tell him. Tired of being ignored by Cappelletto and all the others, I asked him for an appointment to talk about my article, determined to tell him about everything I intended to write. He did not try to stop me; he asked me if he could read the article as soon as it was finished. Six months later I gave him a draft of the article. He was dissatisfied and proposed several radical changes which I accepted only in part. I accepted all his corrections of dates and events, but did not change my interpretation of the group as a syncretistic spiritual itinerary within Italian Catholicism. Strangely enough, he never asked me to leave. I suspected that, for some reason linked with his personal truth-seeking, my representation of the group caused him to doubt, soliciting him to reflect upon the critical consequences of the syncretistic establishment which he had set up. Then I thought that his removal of my role as biographer needed to be re-interpreted not as a demotion but as a reluctant act of liberation, facilitating my return to my 'real' home, viz. my research: in other words, enabling me to supply a sociological account which would be useful for reflecting on the destiny of the RIPs at a delicate moment of their existence, when their founder was on the point of leaving the scene. After almost two years from the start of the research, it was I who decided that the moment had come to abandon the field, for I had not received any new information for a long time. Taking my leave was not painless. I promised myself that I would come back soon to dance, sing and walk around their farms, a promise which I did not keep.

Some months after that, I read in a newspaper that the RIPs were in the news because of accusations of paedophilia against one of the group's priests. A year later Cappelletto died suddenly⁴. All this prompted me to rethink my research experience. Methodologically what had happened stimulated me to reconsider the value of reflexivity in fieldwork, especially the epistemological role of ethnographers' misunderstandings, usually generated by their negotiating strategies for the acceptance of their presence in the field. This reflection also evoked the 'theatricality' of the field: how ethnographers incorporate the distancing/proximity dialectics in their attitudes and relationships, in the form of a specifically-elaborated professional 'character', one of the most difficult challenges facing scholars who choose participant immersion. I shall focus on this question in the next section.

3. In favour of participant immersion, being aware of the risks

The above narration of my autobiographical experience of RIP enrolment and distancing, also illuminates their most important sociological traits. In this Section I shall claim that I would not have been able to discover or explore many of these traits

⁴ Although there were some defections after Cappelletto's death, the community survived and is still active today, led by a priest from the movement nominated by Cappelletto himself as a kind of spiritual testament. The successor has opted for a bureaucratic leadership style characterised by the aim of laying aside the esoteric aura associated with the founder's charisma in favour of an 'essentialisation' of the RIPs' doctrine, thus allowing improved relationships with ecclesiastical authorities in the dioceses where the RIPs have their houses and hold their meditation courses (Palmisano 2015).

if I had not carried out participant immersion ethnography. Although broad agreement with RIP practices facilitated my conversion, I am still in favour of this ethnographic approach when studying religious phenomena where embodied spiritual experience occupies a central space.

The RIPs aim to entice back the 'lost sheep' to the Catholic Church by reawakening their desire for a relationship with the transcendent. This mission has been declared in their charter: 'To commit itself, through study and research, to finding the best means to bring back to the faith those who have abandoned it, or non-believers, and to re-educate them in the sacramental life'. What is missing in the charter is that this journey is accomplished through meditation and that it is not presented as leading to an encounter with the personal God of Christianity, but rather to an impersonal and fusional god evoked in the form of 'cosmic energy'. Only through my fieldwork did I understand that the subsequent steps towards discovery (or rediscovery) of the Christian God and the figure of Christ are part of a gradual process of 'disclosure' which begins if/when the spiritual aspirants are ready. This aim explains why the RIPs address a public that is vast and heterogeneous from a spiritual point of view. Among those whom I met at the meditation course there were atheists and agnostics; seekers of spirituality attracted by Oriental culture and esotericism; non-practising Catholics, and active Catholics dissatisfied with parish life. Informal interviews reveal that all feel they were received with great enthusiasm on their arrival. In the affiliation process they are guided by an experienced member of the opposite sex whose role it is to foster their involvement by eliciting curiosity about the spiritual journey they are about to undertake and its results. Through my experience I realised that once they join the meditation group, new members are encouraged to observe the diet/lifestyle and spiritual discipline of the community – taught by Cappelletto – and participate in its activities. These are the necessary conditions for achieving results in meditation, namely arriving at a particular psychophysical state of deep relaxation during which the person meditating enters into communion with the spirit world (angels, saints, the deceased and natural energy), helping him or her to experience direct contact with God. Not infrequently, it seems that meditators experience particular sensations, like lights, sounds, a sense of wellbeing or tremors. In the 'spiritual direction', the priests explain that these extraordinary experiences are signs of spiritual growth. Except in this private meeting with the priest, it is not allowed to speak to anybody about such experiences. Thus, how can the researcher get closer to them?

