

True Words, Silence, and the Adamantine Dance

On Japanese Mikkyō and the Formation of the Shingon Discourse

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This paper deals with Japanese esoteric Buddhism (Mikkyō), in particular the Shingon tradition, as it relates to the emergence of new and peculiar epistemological concerns. Through a discussion of the kenmitsu system outlined by Kuroda Toshio, the paper first situates Mikkyō within the religious and institutional framework of medieval Japan, underlining its liminal and heterological nature as both an institutionalized discourse and a reservoir of oppositional possibilities. The paper then analyzes the formation of Shingon orthodoxy as an attempt to systematize the Tantric field in Japan through a re-organization of preexisting religious doctrines and practices. Special attention is given to the actual articulation of the kenmitsu episteme and its orders of significance. Finally, the paper outlines some fundamental epistemological tenets of Mikkyō discourse. Though it focuses on Shingon discourse and orthodoxy, this paper confronts basic epistemic assumptions and discursive practices common to the multifarious forms of esoteric Buddhism in Japan.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to describe the discourse of Japanese esoteric Buddhism (particularly the Shingon 真言 tradition) as it developed in conjunction with the emergence of a distinctive form of philosophical reflection on signs and the formation of a corpus of

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practices relating to the production of meaning.¹ My basic hypothesis is that esoteric Buddhism (Jpn. *mikkyō* 密教, secret teachings, hidden doctrines) can be understood as a discursive formation that presupposes a particular cosmology, attitude towards reality, and episteme (“the attitude that a socio-cultural community adopts in relation to its own signs”; GREIMAS and COURTÈS 1979, p. 129). It can be seen, in other words, as an ensemble of knowledge and practices concerned with the interpretation of reality as well as the production, selection, conservation, and transmission of knowledge. These things, in turn, are implemented through interpretive strategies, repertoires of metaphors, and a general structuring of knowledge. Like every discourse, that of esoteric Buddhism determines (and is determined by) distinctive institutions, ideologies, rituals, and relations of power.²

The Mikkyō semiotic paradigm was extremely influential in Japan for centuries and still operates today on a certain cultural level (although in a marginalized and nonorganic fashion). An understanding of this paradigm is thus essential for the study not only of medieval Japanese religiosity and culture but also of the esoteric ceremonies, magic rituals, and traditional divination still performed in contemporary Japan.³

The reconstruction of medieval Mikkyō⁴ discourse and its underlying episteme should, ideally, begin with a consideration of the Tantric-Daoist syncretism that occurred mainly, but not exclusively, within the Chinese Zhenyan 真言 lineage during the Tang and Song dynasties, and then trace its development and transformation in Japan. I confine myself, however, to the early and medieval Japanese Shingon tradition, not only to set reasonable boundaries to this study but also to answer in part the urgent need for a cultural history of the Shingon sect. The lack of such a history has been a major hindrance to the study of Japanese religiosity in its various manifestations and has left many questions unresolved, particularly those concerned with the ways in which Shingon knowledge and practices were codified, trans-

¹ According to Charles Sanders Peirce’s definition, a sign is “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity”—in other words, anything that can be charged with meaning and interpreted.

² I agree with James BOON, who considers semiotics “less an integral theory than a clearinghouse of issues in the complexity of communicational processes” (1982, p. 116). I see semiotics as an open field of problematics, a network of approaches and theories that can shed light on basic issues of signification and discursive formations.

³ On these subjects, and on the role of Mikkyō ideas and practices in contemporary Japanese magic and religious ritual, see KOMATSU 1988.

⁴ By the expression “medieval Mikkyō,” I mean the totality of the forms taken by esoteric Buddhism from the Insei 院政 age at the end of the Heian period (late eleventh–twelfth centuries) to at least the Nanbokuchō age (early fourteenth century).

mitted, and diffused, and with the modalities of interaction of the various esoteric lineages in Japan. Because of this the Shingon tradition in most major studies on premodern Japanese culture has been obliterated, or, at best, reduced to a mystified Kūkai 空海 (Kōbō Daishi 弘法大師; 774–835).⁵

I use the term “Shingon tradition” for want of a better translation of the term “Shingon-shū” 真言宗. In its medieval usage “Shingon-shū” indicated a loosely connected network of temples and lineages (*ryūha* 流派) that shared a myth of Kūkai as founder and a common set of initiatory knowledge and practices. This complex was defined in relation to other similar “sectarian” denominations, particularly those included in the Eight Schools system (*hasshū* 八宗) and its expanded versions.⁶ In medieval Japan, the term *shū* 宗 referred essentially to a textual corpus associated with a transmission/foundation lineage in the Three Lands (India, China, Japan). Such corpora/lineages implied orthodoxy and legitimacy because they were officially recognized by the emperor and because they were traditionally associated with certain temples and sacred places (see GYŌNEN). Each *shū* was thus an influential cultural reality as part of the doctrinal, political, ideological, and geographical system of the Eight Schools, and at the same time an “abstract” ideological foundation legitimating the various locale-specific lineages.⁷

Though I will focus on the creation of Shingon discourse and orthodoxy, I believe that the basic epistemic assumptions, discursive practices, and rhetorical strategies discussed here reflect traits common to all the multifarious forms assumed by esoteric Buddhism in Japan. By viewing Mikkyō as a discourse I will try to bring into relief an important, though often ignored, feature of Japanese medieval culture, and also counter the ideological mystifications of traditional sectarian scholarship with its stress on specific lineages and the figures (myths) of their founders. I hope thereby to avoid confining Mikkyō to the reassuring boundaries of our received knowledge.

⁵ The founder of the Japanese Shingon sect.

⁶ The Eight Schools (Kusha 俱舍, Jōjitsu 成実, Ritsu 律, Sanron 三論, Hossō 法相, Kegon 華嚴, Tendai 天台, and Shingon) were the Buddhist scholastic traditions officially “imported” from China and acknowledged by the Japanese imperial system. Such traditions as Zen 禪, Jōdo-shū 淨土宗, Jōdo Shinshū 淨土真宗, and Nichiren-shū 日蓮宗 were added in the Middle Ages. The system of the Eight Schools (and its extended versions) constituted the framework within which each sectarian denomination acquired its status and legitimacy.

⁷ Properly speaking, Shingon has never had a unified center, and a Shingon “sect” does not exist even today. Temples affiliated with the Shingon sectarian denomination belong to either the Kogi 古義 Shingon-shū or the Shingi 新義 Shingon-shū, both of which are further articulated in many sub-branches.

Tantric Heterology and Its Japanese Avatar: The Kenmitsu System

Tantrism, from its very beginnings on the Indian subcontinent, has constituted a complex heterology, an often successful attempt to confer centrality to a heterogeneous ensemble of elements that were culturally marginal and were as such excluded from institutionalized discourses. This heterology in large part accounts for the difficulty of identifying a common substratum to Tantrism's multifarious historical and cultural manifestations.

