

〈論文〉

Interactions Between Buddhism and Local Cults: Considerations from the Perspective of Cultural Semiotics¹

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Recently, the attention of scholars has been increasingly dedicated to the interactions of Buddhism with Shinto in Japan (a subject known as *shinbutsu shūgō*). The result is a more general cultural approach beyond the scope of both Buddhist studies and Shinto studies, also thanks to the mobilization of sources that had been previously downplayed or ignored.² (Incidentally, this may in part be due also to the stimuli provided by research carried out in America and Europe over the past twenty years.) The impression is that *shinbutsu shūgō* has received, at last, an appropriate place on the intellectual map as a proper field of academic study.³ This paper is an attempt to provide a systematization of some general issues concerning the interactions between Buddhism and local cults from the perspective of

¹ This paper presents part of the research I carried out in the 2005–2006 academic year, when I was affiliated with the Department of Communication Sciences of the University of Bologna. I am grateful to Sapporo University for providing me with time off and a generous research grant.

² Among the publications on the subject that have appeared over the past few years, the most significant ones are: Yoshie Akio, *Shinbutsu shūgō*. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1996; Yamamoto Hiroko, *Chūsei shinwa*. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1998; *Ijinron*. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2000; Sueki Fumihiko, *Chūsei no kami to hotoke* (Nihonshi libretto 32). Tokyo: Kawade shuppansha, 2003 (portions of which have now been included in Id., *Nihon shūkyōshi*. Tokyo: Iwanami, 2006); Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli, eds., *Buddhas and Kami in Japan: Honji Suijaku as a Combinatory Paradigm*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. Studies on the Shinto tradition, with special emphasis dedicated to the interactions with Buddhism and other religious traditions, are Inoue Nobutaka, ed., *Shintō*. Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 1998 (English translation: Inoue Nobutaka, ed., *Shinto: A Short History*. Translated and adapted by Mark Teeuwen and John Breen. London and New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2003); Itō Satoshi *et al.*, *Shintō* (Nihonshi shōhyakka). Tokyo: Tōkyōdō shuppan, 2002; "Tracing Shinto in the History of Kami Worship," special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (Vol. 29, Nos. 3–4), guest editors Mark Teeuwen and Bernhard Scheid, Fall 2002. Extremely important is also the monumental work on Buddhist mythology by Iyanaga Nobumi: *Daikokuten hensō* and *Kannon hen'yōtan*, both published in Kyoto by Hōzōkan in 2002.

³ Until now, *shinbutsu shūgō* has been a liminal topic to disciplines such as Buddhology, Shinto studies,

cultural semiotics. After an overview of the state of the field with its recent developments and some remaining problems, I discuss the early interactions of Buddhism with local deities in India—which I suggest constituted the general model for subsequent cases of interactions in other Asian countries. In order to provide a conceptual background to broader issues related to the role of local deities in Buddhist cultures, I then propose to envision the diffusion of Buddhism as an instance of acculturation. Finally, I apply some theoretical tools derived from the semiotics of culture in order to understand some basic mechanisms in the Buddhist attitude toward local deities. Many examples will be drawn from the Japanese tradition—not because I believe that the Japanese mode of interaction between Buddhism and Shinto is a sort of general paradigm, but simply because in Japan there is a consolidated tradition of research on these phenomena whose findings might be heuristically applied to other cultural areas as well. I should stress that, since this paper is above all an attempt to outline a broad historical and conceptual framework for the interactions of Buddhism with local deities, it deals mainly with secondary sources. A sustained discussion of primary sources will be the subject of a subsequent work.

State of the Field

In spite of recent advances in our understanding of the phenomenon of *shinbutsu shūgō*, several problems still remain on the ground. In the first place, we should note the intrinsic vagueness of the term *shinbutsu shūgō*, often understood by non-specialists as a mere mixture of Buddhism and Shinto taken as two separate, independent religions. As has been repeatedly pointed out (most recently by Sueki Fumihiko), *shinbutsu shūgō* refers instead to complex interactions between Buddhism and local cults, and between specific deities belonging to these two fields.⁴ Allan Grapard has shown that combinatory cults (*shūgō*) are

and folklore studies (*minzokugaku*); however, some intellectual historians, beginning with Kuroda Toshio (*Nihon chūsei no kokka to shūkyō*. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1975; *Jisha seiryoku*. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1980; *Nihon chūsei no shakai to shūkyō*. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1990) and Murayama Shūichi (*Shinbutsu shūgō shichō*. Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1957; *Honji suijaku*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1974; *Shūgō shisōshi ronkō*. Tokyo: Hanawa shobō, 1987; *Henbō suru kami to hotoketachi*. Kyoto: Jinbun shoin, 1990), have studied it in depth as a central theme for the understanding of the intellectual and institutional history of medieval Japan. Among the earliest studies, the most significant ones were produced by Tsuji Zennosuke in 1907 (see n. 6 below) and Ōyama Kōjun, *Shinbutsu kōshōshi*. Kōyasan: Kōyasan Daigaku, 1944.

⁴ Sueki, *Nihon shūkyōshi*, pp. 40–41.

not the result of random associations, but rather involve complex semiotic operations: “the associations between divinities of a given cult obeyed linguistically grounded modes of combination such as association, metaphor, palindrome, anagram, and anagogy.”⁵ This is an extremely productive suggestion that unfortunately has not been exploited and developed enough by other scholars.

