

Medicine, Jurisprudence, Divine Inspiration: Marginal Notes to the Knowledge of the Shiite Imam

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ABSTRACT

Between the eighth and tenth centuries, Shiite religious culture developed a concept of authority of the spiritual leader – the Imam descending from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and ‘Ali – centered on a charismatic kind of knowledge intended as a power specific to the status of the Imam.

Heterodox trends in early Shiism conceived of such a knowledge as an esoteric path to salvation, recognizing the figure of the Imam as a recipient of various forms of divine inspiration (*ilhām, tahdīth*), including knowledge of the past and the future, and of the secrets of heaven and earth.

Starting from the seminal works of J. Bottéro and C. Ginzburg – the first focused on divination in ancient Mesopotamia, the second offering a method based on silent clues –, the research aims to contextualize this conception of knowledge/power investigating the persistence of non-Islamic ideas in early Shiite religious culture.

*Iskandar and al-Khiḍr in the Literatures of Islam:
Political Power, Prophecy and Divination in the Legend of the Bath of Immortality*

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ABSTRACT

Classical Islam reserves a privileged role for the figure of Alexander the Great (Iskandar), to whom a few verses of the Koran are devoted with the epithet of Dhū'l-Qarnayn, the 'Two-Horned' (*Sura* 18, 83-102).

The legend concerning Alexander's journey in search for the Fountain of Life, possibly originated in Jewish and Christian milieus, found its most sophisticated and articulated developments in countless texts of Arabic and Persian literatures between the eighth and the sixteenth centuries, thus becoming the main narrative paradigm of Islamic reflection on immortality: denied to the political power (Iskandar never finds the Fountain) and allowed instead to the prophetic one (his guide, the sylvestrian prophet Khiḍr, who bathes in it).

Mapping the diverse uses of this legend and the various textual genres in which it appears in Arabic and Persian literatures (historiography, didactical handbooks, romances, cosmographies, religious works, divinatory texts, and so on) allows drawing a web of values and disvalues associated to immortality and its desire in the context of Islamic cultures.

This paper will focus on the passage from the political function of this story to its more spiritual and then even divinatory readings, highlighting a relevant aspect of the transformation of Muslim intellectual attitudes in framing the nature of humankind, the physical world, and their laws during the classical era.

*Immortality in Tibetan Hagiographies:
The Case of lHa btsun Rin chen rNam rgyal's rNam mgur and rNam thar*

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ABSTRACT

This paper will analyse immortality through the hagiographies of the Tibetan master lHa btsun Rin chen rNam rgyal (1473-1557). His autobiography with songs (*rnam mgur*) recounts the extraordinary bond of Rin chen rNam rgyal with his main master, gTsang smyon Heruka Sangs rgyas rGyal mtshan (1452-1507) who, after his death, continued to teach his heart-son in dreams, contemplative practices, appearances in different forms, passing his legacy to him, and becoming 'immortal' through his teachings, songs, works and paintings made by his disciple and donated by him to several masters living in different areas of Tibet.

Rin chen rNam rgyal's biography (*rnam thar*) describes instead this master's funerary rituals, after which his remains were treated with salt and unguents to be preserved and then dismembered to be distributed among sacred places and people like relics to be worn in amulets, placed in temples and shrines, mixed with inks and pigments to make sacred books. In Tibetan culture amulets, besides protecting people, encapsulate the memory of deceased masters. Equally, ashes and corporal fluids empower and sanctify books and, by embodying religious masters and their teachings, make them immortal. This paper will present the case of lHa btsun Rin chen rNam rgyal's memory, which is still echoing in Tibetan mountains and valleys thanks to amulets, books and works.

Under the Spell of Antiquity: Orikuchi Shinobu and the Water of Eternal Youth

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ABSTRACT

In the first half of the twentieth century, while searching for Japan's original beliefs, Japanese writer and folklorist Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953) directed his attention to the Ryūkyū islands, a place he considered to be one crucial stop in the Ur-Japanese people's long journey towards the Japanese archipelago, where traces of Japan's archaic practices and rituals had supposedly survived.

Orikuchi was interested in the rejuvenating water belief mentioned in the *Man'yōshū*, the oldest Japanese poetic anthology compiled in the eighth century CE. If, at first, he had been forced to link this belief with the Chinese one related to the water of no ageing and no death, later, thanks to the Russian linguist Nikolaj Nevskij, he had been able to autochthonise it, by locating its origin in the Ryukyus.