Tantrism was in origin the heterology of what Michel de CERTEAU calls an "untiring murmur" at the background of Buddhist cultures, a "consumption" and displacement of "high" culture products and discourses by marginalized individuals and social groups (1990, p. 53). James BOON writes, "'Tantrism' is a nineteenth-century European coinage based on an 'exotic' term. The 'ism' part makes shifting fields of oppositions, differentiations, and plural relations sound substantive, doctrinaire, and uniform" (1990, p. 159). Tantrism can be characterized as a complex magico-ritual apparatus that systematically reverses the renouncement ideals proper to religious institutions, especially Buddhism (DUMONT 1979, pp. 342–43), although it does not necessarily conceive of itself as an opposition ideology. As will become clear later, this characteristic is shared, to some extent, by Japanese avatars of Tantrism. Ritual based on a principle of reversal seems, then, to be a fundamental trait of Tantrism. In fact, as BOON suggests, "Tantrism" is merely "a name for a polymorphous reservoir of ritual possibilities, continuously flirted with by orthodoxies yet also the basis of countering them"; it defines a field of possibilities against which "more orthodox positions and transformations become shaped and motivated" (1990, p. 165).⁸

Japanese Mikkyō provides an interesting case of "Tantric heterology." As Boon notes with respect to Tantrism in general, the very term "Mikkyō" presents Japanese esoteric Buddhism as an apparently uniform cultural entity. Actually, it covers three quite different aspects of Japanese Buddhism, among which it is important to distinguish.⁹ The first aspect is the Tantric substratum as a "reservoir of ritual possibili-

⁸ Interestingly, BOON sees "a Western parallel" of Tantrism in "that range of hermetic heterodoxies, a murmur of Gnostic, Neoplatonist, crypto-liturgical positions: from free-masons to Bohemians, from counterculture to *poètes maudits*" (1990, p. 165).

⁹ Although the Tantric field in Japan still needs to be surveyed and charted, I think it constitutes a continuum ranging from clearly "Tantric" positions to formations that could be defined as "tantroid," such as the marginal Pure Land movements known as Ichinengi 一念義 (sometimes related to the radical Tachikawa-ryū 立川流) or the Jishū 時衆 groups often associated with Kōya-san 高野山 and Shingon institutions.

ties,” a disseminated and nonsystematic cultural entity, a matrix of anti-institutional potentialities; this is an aspect often downplayed or ignored by traditional scholarship.¹⁰ The second aspect is Tantrism as “flirted with by orthodoxies,” that is, as a systematic and organized tradition indissolubly related to non-Tantric forms of Buddhism (*kengyō* 顯教, exoteric teachings); this is the most common understanding of Mikkyō, since scholars usually stress the systematic aspects of Japanese Tantrism. Mikkyō in this second sense is organized into lineages and possesses textual corpora and ritual practices; it is a vast phenomenon encompassing various sectarian divisions. The third, and most limited, aspect is Mikkyō as the Shingon tradition, conceived of as the purest form of esoteric Buddhism.¹¹

Tantric Buddhism in its second aspect interacted with other Japanese Buddhist movements, religious traditions, and philosophical systems to create a new organism, defined by KURODA Toshio (1975) as an “exoteric-esoteric system” (*kenmitsu taisei* 顯密体制) with its own ideology (*kenmitsushugi* 顯密主義, exo-esotericism). Kuroda’s concepts—formulated to describe the complex Buddhist institutional system in medieval Japan—have opened the way to understanding Japanese Buddhism as a global cultural system possessing multiple interrelations with other religious and cultural systems. His concepts have undergone various adjustments, but on the whole they are useful tools for portraying what is an ideological, political, and economic organism.

Kuroda and such followers as Satō Hiroo, Sasaki Kaoru, and Taira Masayuki are concerned primarily with the social, institutional, and ideological aspects of the medieval *kenmitsu* system,¹² while I am concerned here more with its epistemic aspects. In particular, I see Mikkyō discourse as an important part of what I call the “*kenmitsu* episteme,” by which I mean the basic epistemic features of Kuroda’s “exoteric” system and ideology.

Kuroda distinguishes three phases in the formation of the *kenmitsu* system:

1. Mikkyō (in the first sense discussed above) unified all religious movements on an original “magic” background;

¹⁰ This aspect of Japanese Mikkyō has been highlighted, although with different degrees of explicitness, by KOMATSU and NAITŌ 1985, AMINO 1986, MURAYAMA 1987 and 1990, KOMATSU 1988, and NAKAZAWA 1988.

¹¹ Most studies on Mikkyō deal only with Shingon, while most studies on Tendai consider only its non-Tantric aspects. Tantric elements in other traditions have never been studied in depth.

¹² For a critical appreciation of *kenmitsu taisei*, see SASAKI 1988, pp. 29–52.

2. the Eight Schools established their own doctrines, esoteric practices, and *kenmitsu* theories¹³ on this new esotericized basis;
3. the respective schools, thus organized, were recognized by secular society as legitimate Buddhism and formed a type of religious establishment with a strong social impact—a situation that occurred only in Japan.

KURODA stresses the fact that what underlies the entire *kenmitsu* system is not a particular sect, but Mikkyō in general as a common substratum of ideas and practices concerned with the ultimate meaning of reality and the supreme goals of Buddhist cultivation (1975, p. 537). The main characteristic of Japanese Mikkyō is its capacity to permeate and unify all religious traditions and to organize the magical beliefs of the people (pp. 432, 436). It differs from Indian Tantrism in the importance it assigns to rituals and prayers (*kitō* 祈祷) for worldly benefits and the protection of the state (p. 433), a difference based on deeper cultural motivations.¹⁴ The *kenmitsu* system was not just a religious logic and ideology, but was so closely connected to Japanese political authority that it acquired the status of an official ideology and gradually esotericized the state apparatuses (p. 434).¹⁵ It constituted the hegemonic system of thought and practice in medieval Japan (pp. 445–46) and was the reigning orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Shinto was fitted into this framework as a local and concrete manifestation of Mikkyō (p. 537).

It should be noted that Kuroda sees the ensemble of Tendai concepts and practices known as *hongaku hōmon* 本覚法門 or *hongaku shisō* 本覚思想 as “the model of *kenmitsu* ideology” and the Tendai school as “the representative entity of the *kenmitsu* system” (1975, p. 445).¹⁶ Although Kuroda mentions the central role of Kakuban’s 覚鑊 Shingon thought in shaping the system (KURODA 1975, p. 475), he fails to analyze this role and thereby neglects the role of Shingon and

¹³ Theories delineating the relationship between Tantric and non-Tantric Buddhism.

¹⁴ It is possible to discern in this feature a reversal of the traditional Buddhist outlook, that is, an awareness that mundane and political activities aimed at establishing a Buddhist kingdom and constructing a Buddha-land can be closely related to salvation.

¹⁵ The present study deals with the question of orthodoxy in relation to the formation of Shingon discourse; thus the approach taken here differs from that of Kuroda.

¹⁶ This, Kuroda argues, is due to the fact that the Tendai tradition (especially the Sanmon 山門 lineages) occupied a hegemonic position during the Japanese Middle Ages. Sasaki Kaoru, on the other hand, indicates that, while Tendai institutions were at the center of the *kenmitsu* system in western Japan, the religious system established by the Kamakura bakufu was essentially based on Zen and Mikkyō, having its roots in the Rinzaï 臨濟 Zen, Tōji 東寺, and Onjō-ji 園城寺 lineages, as well as in Onmyōdō 陰陽術. SASAKI calls this alternative system the *zenmitsu taisei* 禪密体制 (1988, pp. 94–148).

other important esoteric lineages. Kuroda's treatment leaves it unclear whether he envisioned a single, Tendai-centered *kenmitsu* system shared by all other schools or whether he intended only to present another influential paradigm of a manifold reality.

I am inclined to believe the latter. I see the *kenmitsu* system, in the general terms it has been described above, not as the whole institutional and ideological apparatus of Japanese medieval Buddhism but as something akin to a “generative scheme” of multiple cultural interventions, an open framework that the various Buddhist schools and traditions could actualize on their own terms. In fact, all the Eight (or Ten) Schools offered the same range of “products” and “services”: simple formulae for salvation and rebirth, easy practices, relations with local “Shinto” cults, esoteric doctrines and practices, political ideologies, services for the protection of the state and the ruling lineages (*chingo kokka* 鎮護国家), and so forth. These were then personalized through specific doctrines and practices. In this respect, the schools formed a sort of trust controlling the religious market, and Mikkyō was their common religious, epistemic, and ideological substratum.