Another problem in contemporary studies on the interactions between Buddhism and local cults in Japan is that most authors accept the idea, first proposed by Tsuji Zennosuke, according to which *shinbutsu shūgō* developed historically in three distinct and separate stages. According to this account, the kami were first envisioned by Buddhists as suffering beings prisoners of the cycle of transmigration (*rokudō*) and were thus in need of Buddhism to acquire salvation; later, the kami were considered protectors of Buddhism similar to Indian deities; finally, kami came to be treated as manifestations (Sk. *avatāra*, Jp. *gongen*) or, more technically, “manifest traces” (*suijaku*) of buddhas, bodhisattvas and other Buddhist sacred beings, which were in turn envisioned as the “original states” (*honji*) of Japanese kami.⁶ Recently, Sueki Fumihiko has added another stage, namely, the creation of new kami under the influence of Buddhism.⁷ However, it should be noted that these are not, properly speaking, stages in a process of development in which one stage replaces the previous one, but rather different modes of interaction that were largely contemporaneous with each other. For example, during the Edo period we find all of the above four “stages”: kami were treated as suffering beings in need for salvation (thus, Buddhist priests chanted sutras and

⁵ Allan Grapard, *The Protocol of the Gods: A Study of the Kasuga Cult in Japanese History*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1992, p. 82; see also Id., “Institution, Ritual, and Ideology: The Twenty-two Shrine-Temple Multiplexes in Heian Japan,” *History of Religions*, 27/2, 1988, esp. p. 264; for a detailed study of a specific instance, see Id., “Linguistic Cubism: A Singularity of Pluralism in the Sannō Cult,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14/2-3, 1987, pp. 211-234. For a similar treatment of analogous phenomena, see Jacqueline Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Buddhism* (Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 12). Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999, pp. 159-167. I would like to emphasize that Allan Grapard is perhaps the scholar who has contributed the most to making *shinbutsu shūgō* a thriving academic subject in the West.

⁶ Tsuji Zennosuke, “Honji suijaku,” in Id., *Nihon bukkyōshi* vol. 1. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1944, pp. 436-489. The first version of this essay was published in *Shigaku zasshi* 18 (1907). It is now a century old, but still informs scholarly understanding of the processes of interaction between Buddhism and local cults in Japan.

⁷ Sueki, *Nihon shūkyōshi*, p. 40. Mark Teeuwen and I have also addressed this subject; however, we envisioned it not as a stage in a process of historical development, but as a distinct mode of interaction. See Teeuwen and Rambelli, “Introduction” to *Buddhas and Kami in Japan*, 2003, esp. pp. 21-31; Fabio Rambelli, “Local Deities and Buddhism,” in Robert Buswell, Jr., general editor, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Vol. 1, pp. 465-469. New York: MacMillan, 2004.

performed religious ceremonies in front of the kami at shrines affiliated with Buddhist temples specifically for this purpose), kami were envisioned as protectors of Buddhism or as manifest traces of Buddhist entities, and new deities that were generated under some kind of Buddhist influence.

Furthermore, *shinbutsu shūgō* is treated almost exclusively as a feature of ancient and, especially, medieval Japanese religion. Very little attention is dedicated to late medieval developments of *shinbutsu shūgō* proper (in contrast to Yoshida Shinto, which is the subject of numerous studies also in Western languages), and even less to early modern *shinbutsu shūgō*; in fact, it appears that the Edo period was the time in which this form of religiosity acquired the highest systematicity and social diffusion, even amidst increasing critical voices.⁸

A related issue is that *shinbutsu shūgō* tends to be seen as the main feature of medieval Japanese religion, if not as medieval Japanese religion tout court. However, this understanding, even though it rightly emphasizes the historical and cultural relevance of this phenomenon, ends up dismissing or ignoring other significant aspects of the medieval religiosity that cannot be reduced to *shinbutsu shūgō*. Among the latter, I would like to highlight instances of isolation of kami cults from Buddhism (so-called *shinbutsu kakuri*), most notably at court and at the Ise Shrines, but also probably in other places;⁹ the idea that there existed local deities whose status could not be reduced to that of avatars of some Buddhist entity, as in the case of so-called “real kami” (*jisshashin*, *jissha*, or *jitsurui kijin*);¹⁰ and the existence of critical attitudes toward the cults of the kami (so-called *jingi fuhai*).¹¹ More generally, it has not been stressed enough that interactions of Buddhism with local cults, in Japan and elsewhere, resulted not in a simplification of the divine (with local deities reduced to the Buddhist pantheon), but rather in a massive diversification of the realm of

⁸ See Fabio Rambelli, “Honji Suijaku at Work,” in Teeuwen and Rambelli, eds., *Buddhas and Kami in Japan*, pp. 255–286; “The Ritual World of Buddhist ‘Shinto,’” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 29/2–4 (special issue “Tracing Shinto in the History of Kami Worship”), 2002, pp. 265–297.

⁹ See Teeuwen and Rambelli, “Introduction” to *Buddhas and Kami in Japan*, esp. pp. 21–23. On *shinbutsu kakuri*, see also Fujii Sadafumi, “Shinbutsu konkō no hansei,” *Shintō shūkyō*, 20, 1955; Takatori Masao, *Shintō no seiritsu*. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1979, esp. pp. 37–63; Okada Shōji, “Nihon no kamigami to bukkyō,” in Nihon Bukkyō Kenkyūkai, eds., *Bukkyō to deatta Nihon* (Nihon no bukkyō dainiki, vol. 1). Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1998, esp. pp. 43–47; Satō Mahito, “Daijōsai ni okeru shinbutsu kakuri,” *Kokugakuin zasshi* 91/7, 1990.

¹⁰ See Teeuwen and Rambelli, “Introduction” to *Buddhas and Kami in Japan*, esp. pp. 31–33; Imahori Taitsu, *Jinji shinkō no tenkai to bukkyō*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1990.

¹¹ See Fabio Rambelli, “‘Just Behave as You Like; Prohibitions and Impurities Are Not a Problem’: Radical

deities and supernatural beings. As an example, we may note that while in most pre-Buddhist, traditional cultures in Asia the realm of the sacred was constituted by spirits inhabiting natural objects (animism), by certain sacred objects that were believed to be endowed with some supernatural power (fetishism), and by various disembodied spirits of the dead (either ancestors or dangerous revenants), Buddhism exploded these simple categories and proliferated the figures inhabiting the invisible world: the dead were reincarnated within the six destinations (*rokudō*), but the target of a special cult were the hungry ghosts (*preta*); the human souls were no longer a sort of life force animating the body and dying with it and a more subtle entity, but a also complex set of mental functions; deities came to include, in addition to pre-existing gods, *yakshas*, *rakshasas*, celestial beings, *nāgas*, Indian *devas*, Buddhist sacred beings, and so forth.