Since RIP spiritual itineraries are characterised by the centrality of personal experience and the body, if I had restricted myself to interviewing group members or only observing their rituals without participating, I would not have fully understood the meanings which they attribute to those paths. Participant immersion turned out to be the most valid heuristic practice for my research aims. However, I cannot deny that the choice of this role of observer was painful, raising various ethical and methodological dilemmas: it meant acting like a 'novice', taking part in the meditation course and rituals in RIP homes, experiencing ascetic discipline at first hand, and interiorising their views of the world, their values, their discourse and specific symbols – exactly the same process of socialisation and learning which those who decide to join the group must undergo. Above all, such deep involvement meant an 'experience curve' (Piasere 2002) in my existence, implying not only 'living with them' but also 'living like them', wishing to become one of them. My conversion was the key of my autoethnography: my body became my diary and my recorder, my emotions

preservers of memory. I superseded all the limits which ethnography handbooks impose on the researcher so that s/he does not lose objectivity or scientific rigour, i.e. 'in order to avoid the danger of going native'. And I paid the price of these 'methodological mistakes', trapped first of all in the 'intimacy paradox' described in the previous section: the conversion path inhibited not so much my critical gaze upon the group as my ability to ask questions which could, in extreme cases, embarrass the interlocutor. And when the disciple's afflatus had run its course rediscovering my identity as a mere researcher, I found myself with little information at hand and, even more important, few informants.

Although I am aware of the dangers and critical consequences which 'unorthodox ethnography' may lead to, I shall argue here in favour of ethnographic approaches implying sharing in the practices of the subjects being examined. I am not claiming that this sharing is always compulsory because, even in one's choice of ethnographic method, submission to the research object – the precedence of the object over the method – is still the rule. It is rather my intention to suggest that – only for the study of religious phenomena connected with embodied experiential practices – participant immersion has a revealing function which other sociological approaches may lack. Specifically, my fieldwork aims to contribute to the validation of sensory ethnography (Pink 2009) and to affirm the importance of the bodily experience of the fieldworker as a research process and source of knowledge (Okely 2007: 66, as cited in Pierini 2016: 66). In studying RIPs, the *ex-post* reasons inducing me to prefer participant immersion ethnography as a means of research, compared with other sociological approaches, may be summed up as follows:

1. The RIPs are obliged to speak exclusively with their spiritual guides, and nobody else either inside or outside the group, about their meditation practices and the effects which, in their opinion, it could produce in terms of extra-sensory experience (sounds, lights, colours, encounters with spiritual beings). Such wisdom, part of esoteric knowledge, is accessible only to initiates and therefore subject to secrecy, the reason why they cannot be discussed in an interview;
2. Even if the RIPs could speak freely about these experiences, an interview would not be the most suitable means of investigating them because: a. spiritual experience contains a strongly subjective, individual and intimate component, for which reason interviewees might not wish to talk about them; b. meditative practice as a vehicle of spiritual experience hinges on perception of energy through the body. During meditation the RIPs, guided by their leader, train themselves to perfect their perception ('let's learn to extend our antennae') in an effort to reach the highest levels of awareness. Thus, an interview is not suitable for investigating these aspects because it is not capable of expressing in words those 'embodied notions' (Pierini 2016) which are difficult to translate into language;
3. But even if an interview is not suitable, nor is observation sufficient. Sight is not the most useful sense for exploring the RIPs' spiritual experiences – which take place in silence, in immobility and with eyes closed. Sharing these practices rather helps the researcher to learn to 'feel' exactly as the RIPs do by training themselves to perfect their perception. In this way the researcher's bodily experience may become consciousness-producing material: not only because s/he may undergo extraordinary experiences but also because one may ask one's hosts for their personal opinion of