There are other points in Kuroda's treatment of *kenmitsu* requiring further development. For instance, Kuroda does not mention the fact that the very notion of *kenmitsu* resulted from an act, both conceptual and practical, of articulation and restructuring that affected the entire Japanese religious and philosophical world. Nor does he deal in depth with the heterological nature of Tantrism or with the complex process of creating a Mikkyō discourse—a necessary requisite for establishing the *kenmitsu* system and its distinctive internal logic. Mikkyō's evolution is reduced to the thought of Kūkai and later Tendai developments, and the esotericization of other schools is presented as an inevitable outcome.

As we will see in more detail later, “Kengyō” was constructed simultaneously with “Mikkyō” as the Shingon exegetes dissimulated, rearticulated, displaced, and rewrote preexisting doctrines and practices. No place was recognized in this process for the ritual rivals of Kūkai's Mikkyō: Onmyōdō 陰陽苟 and the preceding or competing forms of esoteric Buddhism (*zōmitsu* 雜密, *taimitsu* 台密).¹⁷ The ideology of *kenmitsu* was introduced by Kūkai in his *Ben kenmitsu nikyō ron* as a means of defining the polar relation between the Shingon esoteric system and preexisting teachings, which he considered superficial and provisional. In this respect Kūkai reversed traditional hermeneutical

¹⁷ The interaction of Mikkyō and Onmyōdō doctrines and practices in Japan has been described in MURAYAMA (1981, especially pp. 197–241; see also 1987, 1990), HAYAMI 1975, KOMATSU 1988, and KOMATSU and NAITŌ 1985.

criteria,¹⁸ turning what was “evident” (*ken* 顯, teachings that are clear and self-evident without problems of interpretation) into something “superficial,” and what was “hidden” or “not immediately evident” (*mitsu* 密, teachings related to a certain intention of the Buddha and therefore apparently unclear and requiring interpretation) into something “profound and true.”

Kūkai’s understanding of the term *kenmitsu* came to be widely accepted, and after the late Heian period was commonly used to designate the whole Buddhist system (although Kūkai’s redistribution of doctrines and practices was rooted in the old idea of the existence of a secret transmission of the true teachings and rituals of the Buddha—an East Asian counterpart of the European hermetic mysteries). In this manner, Kūkai opened the way for a definition of the Mikkyō discursive field as comprising that which the other doctrines do not teach, that which the other schools ignore and leave unsaid. The silence of the Buddha marked the boundaries of Shingon intervention.

Mikkyō played another important role, functioning as a relay in the circuit between center and margin. This made the *kenmitsu* system an important instrument of power. By controlling and integrating negative forces that threatened the cultural center from “outside” (KOMATSU and NAITŌ 1985) and by providing central institutions with an efficacious cosmology and a distinctive epistemic field, Mikkyō paradoxically became the dominant paradigm of Japanese medieval culture.¹⁹ Systematic Mikkyō, itself a product of a semantic reversal, succeeded in reformulating on its own terms and from its own perspective—that of systematic reversal—the main concepts and practices of Japanese culture.²⁰ Moreover, monks belonging to esoteric lineages were closely related to the imperial court and the ruling lineages, so that the Tendai and Shingon schools exerted a true hegemony (a hegemony that was economic as well).²¹

¹⁸ See Kūkai, *Ben-kenmitsu nikyō-ron* (translated in HAKEDA 1972, pp. 156–57). On the main criteria of Buddhist hermeneutics, see LOPEZ 1988.

¹⁹ YAMAGUCHI Masao (1989) has presented an illuminating interpretation of the ambiguous and “marginal” nature of the Japanese emperor. This could explain, at least in part, the political importance of Mikkyō.

²⁰ In the systematic esotericization of Japan and its culture that was carried out during the Middle Ages, geographic space was conceived of as a *mandala*, the Japanese language was identified with the absolute language of the *shingon-darani* 真言陀羅尼, and literary production was assimilated to sacred texts dealing with esoteric truth (this process will be the subject of a later study). An esoteric dimension was attributed also to death (see KAKUBAN, *Ichigo taiyō himitsu shū*) and birth (see DAIRYŪ; I am grateful to James Sanford for having brought to my attention this fascinating text).

²¹ Cases such as that of Kakuban, closely connected to the retired emperor Toba 鳥羽, and Monkan, in the entourage of Emperor Go-Daigo 後醍醐, are well known. Earlier, during

It is, I believe, safe to assume that the real *kenmitsu* matrix of the Shingon school emerged during the late Heian period with the appearance of a new literary genre: the treatises on the distinction between *ken* and *mitsu* by such great scholars and religious figures as Saisen 最暹 (1025–1115), Jitsuhan 実範 (?–1144), and Kakuban 覚鑊 (1095–1143). Generally ignored by scholars today, these men were directly responsible for the creation of medieval Mikkyō. Contemporary events—such as the creation of the cult of Kōbō Daishi or the emergence of Kōyasan as an object of popular faith connected with the quest for immortality and rebirth in paradise—were closely related, on the one hand, to the cultural mood of the time (the idea of *mappō* 末法 and the search for methods to counter it), and, on the other, to the need of religious institutions to gain new sources of income and wider social support. In this respect, it is interesting that the collection and study of Kūkai's works, as well as the attempt to adapt Mikkyō to new religious needs and trends, began after the creation of new forms of cult and religious “consumption.”

Still, Mikkyō heterology never lost its formidable function of opposition, precisely because of its special contact with the “outside” and with “otherness,” and because of its direct links with marginal, heterodoxical, and ambiguous cultural products (sacred mountain cults, popular religious practices, and social organizations of marginality).²² Among the expressions of Mikkyō were the *hijiri* 聖, marginal religious figures that gravitated around central political and religious institutions and possessed the power to subvert them.²³ The number of *hijiri* and monks of low status using their esoteric training to get close to political power was large, and included such figures as Gyōki 行基 (668–749), Genbō 玄昉 (8th c.), and Dōkyō 道鏡 (d. 770) in the Nara period, Kūkai and Kakuban in the Heian period, and Monkan 文観 (1278–1357) and many of the monks around Emperor Godaigo in the Nanbokuchō era. A later example was Tenkai 天海 (1536–1643), the architect of the political and religious cosmology of the Tokugawa government. An example of a “Tantric” attempt to organize social

the Nara period, esoteric monks such as Genbō and Dōkyō were closely associated with those in political power. On a more orthodox and official level, the Shingon hierarchy has been close to the emperor since 834, when a Shingon chapel, the Shingon-in 眞言院, was established inside the Kyoto imperial palace precincts. It is also to be recalled that the development of Mikkyō, first in the early Heian period (ninth century) and later in the Insei age (late eleventh–twelfth centuries), was closely related to more general restructurings of the Japanese political, social, and economic order.

²² On the cultural role of marginality and its relationship with the center, and on the principle of exclusion in Japanese culture, see YAMAGUCHI 1975.

²³ On the *hijiri*, see GORAI 1975; SATŌ 1987; SASAKI 1988.

marginality was the Shingon Ritsu tradition of Eison 叡尊 (1201–1290) and Ninshō 忍性 (1217–1303) (OISHI 1987).

Mikkyō never became a unified opposition force, but was a reservoir of nonorganized and asystematic oppositional possibilities. Its history is a series of attempts to keep an almost impossible balance between center and periphery, between institutionalized discourses and practices and their heterological counterparts. A conflictual relation between center and margin existed throughout the whole of pre-modern Japanese history, contributing to the flourishing of the esoteric tradition. Nevertheless, people apparently did not realize the questionable compromises such a stance entailed, with perhaps the only significant exception being the Hossō monk Tokuitsu 徳一 at the beginning of the Heian period.