The theme of water holding the power of providing eternal youth and immortality – certainly not limited to Japan or East Asia – was employed by Orikuchi as one tile of a mosaic he scholarly and, most of all, narratively and poetically composed, in order to portray his own vision of Japan's remote past, where water meant as source of life was associated with women, and rhythmical time was marked by the daily performance of rituals and by the power of language and sound as incantation.

By delivering his own version of antiquity, Orikuchi did not merely narrate beliefs and rituals from the past, but he also aimed to offer an alternative fate for twentieth-century Japan, summoning and reviving an oneiric memory able to overcome the perishable constraints of a disenchanting society.

La Spiritualità degli Immigrati e lo Stress nei Tempi di Pandemia: da Cina e India a Roma

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ABSTRACT

Questa ricerca vuole esplorare la relazione tra le credenze focalizzate sulla religiosità e spiritualità tra gli immigrati provenienti dall'Asia (Cina e India) e residenti a Roma e le loro modalità di affrontare le varie difficoltà e preoccupazioni incontrate nei tempi di COVID-19.

Nello specifico, vengono esplorati gli aspetti riguardanti la percezione dell'importanza della religione nella vita, il *coping* religioso, la spiritualità e gli atteggiamenti verso l'immortalità dell'anima, la frequentazione dei luoghi di culto presenti a Roma. Abbiamo ipotizzato che queste variabili possano fungere da moderatori tra le difficoltà percepite e l'adattamento alle situazioni stressanti.

rJe tshe 'dzin ma: una Prassi Meditativa dge lugs pa per Favorire una Lunga Vita.

Relazione tra Istruzioni Tantriche e Simboli Figurativi

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ABSTRACT

Nella tradizione buddhista tibetana *dge lugs pa*, il *sadhāna* conosciuto come *rJe tshe 'dzin ma* prevede prassi speciali relative alla coincidenza tra il fondatore della tradizione, Tsong kha pa, e il Buddha della vita infinita, Amitāyus.

Tali prassi vengono impiegate dagli adepti *dge lugs pa* al fine della rimozione di ostacoli, blocchi e interferenze di natura sia psicologica che fisica, causate sia dal *karma* individuale dell'individuo che da possibili esseri soprannaturali ostili. Esse vengono impiegate per riequilibrare scompensi psicofisici, eliminare malattie, e favorire una vita sana e consapevole non solo in questa esistenza ma anche nelle prossime.

Oltre a ciò, il *sadhāna* si predispone quale strumento per favorire il risveglio di un discernimento che, laddove non conduca direttamente al risveglio, può allungare la durata della vita dell'adepto in maniera indefinita. Elemento fondamentale è la visualizzazione di un'immagine particolare dello stesso Tsong kha pa, caratterizzata dagli attributi del Buddha Amitāyus, tale da creare in ambito artistico una specifica iconografia ancora poco conosciuta e indagata.

Death and Immortality in the Teachings of Muktananda Paramahansa

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ABSTRACT

Death, treated as a natural turning point and the transition to a different mode of existence, is part of the teachings on immortality in Hinduism. Muktananda Paramahansa, a contemporary Hindu spiritual master, referred in his teachings not only to eschatological issues but also to mental representations of death, the fear of death, and the overcoming of this fear.

The article examines the idea of death and immortality as represented in the teachings of Muktananda. His deliberations are based, on the one hand, on his meditation experiences, in particular those related to the confrontation with the fear of annihilation, and, on the other hand, on his eclectic philosophical system, in which three components play an important role: the neo-vedantic concept of liberation in life (*jīvanmukti*), non-dualism of Kashmir Śaivism, and the mythical and legendary accounts on the Siddhas.

Destino e Immortalità nel Taoismo

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ABSTRACT

Nel Taoismo non vi è un unico modo di intendere il destino (*ming* 命), e diverse idee a questo proposito sono esistite all'interno dei suoi numerosi rami. Per quanto riguarda la ricerca dell'immortalità, Ge Hong (283-343) sostiene che il destino di ogni individuo — compreso il conseguimento della condizione di immortale — è una “dotazione naturale” ricevuta in base alla stella sotto la quale si viene concepiti. Allo stesso tempo, l'opera di Ge Hong è la prima a contenere il famoso detto “il mio destino è in me, non è nel Cielo”, che divenne un tema ricorrente nelle discussioni taoiste riguardanti la coltivazione di sé.