An additional problem is that *shinbutsu shūgō* is still addressed mainly as a discursive system related to deities; however, there is the need to investigate larger cultural issues that were influenced by the ways in which Buddhism interacted with local cults. Broad cultural fields such as subjectivity, cosmology, political ideology, economics, organization of temporal structures, semiotics and so forth were also related to *shinbutsu shūgō*. For instance, in a culture in which buddhas manifest themselves as kami and kami appear in this world as human beings, animals, or natural objects such as trees; in which there is no center of the self, but a complex set of mental functions and bodily energies; in which reality is not how it is perceived but encompasses a number of realms that are beyond human faculties—where are the boundaries of the “subject”? What are the principles and the forms of legitimization of power? What kind of cycle of exchange between human beings and deities establishes itself that results in the production of value? How can the sacred be represented?

Finally, there is very little comparative focus in studies on *shinbutsu shūgō* in Japan. Sueki has pointed that some of its forms derive from Chinese and Indians models but did not expand on the subject.¹² Yoshie Akio presents the distinction between Buddhism as a “universal religion” and various deities’ cults as “basic religiosity” (*kichō shinkō*), but his

Amida Cults and Popular Religiosity in Premodern Japan,” in Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha* (Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 17). Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004, pp. 169–201; Kuroda Toshio, *Nihon chūsei no kokka to shūkyō*, esp. pp. 257–262; Satō Hiroo, *Kami, hotoke, ōken no chūsei*. Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1998, pp. 89–117.

¹² Sueki mentions three cases: an episode from the agiography of An Shigao, a Buddhist monk of Persian origin active in China around the mid-second century (according to that tale, a local divinity residing in a lake

understanding of these two categories is rather superficial.¹³ Yoshie compares the interactions between Buddhism and local cults in Japan and between Christianity and the Celtic and German religions in Europe, but this comparison remains on a rather superficial level and ends by strengthening old stereotypes about Japanese religion (capacity to integrate peacefully many religions, openness, etc.). Particularly questionable is the statement that Buddhism never suppressed or negated local cults, but accepted them as they were.¹⁴ Significantly, the comparison chosen by Yoshie is not between Japan and other countries where Buddhism spread, but between Japan and Christianity in Europe—a typical bias among Japanese scholars for whom Christianity is, more or less explicitly, the paradigm for religion. As is well known, however, various forms of interaction with local cults occurred in all countries in which Buddhism spread; nevertheless, there is no systematic and general study of the relations between Buddhism and the other forms of religiosity it encountered. There is therefore the need for comparative research from within the Buddhist tradition; in this respect, cultural semiotics can be helpful in providing general models of understanding.

There are various obstacles to such a comparative endeavor. Some are due to the organization and institutional boundaries of academic disciplines: Buddhology traditionally focuses on elite, textual, monastic traditions to the detriment of the study of the impact of Buddhism on the societies and cultures in which it spread. On the other hand, ethnology and anthropology study local cults, but often ignore elite culture and traditions related to the cultural center (typically, the early sites of diffusion of Buddhism). In addition, local cults have often been envisioned as relics of a superstitious, backward past superseded by Buddhism with its powerful intellectual and ritual systems. Also because of this, very little is known about pre-Buddhist local cults; their practitioners did not leave written records, and the documents we have were written by outsiders, often in order to criticize those cults.

asked An Shigao to build a Buddhist temple near the lake for its own salvation); the treatment of Brahmanical gods as protectors of Buddhism already in Indian sources; and the fact that Confucius and Laozi were considered in China as manifestations of the Buddha; see *Nihon bukkyōshi*, pp. 41–47.

¹³ According to Yoshie, early Buddhism was characterized by its complete rejection of magic and miracles and its focus on the inner angst of individuals, and as such it was difficult for it to spread among the general populace. For this reason Mahayana developed, characterized by the inclusion of local cults (*kichō shinkō*), in a trend which was further developed by Tantrism (*mikkyō*). On the other hand, local cults (*jingi shinkō*) are seen as highly localized, collective cults with strong magical components. See Yoshie Akio, *Shinbutsu shūgō*, pp. 203–206.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: p. 212

Other obstacles to comparison have a more political nature: local cults and Buddhism have played different roles in the formation of cultural identities and state ideologies in early modern and modern Asian countries. Whereas some countries went through the process of formation of a modern nation state by downplaying or even persecuting Buddhism in the name of re-invented “autochthonous” religious traditions, others came to base their national identity on Buddhism to the detriment of local cults which were thus marginalized. Thus, in East Asia research tends to take for granted the continuous—and, to an extent—unchanged existence of local cults and religious traditions; accordingly, it emphasizes the ways in which Buddhism adjusted itself to new host cultures (“Sinicization,” “Japanization” of Buddhism). In contrast, Southeast Asian authors emphasize the supposed “purity” of the local forms of Buddhism. In India, Buddhism is largely outside the scope of Indology and thus of Indian cultural identity, even though we should note that a number of studies do emphasize the important role played by Buddhism and Buddhist communities in early medieval India.

Buddhism and Local Deities: The Indian Model

It appears that a central aspect of Buddhism, albeit a neglected one, and one of the key factors in its successful diffusion, is its willingness and ability to interact with preexisting religious traditions. Buddhism was a complex cultural system that already in its early stages of development in India included “local deities,” i.e., Brahmanical deities and local gods such as *yakshas* and *nāgas*, in addition to various kinds of dead. This became the general paradigm for the structuring of local spirit-deities elsewhere. When Buddhism spread, it carried along with it its peculiar patterns of interactions with other traditions, which included, already in India, elements mediated from both Brahmanism and local, non-Aryan cultures. In other words, Buddhism interacted with the state through a “Brahmanical” interface and with local society through another interface represented by the engagement with the dead and the deities of local communities. In general, Buddhism did not attempt to supplant pre-existing cults, but only to carve a specific cultural space for itself by interacting with these cults in several ways. This implied the development of forms of religious syncretism (festivals, calendrical rites, etc.), but also and especially of specific and original intellectual systems and ritual procedures that would characterize Buddhism and differentiate it from other

traditions.