Tokuitsu's Criticism of Mikkyō

That Tokuitsu (fl. ca. 820) was aware of the heterological nature of Kūkai's new Mikkyō is evident from his *Shingonshū miketsu-mon*, a short treatise in which he listed his doubts and criticisms concerning Shingon doctrines and practices (T #2458, 77.862–865). A seemingly harmless work, it in fact reveals the total incompatibility of Mikkyō with the doctrines of the Six Nara Schools (TSUDA 1985). As noted by TAKAHASHI Tomio, Tokuitsu's criticism was directed less at the Shingon school than at Mikkyō as a distinct new tradition (1990, 181–82). His criticism encompassed Tendai forms of Mikkyō as well, so that Tendai monks were among those who responded to him.

The tenor of the debate was unusual. While disputes among schools in East Asia were usually over the provisional or ultimate nature of teachings or lineages, Tokuitsu argued from a Mahāyāna perspective that Mikkyō, as explained by Kūkai, was utterly untenable. His criticism was directed particularly against the features of Kūkai's thought connected with the formation of an orthodox esoteric discourse separate from the Nara Buddhist establishment, features such as the authenticity of the esoteric lineage, the salvific value of its practices, the idea of *sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏 (becoming Buddha in this very body), and the unconditioned nature of the Sanskrit language. Since Kūkai saw the salvific power of his teachings as lying in the absolute nature of esoteric words,²⁴ Tokuitsu's observations threatened his Shingon system at its very basis: if mantras are not expressions of an unconditioned language, then the truth they convey is

²⁴ See Kūkai, *Shōji jissōgi, Bonji shittan jimo narabini shakugi*; see also RAMBELLI 1992 and 1994.

conditioned and the rapid attainment of *siddhi* (supernatural powers) is consequently impossible. This would amount to the dissolution of Mikkyō. Tokuitsu's doubts are thus clues to the fundamental alterity of the esoteric system, and to the impossibility of understanding it on the basis of Mahāyāna principles.²⁵

Because of Tokuitsu's perhaps unexpected attack, Kūkai realized that influential figures in Nara Buddhism saw the teachings of his new school as flawed, yet nevertheless as potentially threatening. In order to confer preeminence upon the Shingon doctrines, therefore, Kūkai had to find new hermeneutical criteria. He also was at least partly aware of the fundamental heterogeneity of Mikkyō, and accordingly stressed its systematic coherence with Mahāyāna texts. Although Kūkai never explicitly answered Tokuitsu's criticisms,²⁶ all of his work can be understood as an indirect reply (for a different interpretation, see TSUDA 1985).

Only by raising Shingon Mikkyō above its marginal and asystematic background could Kūkai and his successors confer on the Shingon school a dominant role within the Japanese religious establishment. In order to bring this about it was necessary, first, to create a new discourse and orthodoxy that partially concealed Tantrism's heterogeneity and underlined its continuity with the dominant forms of state Buddhism; and, second, to devalue most preceding Tantric forms and write a new classification of Japanese Buddhist schools. A very difficult agenda, undoubtedly. But Kūkai's efforts, especially in consolidating the *kenmitsu* categorization, constituted an impressive attempt to create a new tradition. The endeavor required time to bear fruit, and several centuries passed before convincing replies to Tokuitsu's objections were formulated: first it was necessary to build up a solid alternative point of view grounded in a systematic discourse. Of course, the debate did not concern only theoretical matters and doctrinal prestige;

²⁵ More recently, TSUDA (1978) has expressed doubts that the two fundamental texts of the Shingon tradition, the *Dari jing* (Jpn. *Dainichi-kyō*) and the *Jinggang ding jing* (Jpn. *Kongōchō-kyō*), can be integrated into a single and noncontradictory system. According to Tsuda, these two texts epitomize two cosmologies and soteriologies (those of Mahāyāna and those of Tantric Buddhism) that exist in a "critical" relation to each other, i.e., that are completely different and incompatible. TSUDA, interestingly, refers to Tokuitsu's criticism (1985, pp. 89–91). It should be stressed, however, that Mikkyō, far from being reducible to the *Dari jing* and the *Jinggang ding jing*, comprises a complex intertext of commentaries on and explanations of both sūtras, plus numerous other texts that lack direct relations to them. On a still deeper level, one can recognize a diffuse set of non-systematic knowledge and ritual actions, many of which are not clearly supported by textual authorities.

²⁶ He directly tackled only Tokuitsu's eleventh doubt, concerning the Iron Stūpa where Nāgārjuna, the human patriarch of Mikkyō, was initiated by Vajrasattva into the esoteric teachings (KŪKAI, *Himitsu mandarakyō fuhōden*).

what was really at stake was ideological supremacy and power.

Tokuitsu's criticisms were not pursued by other members of the contemporary Buddhist establishment, and Tokuitsu was silenced even by his own Hossō colleagues and successors. The Nara establishment soon realized the ideological and ritual importance of the new Mikkyō as an instrument of political and economic control, and adopted it in a sort of surreptitious paradigm shift. Esoteric Buddhism became in this way an essential feature of premodern Japanese culture. It is not by accident, therefore, that Tokuitsu has been canceled from the official history of Japanese Buddhism, and that most of his works are no longer extant. Forced to play the role of the loser in the debates on the *kenmitsu* matrix, he became a kind of scapegoat of the *kenmitsu* system.

Purity and Heterogeneity: The Formation of Mikkyō Discourse

In his criticism of Mikkyō, Tokuitsu ignored the important fact that Nara and early Heian Buddhism already contained numerous esoteric (Tantric) elements, mainly relating to the ritual and meditative apparatus. Among these elements were those directed toward the political center (e. g., rites for the protection of the state) and those expressive of cultural and political marginality (e.g., individual practices to gain various *siddhi*) (see KUSHIDA 1964, 1–54; HAYAMI 1975; MURAYAMA 1987, 1990). We see here a different configuration of the traits that characterize Indian Tantrism (DUMONT 1979). The ritual apparatus of Nara Buddhism, with regard to both central state rites and marginal individual practices, was Tantric in that it reversed Buddhist ideals of renunciation by stressing material benefits and protection of the state (symbolized by the imperial lineage).²⁷

Later Shingon scholars stress the “miscellaneous,” “unsystematic,” and “fragmentary” nature of Nara Mikkyō, which they label *zōmitsu* 雜密, in contrast to the pure, systematic, and mature esoteric teachings—*junmitsu* 純密—that were supposedly introduced to Japan by Kūkai. Although the distinction between *zōmitsu* and *junmitsu* is often taken for granted, its basic criteria are neither clear nor objective, and it is thus quite problematic as a description of actual doctrinal and ritual differences.²⁸ MISAKI (1988) has demonstrated the existence of

²⁷ The efforts of esoteric monks like Genbō toward establishing the Kokubun-ji 国分寺 system of state-run provincial temples indicate the importance of Mikkyō in the formation of Nara State Buddhism (see HAYAMI 1975, pp. 4–5).

²⁸ Even the origin of the terms *zōmitsu* and *junmitsu* is obscure, and presumably quite late; according to MISAKI (1988, pp. 146–47), the first person to use the words was Ekō 慧光

multiple esoteric trends in Tang China, and of numerous attempts to construct orthodoxies. These efforts were continued in Japan by Shingon and Tendai monks. The *junmitsu/zōmitsu* distinction was the product of just such an effort, one that rewrote Mikkyō's history to magnify Kūkai's lineage, downplay Tantric practices and rites prior to Amoghavajra,²⁹ and belittle subsequent developments in rival lineages. These efforts, animated by a certain "volonté d'orthodoxie" (a term used by Bernard Faure), were in large part successful, though the translation and production of so-called *zōmitsu* texts did not cease (MISAKI 1988, pp. 146–47). Tantric multiplicity also continued to flourish in marginal cults like Tachikawa-ryū 立川流, local traditions like Shugendō 修験道, and even "orthodox" Mikkyō as institutionalized lineages proliferated and sometimes integrated heterodoxical practices.