La teoria che l'immortalità sia predestinata non è dominante all'interno del Taoismo nel suo insieme; al contrario, il Taoismo in generale ritiene che sia possibile non solo amministrare ma anche cambiare il proprio destino. L'idea che il destino sia ricevuto allo stato embrionale ha tuttavia svolto un ruolo importante nelle pratiche di meditazione. Alcuni metodi di meditazione taoista consistono nel ripercorrere l'intero processo embrionale generando, questa volta, una nuova persona libera non solo dalla morte ma anche dal destino nel senso comune del termine. Al di là delle loro diversità, questi metodi consistono nella creazione di una diversa identità, fondamentalmente non coinvolta nel destino del suo creatore.

L'assunzione di responsabilità nei confronti del proprio destino è ancora più evidente nel Neidan (Alchimia Interna), dove il senso del termine *ming* viene esteso sino a significare non il destino in senso stretto ma la propria esistenza individuale. Il fine del Neidan è di regola raffigurato dalla generazione dell'embrione alchemico, che una volta venuto alla luce viene definito “una persona al di là della propria persona” o “un corpo al di fuori del proprio corpo” (*shen wai zhi shen* 身外之身). Usando un termine buddhista, alcuni maestri Neidan affermano che l'embrione rappresenta il “corpo del dharma” (*fashen* 法身), libero da nascita e morte, e ritengono che questo sia il vero corpo immortale.

Today as Yesterday: Tibetan Eschatology in a Fourteenth-Century Bon-po Prophecy

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ABSTRACT

This contribution is centered upon a *bon-po* textual source contained in the Giuseppe Tucci Tibetan Fund Collection preserved at the Central National Library in Rome, namely, Text 19 of the Volume numbered 514. It is a very short text, two folios in all, and it is titled *mKha' 'gro'i lung bstan* (The Ḍākinī's Prophecy). It is written in cursive script and endowed with numerous contracted words.

We can infer from its title, obviously, and from its studied content that it represents a prophecy or revelation (*lung bstan*) bestowed by a female enlightened being protectress of the Doctrine (Tib. *mKha' 'gro*, Sskt. *Ḍākinī*) to a master who experiences a vision while meditating in a secluded hermitage. The Ḍākinī pictures, in uncompromising and pessimistic terms, the state of affairs in which worldly and religious communities find themselves. After warning him of the inevitably dire consequences that the degenerate period will yield for all, the Ḍākinī provides specific indications as to the correct way to preserve the Teachings, not only to protect the latter but also for the spiritual survival of those who care.

The revelation/prophecy has the effect of engendering a state of sudden and spontaneous epiphany in the recipient, culminating in his “unification” with the Enlightened State which is then described in poetic and mystical terms.

The Ḍākinī's Prophecy will be analytically deconstructed in order to identify and highlight its eschatological and soteriological features so as to contextualize them in the research architecture of the Project and propose emic and comparative hypotheses to complement the relevant cross-cultural debate.

*The Multidimensional Nature of the Mercury Procedures
as Expressed in the Ten Million Relics (bye ba ring srel) of Zur mkhar bam nyam nyid rdo rje*

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ABSTRACT

Among the vast array of pharmacological teachings on mercurial recipes preserved in the *Ten Million Relics (bye ba ring bsrel)*, a medical anthology authored by Zur mkhar ba mnyam nyid rdo rje (1439–1475), the “Dākinī’s Song, Instantaneous Liberation through Realizing the Accomplished Speech from the Ten Million Relics, Special Teaching of The Glorious Zur mkhar ba” (*dpal ldan zur mkhar ba khyad chos bye bya ba ring bsrel las grub pa’i ngag gi rtogs pa ’grol ba dā ki’i glu dbyangs*) and the “Systematic Collection of Practices Related to the Adamantine Verses” (*rdo rje tshig rkang dang ’brel ba’i lag len grigs su bsdebs pa*) are to be considered particularly noteworthy for the complexity of and multidimensional nature of the mercury procedures they describe.

Those chapters not only deal with the pharmacological procedures aimed at obtaining the mercurial elixir but are also deeply interrelated to contextual yogic and meditative practices which are grounded in the tantric tradition of Mahāmudrā. The entire process is indeed devoted to both the obtainment of the mercurial panacea endowed with therapeutic potencies and apotropaic virtues and, from a higher spiritual perspective, to the realization of extraordinary bodies made of subtle lights as well as ultimate liberation.