At the time of the initial diffusion of Buddhism in India, Brahmanism constituted the official, Aryan orthodoxy. It perpetuated the Vedic ritual, considered as the key to secure both political legitimacy and the correct ordering of society; as the religious system of the upper castes, it upheld a traditional, hierarchical vision of society, and needed no broad popular support. It had no positive place for merchant and artisan classes then on the rise, not to mention the outcastes; it had no interest in local spirit-deities. Buddhism developed precisely by occupying those spaces of the social and religious fields left open by Brahmanism, and was able to thrive until Brahmanism succeeded in incorporating the more prosperous and influential elements of the lower castes.¹⁵

Brahmanism was usually closely related to the political establishment; even at kingdoms officially supporting Buddhism, court rituals were generally performed by brahmins.¹⁶ Buddhism employed Brahmanical elements as a general model for the integration of elite cults and for the development of religious ideologies of the state. It is interesting to note that Buddhism carried along with it a similar structure of division of ritual labor also to other countries. Indeed, we could argue that the brahmin and the village religious specialist constituted the two basic models for the status and role of ritual specialists of the deities in the various cultures in which Buddhism spread. Thus, Buddhism coexisted in India with both brahmins and local religious specialists; the same was true for many South-east Asian Buddhist monarchies: this tradition continues in contemporary Thailand.¹⁷ Even farther away from a direct influence of Indian civilization, such as China, Korea, and Japan, we find court religious specialists not officially affiliated with Buddhism (such as Confucians, Taoists, and Shinto lineages), which constitute a structural equivalent of Indian brahmins, in addition to a variety of local religious specialists.

At this point, we cannot avoid the issue of the definition of “local deities” (and local cults in general) in a Buddhist context. In fact, “local deities” is an umbrella-term covering a

¹⁵ For an outline of this historical process, see Romila Thapar, *A History of India*. Volume 1. London: Penguin, 1966 (1990).

¹⁶ See Himanshu P. Ray, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 133–136.

¹⁷ Romila Thapar writes that “The Thai court at Bangkok employs, to this day, brahmins from India for all court ceremonies, and the brahmins are maintained in comfort at Bangkok”: see *A History of India*. Volume 1, p. 165 footnote. On the role of Brahmanism in Southeast Asian kingship, see also Stanley Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

number of different phenomena and entities.¹⁸ We should note that Buddhism and Indian religions in general developed a detailed vocabulary to designate supernatural beings, and this terminology cannot be adequately rendered by English words such as “deity,” “god,” “spirit,” “ghost,” and “ogre.” Moreover, these beings cannot even properly be considered “supernatural,” since they exist and operate within the same natural realm of human beings. An attempt to give a unified classification to various forms of such beings is the Sino-Japanese term *hachibushū* (or *tenryū hachibushū*), which includes *devas*, *asuras*, *nagas*, *garudas*, *mahoragas*, *kinnaras*, *gandharvas*; in addition, we find *yakshas*, *rakshasas*, and various kinds of ghosts and demonic entities. Furthermore, not all local deities were, strictly speaking, “local.” Whereas some controlled a very limited territory (such as the area covered by the shade of the tree or the lake in which the deity resided), some, such as the Vedic and Brahmanic gods, were the objects of widespread cults; other were regional gods but spread in various parts of the Indian subcontinent (most notably, Krishna and Ganesha) and even abroad. At times, certain local spirit-deities, thanks to their interactions with Buddhism, came to acquire a “translocal” (even transnational) character, as in the case of Indian deities worshiped from Southeast Asia to Japan. Recently, Robert DeCaroli has proposed the term “spirit-deity” and stresses that these beings share qualities of both gods and ghosts.¹⁹ Indeed, in virtually all Buddhist countries there was a strong continuity between the dead (both ancestors and dangerous dead, but also cultural heroes and rulers), spirits (*yakshas*, *rakshasas*, etc.), and deities. In an attempt at simplification and generalization, I propose to define as “local spirit-deities” (and “deities” here is to be understood in the broadest possible sense) essentially three kinds of superhuman entities: spirit-deities (i) that are not originally Buddhist (or, outside of India, not originally Indian); (ii) that were brought elsewhere by Buddhism as part of a larger process of Indian acculturation and which became objects of local cults; and (iii) that were produced by the interactions between Buddhism and local traditions.

Interactions of Buddhism with local deities have usually been described as a

¹⁸ The same applies also to the very term “Buddhism.” For instance, Gregory Schopen has defined Buddhism as a “chameleon-like collection of startling ‘metaphysics,’ complex cults, and sometimes cantankerous monks.” Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004, p. 360.

¹⁹ Robert DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha: Indian Popular Religions and the Formation of Buddhism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 18.

concession to the superstitious beliefs of the masses. According to this received interpretation, Buddhist monks would have incorporated some forms of popular beliefs and rituals concerning local deities not because they also accepted them but simply as a skilful means aimed at bringing the unenlightened folks within the Buddhist fold. This view presents at least two obvious problems. On the one hand, the Buddhists involved in establishing relations with local cults appear as opportunists—if not outright deceivers, since they were pandering forms of beliefs they did not personally share. On the other hand, commoners carrying out local cults appear as superstitious, ignorant folks, incapable of understanding the true teachings of the Buddha.

In contrast, recent studies have begun to show that interaction with local cults was an essential aspect of Buddhist beliefs and practices since the very beginning. Archaeological evidence indicates that early Buddhist temples were built on the sites of prehistoric megalithic formations or in nearby areas; Gregory Schopen has suggested that this fact indicates an earnest interest in interacting with the dead of local communities and, more in general, with local cults—including those dedicated to deities.²⁰ Robert DeCaroli has further developed Schopen's suggestion, providing us with a detailed picture of early Buddhist interest for, and attention to, local cults in India.²¹ DeCaroli writes that "Far from being marginal concessions to the public, spirit-deities played a central role in the development and growth of Buddhism in all of its contexts and in all of its forms."²² He shows that "Buddhism even in its earliest forms was not simply an otherworldly ideology of transcendence. Parallel to this soteriological concern was a deep investment in mortuary practices and a persistent concern with strategies for coping with spirits and the dead."²³ Therefore, I would add, it is not surprising that Buddhism engages itself everywhere in various mortuary rites, from funerals to post-mortem merit-making. Caring for the dead was originally one of the ways in which Buddhism interacted with local cults and intervened in the religious field of other cultures.²⁴ Indeed, "the Buddhist community intentionally sought out and absorbed spirit-

²⁰ Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, pp. 360–381.