The *Mikkyō daijiten* defines *junmitsu* as a synonym for *ryōbu* 兩部 *mikkyō*, a form of Mikkyō that combines the doctrines and practices of the Womb (*taizō* 胎藏) system and the Diamond or Vajra (*kongō* 金剛) system. *Junmitsu* is believed to be the direct expression of the enlightenment of Dainichi Nyorai 大日如来 (Mahāvairocana), the personification of the Dharmakāya (MD, p. 1108). *Zōmitsu* is synonymous with *zōbu* 雜部 *mikkyō*, that is, everything in Mikkyō that cannot be reduced to *junmitsu*. It comprises conditioned doctrines and rituals propounded by Dainichi Nyorai's three communicational and transformational bodies (the *tajuyūshin* 他受用身, *hengeshin* 變化身, and *tōrushin* 等流身), and as such is explicitly inferior to *ryōbu*. This is a major difference with respect to Tendai Mikkyō (*taimitsu* 台密), according to which the *zōbu* is the very space where the nondualism of the Womb and the Diamond systems is realized.

The term *zōbu* was first used by Kūkai in the *Shingonshū shogaku kyōritsu-ron mokuroku*, his catalogue of esoteric texts (also known as the *Sangakuroku*) compiled in 823. This work, perhaps the first systematic attempt to classify Mikkyō texts (MISAKI 1988, p. 150), utilizes the three traditional categories of sūtras (*daikyō* 大經), precepts (*ritsu* 律), and treatises (*ron* 論). The Shingon sūtras are then classified as Diamond-lineage, Womb-lineage, or miscellaneous (*zōbu*). Problems with criteria and modalities appeared even in this early classification,³⁰

(1666–1734). On the mystifications in the traditional sectarian treatment of the *junmitsu-zōmitsu* distinctions, see ORZECH 1989 (especially pp. 88–92), and MISAKI 1988.

²⁹ Bukong 不空 (705–774), a Tang *ācārya* with direct lineal contacts with Kūkai.

³⁰ For instance, a sūtra such as the *Suxidi-jieluo-jing* 蘇悉地羯羅經 is included among the precepts and regulations; the *Dari jing* does not conform to the classificatory criteria, containing as it does many explicit references to *genze riyaku* 現世利益; texts that are not sūtras (i.e., that do not contain doctrinal elements and concern *genze riyaku*) are included in the Diamond textual lineage (MISAKI 1988, pp. 150–52). In general, the Shingon school appears

however, and later attempts were not much more successful.³¹ The criteria tended to be arbitrary and overly influenced by the desire to support the claims to orthodoxy of the compiler's own lineage. It is not surprising then that the *ryōbu/zōbu* distinction is related within Shingon to the more general *kenmitsu* articulation.

It is nevertheless possible to trace a distinction between Nara Mikkyō and later Mikkyō. In the latter one finds an attempt to develop a systematic discourse, different from and sometimes antithetical to "normal" Buddhist discourse. Although very few differences can be detected between *junmitsu* and *zōmitsu* with regard to cosmology and soteriology, Heian Mikkyō presents a more systematic aspect, and devotes a large amount of attention to semiotic and discursive problems (usually connected, again, with its need to establish its own orthodoxy). It may be that such a discursive self-awareness was also present in late Nara Mikkyō, an interesting point requiring further research. But, though of interest for the history of Japanese culture and the establishment of the esoteric orthodoxy, this possibility does not affect the characteristics of the full-fledged Mikkyō discourse.

Esoteric elements in pre-Heian Japan were assembled into a literary and ritual genre, a loose corpus called the *darani-zō* 陀羅尼藏, one of the five sections of the Buddhist Canon in the *prajñā-pāramitā* tradition (*Dasheng liqu liuboluomituo jing*, T. 8.868b; see also Kūkai's treatment of the subject in the *Ben-kenmitsu nikyō-ron*). The esoteric formulae, variously called *darani*, *ju* 呪, and *mitsugo* 密語, are discussed in many Mahāyāna texts (UJIKE 1984; MISAKI 1988, pp. 18–25). The wide diversity of approaches and interpretations shows that dharanic expressions made up a heterogeneous field not organically integrated within Hinayāna and Mahāyāna traditions.

According to UJIKE Kakushō (1984), who describes in detail the development of dharanic thought in China and Japan, spells designed to facilitate the understanding and usage of Mahāyāna doctrines developed into instruments of power, and later became a kind of microcosm that offered the chance to "become a Buddha in this very body" (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏). UJIKE points out that, after the age of the great Tang *ācāryas*, increasing attention to linguistic problems together with a new vision of salvation caused the transformation of the *darani-zō* into the Shingon vehicle (1984; see also RAMBELLI 1992,

to have followed Amoghavajra's method of including into the Diamond lineage authoritative (and useful) texts and rituals of miscellaneous origin.

³¹ See, for instance, MISAKI's analysis of the classification proposed by Gōhō 果宝 (1306–1362), the great scholar monk of Tō-ji 東寺 (1988, pp. 157–58), and Yūkai's 祐快 (1345–1416) attempt as described in MD (s.v. *Ryōbu zōbu*: 2284).

pp. 189–93). And just as mysticism separated from theology in Europe in a process studied by CERTEAU (1982), so the dharanic ideas and practices of the *darani-zō* detached themselves from the Mahāyāna corpus to form an independent discourse. This movement “is related to a sharper consciousness of a specific and original language. The word that referred to an *experience* developed to designate a *language*” (Michel de Certeau, quoted in the introduction to the Italian translation of CERTEAU 1982 [Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987]).

Tantrism was also concerned with the operations performed on the terms it invested with meaning. It thus possessed pragmatic and meta-linguistic significance: it specified both how to use and how to interpret its expressions. It specified, in other words, how to *practice* language. These linguistic and semiotic practices, when they became complex and explicit enough, established a field of their own: *junmitsu* Mikkyō. Mikkyō proposed a unitary and organic vision of esoteric linguistic phenomena, thus performing a restructuring of Buddhist discursivity. Denomination marked the will to unify all the operations until then dispersed, to organize, select, and regulate them. A new discipline was born from this attempt to systematize discursive practices (see also CERTEAU 1982).

In this process, undoubtedly connected to more general cultural factors, *junmitsu* emerged as (Shingon) Mikkyō orthodoxy; thus “pure” Mikkyō was the result of a mystified idea—an ideology—of orthodoxy, purity, and uncontamination. The very concept of a Shingon “school,” with its overtones of unity and group identity, conceals the manifold moves made over the centuries to exploit new and different possibilities of representation. Bernard FAURE has deconstructed traditional views of lineage and orthodoxy through a critique of their arborescent model: “Orthodoxy takes its shape not from its kernel—a lineage—but from its margins, the other trends against which it reacts by rejecting or encompassing them” (1987, p. 54). Shingon Mikkyō, too, developed in rhizome-like fashion as the result of “an amnesia, an active forgetting of origins” (1991, p. 14), and of complex interactions with so-called *zōmitsu* and *taimitsu* intervention.

This being the case, what is the role of the founder, Kūkai, in this rhizomatic process? As FAURE explains, “Individuals...are not the source of tradition, but rather its products, its nodal points, its textual paradigms or points of reemergence” (1987, p. 54). Contrary to traditional myths, Kūkai is to be considered the emergence of peculiar discursive strategies in relation to already extant ideologies, discourses, and literary genres. His achievement can be seen to lie in his successful attempt to bring esoteric trends into the proximity of the political,

institutional, and cultural center through his construction of a new Mikkyō orthodoxy.