those experiences (Goulet 1994; Palmer 2001). Indeed, such shared experiences may become the entry-point to study beliefs, values and cosmogony. On the other hand, the more refined the researcher's sensorial awareness becomes, the more interlocutors are willing to reveal new elements to him/her. What they are prepared to say will depend partly on how much they think the researcher is able to grasp and understand (Pierini 2016). In other words, being reflexive about one's experience can constitute a common ground for interaction with research participants (ibid). In my case study, this discovery allowed me to show that among the RIPs themselves, many are critical of the beliefs implicit in spiritual experiences of meditation;

4. Participant immersion is also solidly supported by the 'observer paradox' (Devereux 1967): the very presence of the researcher may induce members to modify their behaviour. Observation in itself may have a damaging effect on the context being examined, provoking a remarkable degree of observational perturbation: one can imagine how much impact the presence of the researcher – equipped with notebook, taking notes during a meditation session, even the rustling of pages and a pen scratching on paper in an environment of *summum silentium* – may have. Rather, although it may appear paradoxical, it is the full participation of the researcher in his/her hosts' lives, his/her immersion in the field, which reduces the degree of perturbation deriving from his/her 'being there'. The reason this happens is that, as the ethnographer passes gradually from observation of, to participation in, the object of study, his/her 'third world' (Fabietti 1999) becomes evanescent in the sense that his/her presence in the field is 'naturalised' over time partly due to his/her greater capacity to stay and act in that environment. If this on one hand allows hosts to 'forget' the researcher, on the other it allows the latter to activate – sometimes totally inadvertently – the 'fluctuating attention' or 'receptive distraction' (Devereux 1967) which allow him/her to learn and understand (without any necessity for direct intervention of awareness but simply being in the context and in some way 'absorbing' it) – a process which Olivier de Sardan (1995) defines as 'impregnation'.

These reflections demonstrate that the choice of the observer role, of the ethnographer's degree of involvement and/or the group's sharing in the experience, are not exclusively methodological questions, but epistemological because they deal with how knowledge of the phenomenon being studied is constructed.

4. Conclusion

The autoethnography of my interrupted conversion to the RIPs was an existentially important and professionally revealing research experience which has helped me to clarify the 'ethnographic posture' which I intend to adopt in future fieldwork. Having carried out this research, with the described modalities, has convinced me of the validity of the technique of participant immersion in the study of religious phenomena dealing with spiritual experiences based on the body and on subjectivity, especially in groups with an initiatic structure connected with esoteric knowledge. But I am not claiming that this is the only option possible or the most valid for every ethnographic research object. Moreover, having made myself, my body and my personal experience the object of ethnography has stimulated some epistemological reflections tending towards the rationalisation of ethnographic reflexivity. Given my past of going native, this may seem contradictory but, maybe because of this very experience, I sustain that an ethnographer should aim at a kind of impartiality, recognising that this is a utopia

or a limiting idea rather than an out-and-out scientific criterion. Even though the ethnographer feels strong attraction towards, or repulsion against, 'his' social actors, I believe that the best way to do them justice is the most objective possible description of the practices in which they are involved. I am not contradicting what I have already said, but rather affirming that participant immersion is a more valid technique when it allows gathering more data than the others do about a given social phenomenon – data which the researcher may elaborate in order to interpret that phenomenon. In other words, the reflexive dimension should enrich and problematise the cognitive process because what counts in the end is what the ethnographer says about a given social phenomenon, not his/her subjectivity. This is especially true because ethnography, in the light of its very militant methodological role, adopts a revelatory function which other sociological approaches find it more difficult to realise: being interested in practices, in what the social actors 'do', it is often able to show how things 'really' are, apart from the discourses which the actors or society create around themselves. I end with a *caveat* about the ethnographer's reflexivity: reflexive and introspective accounts are not always better than those where reflexivity is hidden. While some research benefits from its author's reflexivity, becoming thereby heuristically valid and convincing, other, openly introspective, research – where the author does little else but navel-gazing – is therefore destined for oblivion.

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