²¹ DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha*, 2004.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁴ Thus, we could argue that "funerary Buddhism" (*sōshiki bukkyō*) is not a Japanese degeneration of a "pure" Buddhism, but a transformation (with certain undeniable excesses) of an essential aspect of the Buddhist tradition throughout history.

deities into its fold.”²⁵ Thus, the attention dedicated by Buddhist institutions to spirit-deities was not a sign of decay; far from that, “the Buddhist success in controlling these capricious beings [...] marked the *samgha* as a group that was both worthy of support and capable of generating impressive amounts of merit.”²⁶ Thus, “the incorporation of popular deities into Buddhist contexts become simultaneously significant as a methodology for outward expansion, a means of signalling the *samgha*’s purity, and as an act of monastic courage and compassion.”²⁷ It is likely that Buddhist interactions with local spirit-deities began with the attempts to come to terms with *yakshas* and *nāgas*, the usual forms of local deities in, respectively, north and south India. It is thus not by chance that references to *yaksha* and *nāga* cults can be found in all cultures in which Buddhism spread.²⁸

To summarize, we could say that local cults were not a marginal aspect of Buddhism (especially if compared with meditation and monastic institutions), but a central element in the life of Buddhists since early times. In addition, local cults are not just part of folk religion; they are essential for the ordering of society and the control over the territory and thus have political significance (kingship and power), and are also related to other aspects of culture, including cultural identity; they enabled Buddhism, originally a translocal religion, to set its roots in foreign localities. Moreover, local cults are not just ways to cope with popular superstition and ignorance, since several of them were based on elite cosmological and ideological constructs (cosmology, ontology, subjectivity, politics, etc.)—more or less explicitly developed. They were also ways to define subjectivities (souls, spirits, various forms of existence) and righteous behavior.

Diffusion of Buddhism and Interaction with Local Cults as Acculturation

Buddhism has been traditionally understood as essentially a monastic tradition concerned with salvation. However, a complex cultural system such as Buddhism cannot be simply reduced to a monastic organization, its doctrinal apparatus, and its soteriology, because this

²⁵ Ibid., p. 186.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 186.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

²⁸ On *yakshas*, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas* (Second Edition). New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1980; DeCaroli, *Haunting the Buddha*.

would exclude most aspects of Buddhist religiosity throughout history. A very useful way to understand Buddhism as a cultural system has been proposed by Melford Spiro with his positing of three dimensions in Myanmar Buddhism, which he defined as, respectively, nibbanic, kammatic, and apotropaic. The nibbanic level refers to the quest for ultimate salvation; historically, this has been the concern of a rather small group of Buddhist practitioners. Kammatic Buddhism refers to the various processes of merit-making and is primarily concerned with improving the material existence in this world (including the next reincarnations) as a means also for spiritual betterment. Finally, apotropaic or magical forms of Buddhism are concerned with securing protection from evil forces and natural disasters— aspects that are commonly, but incorrectly, referred to today as “superstitions.”²⁹

I think that Spiro's framework can, with a few minor modifications, be proficuously generalized to Buddhism as a whole. Thus, we have a sphere concerning ultimate salvation (be it extinction into nirvana, deliverance into a Pure Land, or becoming a buddha in the present body), a sphere related to material and spiritual existence in this world envisioned as processes of merit-making, and a sphere of magical operations. It is important to stress that these three spheres are mutually interrelated. Magical protection allows one to lead a more secure life, which can thus be dedicated more easily to merit-making. Merit-making, in turn, is an activity related, more or less directly, to ultimate salvation, which is often envisioned as the final result of the accumulation of good karma. Salvation may also be due, at least in part, to the intervention of “deities” (buddhas, bodhisattvas, and their retinues and manifestations) as a consequence of the performance of magical rituals (this is especially true in Tantric Buddhism). Envisioning Buddhism as complex and varying interactions among these three spheres enables us to go beyond the limitations intrinsic to the received emphasis on soteriology and to recognize that Buddhism's impact has always been extensive and profound on many aspects of the cultural traditions in which it spread. Furthermore, we should recognize that interactions with local deities occurred not only in the apotropaic sphere, but also, to different extents, in the other spheres of the Buddhist realm. For example, merit could be used to deliver local deities from their painful condition of beings prisoners of the cycle of rebirth; as a reward, spirit-deities would protect the Buddhist practitioner and facilitate his or her accumulation of merit and, ultimately, attainment of

²⁹ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

Buddhahood. Moreover, in medieval Japan soteriological rituals developed involving the kami in a Buddhist context: the practitioner would “become a kami” as an intermediate, and easier, step before he or she could “become buddhas in their body.”³⁰ Thus, interactions with spirit-deities are much more important, central activities than is normally recognized.

Historians have argued that Buddhism was able to spread widely for a series of factors, including: its independence from, and critical attitude toward, pre-existing cultural, social, and political traditions (Buddhism’s independence was clearly marked by the autonomy of its monastic institutions); its capacity to address different social classes, from the aristocracy to the warriors, the merchants and the artisans, and the peasants, because of its powerful intellectual and ritual fascination; its targeting social groups (such as lower castes, non-Aryan people in India, and foreigners abroad) who were marginalized or excluded by the dominant Brahmanical religion; its connections with the merchant and artisan classes and therefore its mobility; and its strong missionary concerns and functions as a vehicle for the diffusion of Indian civilization abroad.³¹ To these factors, we should add, as we have seen, Buddhism’s willingness and ability to interact in sustained and significant ways with local spirit-deities.