A “Space of Interplay”: The Kenmitsu Matrix and Its Surrounding Silence

Let us now turn to the processes whereby orthodox Mikkyō discourse was generated. As CERTEAU points out, “The right to exercise language *otherwise* is objectified in a set of circumscriptions and procedures” (1986, p. 83). First, “a spatializing operation which results in the determination or displacement of the boundaries delimiting cultural fields” (pp. 67–68) is necessary. Next, “the spatial divisions which underlie and organize a culture” will be reworked (p. 68).

As explained above, the first step in the formation of Mikkyō discourse (“determination or displacement of the boundaries delimiting cultural fields”) involved the problematic and artificial articulation of the Tantric field into *junmitsu* and *zōmitsu* through the constitution of a new orthodoxy grounded in the myth of a direct transmission of an original ostension.³² Sources report that Dōji 菊慈 (?–744), the Nara monk credited with introducing the *Kokuzō gumonji-hō* 虚空藏求聞持法 to Japan, studied in the Tang capital Changan under the *ācārya* Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637–735). In order to counter this and assert his own claim to orthodoxy, Kūkai had to invent a new, more powerful, and more appealing lineage, the one that connected him to Amoghavajra. Thus much of the Shingon textual production is pervaded by an insistence on the contrast between the old teachings (miscellaneous and impure and therefore ineffective), and Kūkai’s new teachings (systematic and pure and therefore extremely effective). This is not a mere rhetorical topos, but part of the ideological operation that helped establish Shingon sectarian orthodoxy by declassing earlier tendencies as *zōmitsu* and silencing rival lineages like *taimitsu*.

Although officially relegated to the periphery of the Shingon system, *zōmitsu* and, to a certain extent, *taimitsu* were de facto retained as an essential part of Shingon Mikkyō. The general *ken-mitsu* distinction operated as a “generative scheme,” according to which the fundamental oppositions common to the whole Mahāyāna tradition could be

³² The first link in the chain of the secret transmission of Mikkyō doctrines and practices is Dainichi Nyorai. In order to stress that these teachings were born in the self-presence of the Dharmakāya and are themselves unconditioned, a myth of an original ostension was created in which the esoteric sūtras and maṇḍalas appeared in the sky to Nāgārjuna, who faithfully copied them and handed them down to later disciples. The myth of the manifestation in the sky, perhaps of Daoist origin, expressed the idea that the esoteric transmission transcended the arbitrariness of signs, conditioned cultural codes, and ordinary semiotic strategies. See also RAMBELLI 1991, pp. 20–21.

displaced, relocated, and reinterpreted. Relevant questions included the “sudden/gradual” soteriological polarity, the Twofold Truth paradigm, the conditioned/unconditioned nature of the Buddha’s preaching, and the semantic levels of language (*jīsō* 字相 / *jīgī* 字義).

Michel de Certeau’s second phase, the more general cultural reorganization, corresponds to the Tantric restructuring of the whole religious situation in Japan, an operation—perhaps already completed in Tang China—that culminated in Kūkai’s articulation of the ten levels of the *kenmitsu* system in the *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron*.³³ Kūkai “reversed” the classifications of the Three Teachings (*sangō* 三教) and traditional Chinese Buddhist *panjiao* 判教 hermeneutics, which ignored esoteric teachings, by placing his new “orthodox” Mikkyō at the top—and, at the same time, in the background—of the whole system, thus strategically situating formerly marginal practices at the center of the Buddhist establishment.³⁴ Although engaged in articulating their own system, Shingon commentators stressed the continuity of their own teachings with those that preceded them: important authors like Kūkai, Kakuban, and Raiyu 頼瑜 (1226–1304) untiringly repeated that the difference between Mikkyō and Kengyō lies not in their ultimate truth, which is identical, but rather in their approach to it, which is utterly different.

Basically, Kūkai’s doctrinal and ritual system contained few innovative elements. The Chinese Tiantai 天台 and Huayan 華嚴 schools already recognized the possibility of becoming a Buddha in the present life, and Tantric elements already existed in most schools. It is possible to argue that Kūkai’s success was the result of his ability to provide the emperor and the imperial system with a new ideology and a new imagery, rooted in a grandiose cosmology and explicitated in powerful rituals (such Tantric imperial imagery and ritual were very fashionable at that time in the sinicized world). The truly new characteristic of *junmitsu*—the one that firmly grounded it—was its conviction that it was the only true discourse by virtue of its esoteric ordering of things.

As CERTEAU has explained, the process of articulating and establish-

³³ Various Mikkyō texts (like the *Lueshu jinggangding yuqie fenbie shengwei xiuzheng famen*) developed their own hermeneutics, thus confronting the Buddhist establishment. In any event, Mahāyāna texts already dealt with the *ken-mitsu* distinction, although in a different way (see, for instance, the *Jie shenmi jing*). A major source of Kūkai’s thought on the matter was the *Shi moheyan lun* (Jpn. *Shaku makaen ron*).

³⁴ Such a hermeneutical reversal is most evident in KAKUBAN’s *Gorin kuji myō himitsu shaku*, where all Buddhist schools and all religious traditions are explicitly envisioned as steps on the path toward the attainment of esoteric goals. In this manner, all salvational endeavors became parts of a Mikkyō soteric framework. On *panjiao* hermeneutics, see LOPEZ 1988.

ing a new discourse requires a “space of interplay,”

one that establishes the text’s difference, makes possible its operations and gives it “credibility” in the eyes of its readers, by distinguishing it both from the conditions within which it arose (the context) and from its object (the content).

(1986, p. 68)

Such a “space of interplay,” a kind of meta-discursive level, is to be found in the *kenmitsu* generative scheme, where, as explained above, Buddhism was rearticulated in order to establish the place of Mikkyō in the religious discourse. Shingon orthodoxy (*junmitsu*) lived between two vast silences, between two kinds of unsaid: it emerged from an “ideological silence” where its *zōmitsu* origins were actively forgotten and its Tantric rivals silenced, and it set its discursive space on a background of “epistemological silence,” in the sublime realm that the other traditions considered beyond the reach of language and thought. Mikkyō deals with what the other doctrines do not teach, with what the other schools cannot fathom and are silent about: the realm of the supreme enlightenment of the Buddha.³⁵ Thus silence is an important element in the construction of the discourse of True Words. *Mitsu* represents a further reversal of perspective: it deals not with the itinerary of sentient beings toward Buddhahood, but with discourse from the absolute point of view of the unconditioned Dharmakāya.

Kenmitsu Doctrine

Let us now look at the basic doctrinal framework of the *kenmitsu* matrix, based on a small corpus of representative texts on the subject.³⁶ I hope that this short and synchronic account of the core of Mikkyō teachings will provide a useful starting point for further inquiry, despite its neglect of subtle doctrinal distinctions, sectarian controversies, and important historical developments.

³⁵ Kūkai, *Ben-kenmitsu nikyō-ron*, KDZ 1, 482; RAIYU, *Shoshū kyōri dōi shaku*, DNBZ 29: 5a–b. According to the *Dari jing*, the essence of the Shingon teachings is to be found where “the way of language is interrupted and mental activity also vanishes. It is a realm comprehensible only in the communication between buddhas” (T #848, 18.9b).

³⁶ The texts are, respectively: KŪKAI, *Ben-kenmitsu nikyō-ron*; KAKUBAN, *Kenmitsu fudō ju* and *Gorin kuji myō himitsu-shaku*; and RAIHŌ, *Shingon myōmoku*. Each author stresses different aspects of the *kenmitsu* paradigm, in accordance with the main trends of debate in his time. Kūkai is especially concerned with the uniqueness of Mikkyō in relation to the other schools, Kakuban underlines the absolute character of the esoteric teachings and shows how they transcend the idea of *mappō*, and Raihō emphasizes the essentially enlightened nature of all things.