In these alchemical and iatrochemical practices the relation wisdom–revelation appears to be crucial because, according to the hagiographical tradition, the teachings on the “great purification of mercury calcinated ashes” (*dgnul chu btso bkru chen mo*) were transmitted by Vajrayoginī to the Brug pa bka’ rgyud master O rgyan a rin chen dpal (1209–1229/30) and codified in obscure verses. The same instructions were passed down through the Zur lineage by the third Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje (1234–1339), disciple of O rgyan pa; in the anthology, they are associated to the exegesis of the twenty-fourth chapter of the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra (Śrīcakrasaṃvara-nāma-mahayoginī-tantra-rāja, dpal sdom po ’khor lo zhes bya ba rnal ’byor chen mo’i rgyud kyi rgyal po)*, which is concerned with *dākinī* language (*mkha’ ’gro’i brda tshig*). Another peculiar aspect of the teachings is that many formulas are presented as practical instructions, based upon the experiential knowledge gained by the same Zur mkhar bam yam nyid rdo rje who transmitted it to his disciples.

This contribution intends to analyze the above-mentioned chapters in order to demonstrate the multidimensionality of this fifteenth century’s pharmacological practice and, consequently, to trace connections between diverse historical traditions. The study will also address the role of Buddhist sources in legitimizing and codifying Tibetan iatrochemical knowledge, which is presented as a refined operative discipline wherein speculation, experiential knowledge, and spiritual achievements come together.

Reflections on the Jingoji Yakushi and the Production of Wooden Images of Bhaiṣajyaguru (The Healing Buddha) in Japan during the Late Nara (710-794) and Early Heian (794-1185) Periods.

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ABSTRACT

The Buddha Bhaiṣajyaguru (Jap. Yakushi Nyorai), the Medicine (or Healing) Buddha, has played a prominent role in East Asia since the third century CE. This deity, known for its power to alleviate suffering and restore health and general well-being, both for individuals and the nation, has been venerated in Japan since the seventh century. Although the cult of Yakushi arrived much later in Japan than on the continent, it became a dominant force in Japanese Buddhism, where interacted and blended with native beliefs, dispositions, and ritual practices over the centuries.

This contribution explores the lineage of the Yakushi cult – as it extended to Japan – and its icons, particularly their development during the late eighth and early ninth centuries, when standing statues of this deity, made of wood, were produced in large numbers in Nara first, then in Kyoto (and eventually in temples far away from the capital), and its devotional cult was assimilated and completely transformed into a Japanese artistic idiom.

The Yakushi statue from the Jingoji temple in Kyoto, expertly carved from a single block of *torreya nucifera* (Jap. *kaya*) that was not hollowed out, is often hailed by Japanese art historians as the representative example of plain-wood statuary from Japan’s early Heian period (794-1185). The statue’s maker showed great respect for the wood itself, which was left largely unpainted except for the hair, lips, and eyes. Rather than displaying the compassionate, idealized countenance the modern viewer has come to expect of Buddhist icons, the Jingoji Yakushi wears a solemn, fierce and fearsome look, an individuality of expression more commonly manifested by representations of indigenous local deities known as *kami*. This combination of elements resulted in a statue of remarkable spirituality whose power can be said to derive from its difference. His apotropaic forces were activated during ritual performances, particularly in the Buddhist repentance rite called Yakushi *keka*.

This sculpture, and other statues of Yakushi from the same period, will be discussed and situated within the broader framework of the rise of plain-wood statuary in late eighth and early ninth century Japan, validating the role of icons and their veneration, for both spiritual and worldly gains, as a central theme of Japanese religiosity.

The Quest for Immortality and the Transience of Life in Ancient Mesopotamia

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ABSTRACT

The second part of the famous Epic of Gilgameš centres around the protagonist’s quest for immortality. Gilgameš’ attempt is doomed to failure and at some point, before Gilgameš reaches the hero of the deluge and acquires the secret of immortality, the goddess Ištar appears to him in the disguise of a tavernkeeper and warns him of the impossibility of the undertaking, inviting him to enjoy the small joys of everyday life. The same words are found in wisdom texts where the imperishable fame of heroes is contrasted with the brevity and transience of life.

In this paper I analyze the concept of human immortality or, better, long life in Mesopotamian literature. I look at the failing occasions of regaining it, focusing on the two cases of Gilgameš, who loses the “plant of life”, and Adapa, who “refuses” immortality. In the conclusion, I discuss the opposite view proposed by epic and wisdom texts, the former aiming at heroic feats as a way of overcoming death at least for the name (fame), the latter by insisting on the vacuity of heroic deeds, the transience of life and the small everyday pleasures.