Especially outside of India, Buddhism was able to create an influential “political theology” of its own—an operation that was impossible to carry out in India, where the political theology of the brahmins was much too powerful.³² Buddhism claimed that its capacity to bring order to the “supernatural” (or, rather, “super-human”) realm, by pacifying and converting spirit-deities and the dead, could be helpful in the creation of a new ordering for society through a Buddhist-inspired state policy. In this respect, Buddhism could function as an important tool for state governance; this would explain, at least in part, the state patronage it enjoyed in all areas in which it spread—patronage that almost always involved a restructuring of the divine realm.

From all of the above considerations, the diffusion of Buddhism among various Asian cultures can be best understood as a case of acculturation. This term has been employed with several meanings, but here we mean a complex process in which a culture adopts

³⁰ See Rambelli, “The Ritual World of Buddhist ‘Shinto.’”

³¹ On these points, see Himanshu Ray, *The Winds of Change*, esp. pp. 121–161; Romila Thapar, *A History of India*.

³² Of course, “political theology” is a term I borrow from Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957 (1997).

important elements from another culture resulting in the formation of a new culture.³³ It is important to note here that, differently from other cases of religions which spread as the result of military conquests or foreign countries' imperial policies, the diffusion of Buddhism was mostly related to other, more peaceful factors such as cultural prestige (the Indian cultural heritage in South-East Asia, ways to enhance the status of ethnic minorities or marginalized social groups as in pre-Tang China), intellectual and ideological impact (sophisticated philosophical speculations, ritual systems, and social ideologies and practices), integration into international commercial networks (especially in South-East Asia and Japan), and processes of state formation (almost everywhere). We should also notice that, in the cases in which Buddhism was not transmitted directly from India, it ended up carrying with it not just a general background of Indian civilization, but also cultural features from the places from which it came (for instance, in the case of Japan, Buddhism carried along with it, in addition to obvious Indian elements, also Chinese and Korean features). In these cases, it might be more correct to speak of "transculturation," in the sense of a transformation due to the impact of transnational cultural elements (i.e., that cannot be identified with a single culture).³⁴

Given its nature as a peaceful, "soft" acculturation, the diffusion of Buddhism in general did not result in deleterious phenomena such as generalized, forced, or uncreative imitation of foreign models to the detriment of local traditions and, as a countermeasure, the development of nativistic, fundamentalistic movements.³⁵ In general, it appears that the diffusion of Buddhism did not result in deculturation,³⁶ that is, massive destruction of local cultural elements in the name of a foreign culture (the persecution of the ancient Bön

³³ For a systematic overview of various definitions of the term, see Floyd W. Rudmin, "Catalogue of Acculturation Constructs: Description of 126 Taxonomies, 1918-2003," available at <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/rudmin.htm>.

³⁴ On a more regional level, Sri Lanka, Sukhotai and the Khmer kingdoms in South-East Asia, and Tibet for Mongolia and Siberia constituted powerful cultural models as well.

³⁵ The classical model for these two phenomena was proposed by Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948, esp. Chapter 10; see also the innovative use of these two categories by the Italian philosopher Franco Cassano in *Il pensiero meridiano*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1996 (rev. ed. 2006, pp. 67-75). The development of nativist movements, both Buddhist and anti-Buddhist, in Asia seem to be largely a phenomenon typical of the early-modern and modern periods. This will be the subject of a subsequent paper.

³⁶ I employ this term in the sense indicated by Serge Latouche, *L'Occidentalisation du monde*. Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1989, and Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*.

tradition in XI century Tibet might be a notable exception). We should note, however, that state policies aiming at the diffusion of Buddhism in marginal local areas within those countries disrupted and damaged local traditions.

Buddhism as a Cultural System

Let us now look at the general patterns and cultural mechanisms adopted by Buddhism to interact with local deities in other cultures. Deities could be either set aside, ignored, forgotten, or actively sought after and “used.” A typical example of the former attitude is the Korean text *Samguk yusa*, compiled around 1285, which mentions ancient deities, many with no name; even when a connection with Buddhism is indicated, it appears that in many cases the cult of those deities has died out. In fact, there is no way to tell how many local deities disappeared in this way, since the information we have overwhelmingly concerns deities that were actively engaged with by Buddhism or produced under its influence. However, even when Buddhism interacted “positively” with local deities, several attitudes and strategies were possible: deities were conquered, converted, saved, enlisted as protectors, actively created anew in complex processes in which each attitude is not clearly separated and distinct from the others.

From the perspective of cultural semiotics, a culture can be envisioned from an internal perspective as a sphere, with center and a periphery, surrounded by non-culture. Non-culture is “by no means primary, uniform, and always equal to itself,” since each “culture has its corresponding type of ‘chaos.’”³⁷

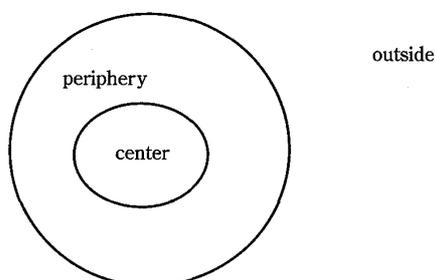


Fig. 1: The cultural sphere

³⁷ Jury Lotman, Boris Uspenskij *et al.*, “These on the Semiotic Study of Cultures (As Applied to Slavic Texts),” in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *The Tell-Tale Sign. A Survey of Semiotics*, pp. 57–83. Lisse (The Netherlands): The Peter de Ridder Press, 1975. The citation is on p. 58.