As explained above, Mikkyō divides the teachings of the Tathāgata into two general kinds: superficial and secret. Superficial teachings are the provisional doctrines taught by Śākyamuni, or, more generally, by the lower, conditioned manifestations of the Buddha: the Nirmāṇakāya and Saṃbhogakāya. The meaning of these teachings is clear and easy to comprehend. Secret teachings are “the most profound doctrines beyond the faculties of sentient beings, dealing with the ultimate secrets of all Buddhas’ enlightenment” (RAIHŌ, 734c–35a). As an unconditioned discourse spoken by the Dharmakāya to itself for the pure pleasure of the Dharma,³⁷ these teachings are permanent and immutable and transcend the doctrine of the Decline of the Law (*mappō* 末法).³⁸ They are composed of “real words” (*shinjitsugo* 真実語) free from all communicational, pragmatic, and contextual constraints.³⁹ In this way, esoteric teachings elude the logic of *upāya* and are not restrained by their listeners’ expectations and limitations, a major shortcoming of Mahāyāna from the Mikkyō point of view.⁴⁰

Ken and *mitsu* show also different attitudes towards principle (*ri* 理) and phenomena (*ji* 事).⁴¹ This is particularly important for the present discussion, because these two ontological categories possess a deep semiotic relevance. According to the Mahāyāna, *ri* can be seen as the ideal *type* of a sign, while *ji* defines its *tokens*, actual and manifold occurrences. *Ken* distinguishes between *ri* and *ji*, thereby establishing two levels: Dharma-essence (*hosshō* 法性) versus its multifarious dharmic aspects. *Ken* thus fails to attain true nondual knowledge. Mikkyō, in contrast, states that both *ri* and *ji* are absolute and unconditioned: every single dharma, with all its particularities, is marked by the “aspect of true reality.” According to the esoteric tradition, the

³⁷ This is the well-known principle of *hosshin seppō* 法身說法 (the Dharmakāya’s preaching), one of the products of Kūkai’s systematizing genius. It is a perfect model of absolute communication characterized by total circularity. For a semiotic analysis, see RAMBELLI 1994.

³⁸ The concept of *mappō*, though not referred to in Kūkai’s texts, became of major importance in Japanese culture after the eleventh century. Kakuban stressed the negation of *mappō* as one of the characteristics of Mikkyō, emphasizing its unconditioned nature and esoteric power.

³⁹ This idea probably resulted from the identification of the linguistic thought of the *Shi moheyan lun* (605b) with dharanic conceptions and practices.

⁴⁰ Nara schools were particularly sensitive on this point. The Six Schools taught that the differences between Śākyamuni and Mahāvairocana are dissolved in the meta-level of absolute reality (although Shingon Mikkyō proposed itself as that very meta-level). They also recognized that Mikkyō, as a part of Buddhism, is an offspring of Śākyamuni’s enlightenment, the esoteric teachings being the secret doctrines taught by Śākyamuni upon entering Mahāvairocana’s *samādhi*. For a direct account of the Nara approach to Mikkyō, see GYŌNEN.

⁴¹ The different conceptions of *ri* and *ji* are the main theme of RAIYU’s *Shoshū kyōri dōi shaku*, a contrastive analysis of Shingon and the Mahāyāna schools.

Dharmakāya's modalities of existence (*shiju hosshin* 四種法身), its activities (*sanmitsu* 三密), and its wisdom (*gochi* 五智) are not different from the elements of ordinary human cognition (sense organs, objects, mind apparatus). As a consequence, the esoteric absolute principle (*ri*), or *tathatā*, is in a nondual relation to phenomena (*ji*), being articulated in substance (*taidai* 体大), signs (*sōdai* 相大), and dynamic manifestations (*yūdai* 用大). It does not transcend human intellectual faculties, and the world of enlightenment—the ultimate result of religious practice (*kabun* 果分)—can be described and explained in the absolute language of the Dharmakāya.⁴²

Individual phenomena do not differ from the supreme principle; an individual entity is no longer a mere token (*ji*) of a type (*ri*), but is itself an absolute, a microcosm. There is ultimately no distinction between the mind of each ascetic, the global mind of sentient beings, and the Buddha. Salvation is thus close and easy to attain: the person who performs Mikkyō rituals after proper initiation is able to accomplish the sublime practice of *sanmitsu* in his or her “body generated by father and mother and become Buddha instantaneously.” Although maṇḍalas and dhāraṇīs are not suited to those of low abilities, their powers and virtues are unfathomable, and even the most superficial practice produces benefits and blessings. The esoteric cosmos is an immense salvific machine, in which everything is absolute.

As Tokuitsu realized, at least in part, Mikkyō's differences with the rest of Buddhism relate to the nature, structure, and power of signs. While the Mahāyāna schools describe the Dharmakāya—the absolute, the kernel of Buddhist ontology and soteriology—as devoid of signs and forms, Mikkyō describes it as the totality of all possible signs. The Dharmakāya is thus able to “speak” and explain to all beings its own enlightenment—an absolute language exists that is able to convey in some way the ultimate reality (RAMBELLI 1994). The essential identity of sentient beings (*shujō* 衆生) and Buddhas is the ground for symbolic practices that lead to the reproduction within the practitioner of the characteristics and particularities of the absolute.

⁴² See for instance KAKUBAN's *Kenmitsu fudō ju*, in particular the following verses: “*Ken* teachings explain the initial stage [of practice leading to Buddhahood (*inbun* 因分)], *mitsu* teachings explain the final stage [of attainment of Buddhahood 成仏 (*kabun* 果分)]: “*Ken* principle (*ri*) has no relationship with the sense organs [*rokkon* 六根], *mitsu* sees them as the Four [Buddha-]bodies [*shishin* 四身]; *ken* principle has no relationship with objects [*rokkō* 六境], *mitsu* sees them as the Three Adamantine Mysteries [*san(mitsu) kon(gō)* 三(密)金(剛)]; *ken* principle has no relationship to mind apparatus [*rokushiki* 六識], *mitsu* knows them to be the universal wisdom of the Dharmakāya”; “*Ken* principle has neither signs [*sō* 相] nor activities [*yū* 用], *mitsu* Tathatā [(*shin*) *nyo* (真)如] is endowed with substance-signs-dynamic manifestations [*sandai* 三大].” On the *sandai* doctrine, see RAMBELLI 1991, pp. 4–5.

Semiosophia, Semiognosis, Semiopietas: Mikkyō Orders of Significance

It is now necessary to outline the internal structure of the *kenmitsu* episteme. An account of the actual articulation of the *kenmitsu* epistemic field should take into account the following considerations:

- 1 the diachronic transformation of Buddhist semiotics;
- 2 the complex epistemic relations within Buddhism as both a “high” culture and a “popular” phenomenon;⁴³
- 3 the presence of other influential models of semiotics and semiosis (Confucian, Daoist, and later, “Western”) that coexisted and interacted in various ways with and within the *kenmitsu* epistemic field.