However, the outside is not simply a negative, undifferentiated space. A culture usually constructs its extra-cultural dimension as two different realms, namely, non-culture proper and anti-culture. While it understands non-culture as chaos and disorder, anti-culture is conceived as a specular and reversed reflection of itself. In addition, cultures also recognize peripheral formations as “non-chaos” or “quasi-culture”; they are not exactly like the center, but they are also clearly not on the outside. We can formalize the above on the basis of the following semiotic square. The center establishes different relations with the outside. In general, chaos (non-culture) is to be conquered and ordered, whereas other cultures (anti-culture) can be ignored, provided they do not become a threat (real or perceived) for the center.³⁸

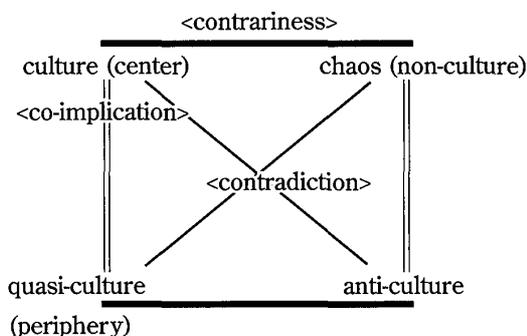


Fig. 2: The semiotic square of culture (center, periphery, and two forms of outside)

Since Buddhism can also be envisioned as a cultural system, the semiotic diagram above may be used to represent Buddhism’s relations with its own outside. From the perspective of a given Buddhist institution, the center is represented by one’s lineage—or by the lineage of the main temple associated with the founder. The periphery is represented, in gradual order of estrangement, by other lineages in the same sect, other orthodox and legitimate sects, and heterodoxical sects. More broadly, Buddhism as a whole (if such a general level of abstraction is indeed possible at all) identified a set of core doctrines, rituals, and representations, classified as increasingly “peripheral,” and created its own outside constituted by non-believers (both non-Buddhism and anti-Buddhism). In general, non-believers are divided into two distinct categories, the non-Buddhists (not-yet Buddhists) and

³⁸ The opposite case may also occur, namely, chaos is ignored as irrelevant while threatening cultures are attacked in order to neutralize them.

the anti-Buddhists (evil Buddhists and heretics, i.e., willing non-Buddhists), both of which are encompassed by the general Sino-Japanese term *gedō* ("external paths"). Buddhism, as it conceives of itself as a "principle of order," a "structuring apparatus" of several cultural realms, envisions non-Buddhism as the realm of non-organized or chaotic religious/moral behavior; as such, Buddhism considers it "the sphere of its own potential diffusion."³⁹ The non-Buddhists are such because they have yet to have any contact with Buddhism, or because they belong to certain religious systems with which Buddhist institutions had to come to terms, such as Brahmanism, Confucianism, and Daoism.

Thus, non-Buddhists are described as prisoners of the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*) and suffering, but they can in principle be saved. In contrast, the realm of anti-Buddhism is constituted by those who actively and voluntarily refuse to accept the Buddhist system; it is the realm of evil and wrongness. Differently from non-Buddhists, who have yet to come into contact with Buddhism, the anti-Buddhists are those who refuse Buddhism after their exposure to it. They do not by nature constitute a unified category, since there are several forms of disbelief. In this case, the Buddhist system "does not oppose chaos... but a system of opposite sign [...] In other words, anti-culture is constructed here in a way which is isomorphic to culture... it is also conceived as a system of signs with an expression of its own."⁴⁰ Since the relationship between culture and anti-culture is grounded on fundamental oppositions such as "right versus wrong" or "good versus evil," there can be no attempt at expansion or integration.⁴¹ The realm of anti-Buddhism is thus not automatically perceived as an area of potential expansion; whereas in principle deities belonging to the realm of non-Buddhists can be saved, the fate of anti-Buddhist deities is unclear.

It is important to understand that the four theoretical positions in the semiotic square can be occupied by different concrete cultural entities according to the observer, historical period, and social situation. Moreover, the same entity may occupy more than one position in a given cultural context. Local deities predating the arrival of Buddhism were originally envisioned by Buddhists as part of the outside to be conquered, either by assimilation through conversion or, more rarely, by destruction. Once converted, local deities moved to

³⁹ Jurij M. Lotman e Boris A. Uspenskij, "Sul meccanismo semiotico della cultura," in Id., *Tipologia della cultura*. Milano: Bompiani, 1973 (1995), p. 57.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 53–54.

⁴¹ See Ibid., p. 57.

the position of quasi-Buddhism, as doctrinally marginal entities. The Japanese medieval doctrine according to which the kami are local manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas placed them at the very center of the system.

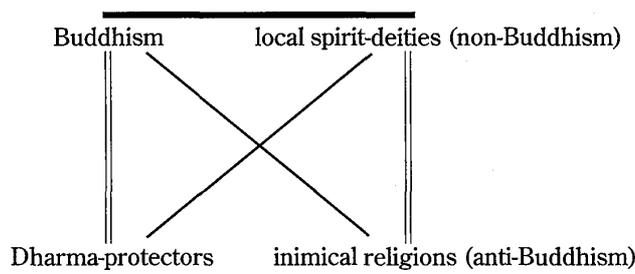


Fig. 3: Semiotic square of Buddhism and local deities

In general, the positions in the semiotic square correspond to different kinds of deities and ways to deal with them; these ways include exclusion, taming, conversion, incorporation, and identification. For example, despite the fact that Brahmanism was usually inimical toward Buddhism, which it considered, together with Jainism, a “heretical sect,” and thus occupied the space of anti-Buddhism, Brahmanical deities were promptly included in the periphery of Buddhism as Dharma protectors. A notable exception seems to have been Shiva. Tantric sources report that this god, under the name of Maheshvara, refused to be included in the Buddhist fold; emissaries of the Buddha (in particular, the *vidyā-rāja* Trailokyavijaya, Jp. Gōzanze myōō) killed him and had him reborn as a Buddha in a different world-system;⁴² this outcome amounts to an operation of status reversal, in which the outside is converted into the very center or, more specifically, anti-Buddhism (Shiva) is converted to its contradictory term, Buddhism itself. Local spirit-deities such as *yakshas* and *nagas* were generally open to conversion and can be envisioned as the typical form of the realm of non-Buddhism: these beings accepted the Dharma (non-Buddhism) when the Buddha visited them and preached to them. In the process, local deities were moved from the outside to the periphery of Buddhism as their conceptual position (non-Buddhism) was reversed into its

⁴² On this subject, see the extensive study by Iyanaga Nobumi, “Récits de la soumission de Maheshvara par Trailokyavijaya—d’après les sources chinoises et japonaises,” in Michel Strickmann, ed., *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R.A. Stein* (Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques vol. XXIII), pp. 633–745. Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1985.

contradictory term, namely, quasi-Buddhism (Dharma protectors). When some of these spirit-deities initially displayed an immoral behavior contrary to the Buddhist Dharma, such as in the case of goddess Hārītī, this was envisioned not as a manifestation of anti-Buddhism, but rather as a form of chaos (lack of basic moral attitudes) and thus of non-Buddhism. In some cases, spirit-deities were openly inimical to Buddhism, thus playing the role of anti-Buddhists; they were tamed, neutralized, and excluded, as in the tales concerning the activity of Padmasambhava in Tibet during the first stage of the transmission of Buddhism in the eighth century; later, inimical local spirit-deities were neutralized by building Buddhist monasteries over their bodies. Another interesting case of taming and exclusion is represented by the treatment of “real deities” (*jisshashin*, *jitsurui kijin*) in medieval Japan. More typical, however, is the case in which Buddha or his emissaries and manifestations convert inimical, violent deities, sometimes even by employing force, as told in the first fascicle of *Mahāvamsa*, Sri Lanka’s Buddhist chronicle written in 543, and in the *Lankavatara Sutra*. Analogously, some medieval Japanese authors pointed to the difficulty to correctly identify “real kami,” and therefore suggested that all deities should be treated as traces. (It is interesting to note that after conversion, local gods are often included into Buddhism through a reversal of their initial state; thus, non-Buddhism becomes quasi-Buddhism, whereas anti-Buddhists become buddhas).

Some spirit-deities may take all of the four positions in the semiotic square in history and even during the same period. In some cases, a deity can even be identified with Buddha/Buddhism (the center) itself. For instance, in India, the Buddha came to be envisioned as one of the ten manifestations of Vishnu; in China the Buddha was described as a manifestation of the Daoist sage Laozi, and Kannon was believed to manifest herself as local female deities; a medieval Japan doctrine (known as *anti-honji suijaku* or *shinpon butsujaku*) maintained that the kami were in fact the original states of the Buddha; in Tibet the Bön religion asserts that the mythical founder of this tradition, Tönpa Shenrab Miwoche, was in fact the primordial teacher preceding the Buddha. In either case, we note that the identification of a local deity with the center of Buddhism is carried out by critics of Buddhism (as in the Chinese identification with Laozi), by non-Buddhist religious organizations (India, Tibet), and by local cult formations that ended up by relativizing Buddhism (as in the Kannon cult in China or the *anti-honji suijaku* doctrine in Japan).

Conclusion

These developments in the conceptual treatment of the outside of Buddhism also affected general attitudes toward local deities. Considered symbols of the outside in the first phase of expansion of Buddhism to foreign lands, local deities came increasingly to be treated as elements of the Buddhist world, be it in south India, Myanmar (the nats cults), Tibet, or Japan (the kami cults). Even though their status and centrality varied according to the region, the historical period, and the social groups involved, deities were given certain functions not just within the apotropaic dimension of Buddhism, but also in its other two dimensions. They became involved in merit-making activities and, in some cases, most notably within the Tantric tradition, they also played a soteriological role. In Japan, for example, as an effect of the Tantric treatment of the outside outlined above, certain authors began to identify the kami with the ultimate realm, the unconditioned and absolute dimension of blissful “ignorance” that was supposed to predate the appearance of the first Buddha and, with him, of speculative thinking differentiating between ignorance and enlightenment. This surprising development opened the way to nativist critiques of Buddhism based on ontological, epistemological, and ethical considerations, as is the case in so-called Ise Shinto and parts of the medieval discourse on the kami, with its focus on origins (mainly represented through cosmogonic myths, cosmologic doctrines, and lineages). Thus, attempts to solve what was perceived as a “limit” and a flaw of Buddhism, namely the positing of a radical distinction between ignorance and enlightenment, increasingly became the seeds of a new discourse on the kami initiated by Yoshida Shinto in the fifteenth century and followed by numerous developments, in which Buddhism was no longer the central intellectual component.⁴³ In this manner, systematic and sustained attempts to integrate “local deities” within the Buddhist system produced an independent, and gradually non-Buddhist, discourse on local cults that became increasingly nativistic in character. This seems to be a common development in regions in which Tantrism played an important role, such as India (with the development of Hindu nativism), Tibet (the Bön tradition), and Japan

⁴³ On this subject, see Fabio Rambelli, “The Ritual World of Buddhist ‘Shinto’”; “*Reikiki ni miru Shinto no renzoku to hirenzoku*,” in *Shinto no renzoku to hirenzoku* (Shinto: Nihon bunka kenkyu kokusai shinpojiūmu, Dai 3 kai). Tokyo: Kokugakuin University, 2005, pp. 46–62.

(the creation of Shinto as an independent religion); another significant factor in this process of nativist transformation of local cults against Buddhism may be the impact of another religious or intellectual tradition from the outside, such as Islam in India, central Asian influences in Tibet, and Neo-Confucianism in Japan.

Thus far, we have attempted to identify some common trends and patterns in the developments of the interactions between Buddhism and local cults in several Asian regions. The next step would be, as previously indicated, a sustained examination of primary sources from various traditions describing such interaction processes. Then, after general models have been sufficiently established, it will be necessary to study local and national differences; in particular, an important issue to be addressed is that fact that Buddhism and local cults played significantly different roles in the formation of cultural identities and nativist movements in various Asian countries in the early modern and modern periods.

I hope that such a general study of the interactions between Buddhism and local cults throughout history could shed new light both on the common conceptual bases of Buddhism and on cultural differences with which Buddhism had to negotiate and come to terms. More broadly, the recent rise of fundamentalist movements in many parts of the world has shown the destructive, divisive power of religion; I hope that such an endeavor will draw some attention to peaceful processes of religious acculturation and integration in general which resulted in the creation of new and original cultural formations.