On a superficial level, the most evident feature of Mikkyō texts (both Shingon and Tendai) is their phonetic and graphic exoticism, in which the foreign is considered closer to the Origin. This is reflected in the large number of Sanskrit terms and in the wide usage of *siddham* (Jpn. *shittan* 悉曇) characters. It could be said that the core of Mikkyō texts is formed by *shingon/shittan*, and that everything else exists only to create a context so that they might be correctly practiced.⁴⁴ This reflects an idea of language and signs typical of Tantrism. As we have seen, ancient *zōmitsu* texts were a heterogeneous part of the Mahāyāna paradigm: their language was an *upāya* to convey meaning or induce certain actions. In the Mahāyāna philosophy of language, linguistic expression has value only insofar as it is able to convey its contents, to which it has an arbitrary connection. As Etienne LAMOTTE puts it, “The letter indicates the spirit just as a fingertip indicates an object, but since the spirit [that is, the meaning] is alien to syllables...the letter is unable to express it in full” (1988, p. 15). With the formation of a Tantric discourse in East Asia, basic linguistic conceptions changed. Language was transformed from an *upāya* into an absolute and unconditioned entity, something that could not be translated without losing its essential character. Kūkai believed that the Indian phonemes and script were endowed with a unique nature. He wrote:

Mantras, however, are mysterious, and each word is profound in meaning. When they are transliterated into Chinese, the

⁴³ These have traditionally been the objects of inquiry of two different disciplines: the history of ideas, and anthropology. For a critical presentation of some theoretical positions concerning the meaning of “popular” religion in East Asia, see FAURE 1991, pp. 79–95.

⁴⁴ On the importance of re-creating the original context of mantras, see LOPEZ 1990, pp. 369–72.

original meanings are modified and the long and short vowels confused.

(KŪKAI, *Shōrai mokuroku*, translated in HAKEDA 1972, p. 144)

Correct interpretation and use depend upon correct transmission. Kūkai mentions that Amoghavajra, aware of the limits of translation, initiated his disciples using Indian words only (KŪKAI, *Bonji shittan jimo narabini shakugi*, T 84.361). He thereby lent epistemic relevance to the esoteric concept of an unaltered transmission based upon an original ostension (a necessary part of founding an orthodoxy).

Mikkyō semiotics is what governs the expression of that which transcends ordinary language (cf., RAMBELLI 1992). It is possible to recognize within Mikkyō three different modes of semiotic knowledge and interpretive practice of reality: semiosophia, semiognosis, and semio-pietas.⁴⁵

Semiosophia refers to exoteric forms of the knowledge of signs (*sō* 相), according to which language and signs are considered to be arbitrary and illusory, but nevertheless usable as *upāya* to indicate the truth. I use this term instead of *semiotics* in order to distinguish it from both semiotics as common sense and semiotics as metalanguage.⁴⁶ Various *ken* types of semiotics can be classed as semiosophia, including Kusha, Hossō, Sanron, Tendai, and Kegon. Although there seem to be basically three epistemological models (Abhidharma, Mādhyamika, and Yogācāra), each school developed its own concept of the sign in relation to its view of ultimate reality and its hermeneutical strategies. In the *kenmitsu* paradigm, *mitsu* semiotics presupposes *ken* semiotics;⁴⁷ semiosophia thus constitutes the superficial level (*senryakushaku* 浅略釈) on which the esoteric interpretive structure (*jinpishaku* 深秘釈) is built.

Semiognosis denotes esoteric semiotic doctrines and practices as

⁴⁵ I am indebted here to Allan Grapard's threefold categorization of the orders of significance in Japanese representations of sacred space (geosophia, geognosis, and geopiety) (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ It is very difficult to evaluate the role of common sense in ideas and practices relating to signs in the esoteric episteme, especially in light of the almost total lack of research on this subject. Buddhist *setsuwa* 説話 collections, for instance, suggest that signs are clues to a hidden reality and at the same time instruments for action: they not only foretell and express events but also give rise to them (see RAMBELLI 1990). It is not clear, however, whether these texts reflected widespread popular ideas on signs and semiosis or were vehicles for the diffusion of a new, Buddhist-continental semiotic mentality.

⁴⁷ According to Kakuban, without the superficial interpretation of signs (*jisō* 字相), the deeper truth (*jigi* 字義) cannot be conveyed, but the esoteric truth cannot be taught to people lacking the status or the capacity to receive it—this is why it is called “secret” (*himitsu* 秘密).

something akin to a type of soteriological knowledge (i.e., leading to salvation) that is gained through specific practices of a predominantly ritual and/or mystical character.... [B]oth [semio]sophia and [semio]gnosis are connected with systems of symbolic representation, but their epistemological frameworks and intentionality differ.

(GRAPARD forthcoming; the original uses *geosophia* and *geognosis* instead of *semiosophia* and *semiognosis*)

Semiognosis refers to specific knowledge and practices that are “claimed to have been extracted from [signs themselves], to correspond in mysterious ways to sacred scriptures and to divine rule, and to lead either to mystical achievement or to religious salvation” (GRAPARD forthcoming). The initiatory knowledge concerning structure, function, and power of the esoteric symbols (especially mantric expressions) is considered the kernel of enlightenment and the key to “becoming Buddha in this very body.”⁴⁸

In consequence, one of the fundamental activities of the Mikkyō exegete is “remotivating” language and signs, that is, overcoming the arbitrariness of language and signs by finding a special “natural” relation between expression, meaning, and referential object. Remotivation is accomplished by reorganizing each expression’s semantic structure and thereby making the expression “identical” to its meaning. In this process an esoteric symbol becomes a kind of replica of its object, and the practice in which it occurs is deemed identical to its goal. Mikkyō salvific practices consist mainly in visualization and manipulation of mantric expressions (*shingon-darani*) and other complex symbols of various kinds, whose very structure, organized on three deeper levels (*jinpi* 深秘, *hichū no jinpi* 秘中之深秘, *hichichū no jinpi* 秘々中之深秘), appears to the initiated person as the inscription of the path both to salvation and to the attainment of *siddhi*.⁴⁹

Related to semiognosis is *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹, an expression of the realm of meaning of Shinto and Buddhism that is itself a result and a displacement of the *kenmitsu* epistemic field. The combinatory

⁴⁸ Kūkai equates the *monji* 文字 (expressive symbols, signs) of the “Dharmakāya’s preaching” (*hosshin seppō*) with the three mysteries (*sanmitsu*) pervading the Dharmadhatu; thus language and signs (*sōdai*) cannot exist separately from the cosmic substratum (*taidai*) of original enlightenment. Kūkai then adds: “Therefore Dainichi Nyorai, by expounding the meaning of [the relations between] language and reality, arouses sentient beings from their long slumber.” Mikkyō semiotics thus has a direct soteric relevance: “Those who realize this are called Great Enlightened Ones, those who are confused about it are called ‘sentient beings’” (*Shōji jissō-gi*, 401c). See also RAMBELLI 1992, pp. 163–85; and 1994.

⁴⁹ On mantric expressions as inscriptions of soteriology, see LOPEZ 1990. For an analysis of Shingon inscription strategies, see RAMBELLI 1991 and 1992 (pp. 249–55; 265–70; 296–316).

logic and practices (*shūgō* 習合) of *honji suijaku* concern the relationships between the Shinto and Buddhist deities, myths, and doctrines that lie at the basis of Japanese medieval religiosity and ideology, and obey rules grounded on “associative linguistic phenomena such as metaphor, paronomasia, and anagogy” (GRAPARD 1988, p. 264; see also 1987, 1992). In other words, operations on the substance (both graphic and phonetic) of language and meaning governed the esoteric interpretation of reality.⁵⁰ According to Grapard, such combinatory practices brought about a reduction from plurality to singularity (1987), but I think that they also exposed the plural nature of supposedly singular entities.⁵¹ This kind of esoteric operation on signs is remarkably evident in a corpus of medieval texts known as *engimono* 縁起物, which deal with the history of sites of cult.

The esoteric episteme, in its more conscious and systematic manifestations, was basically a “high” culture phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is important to trace the dissemination of esoteric doctrines and practices among the general populace, and to analyze their transformations and the counter-practices they produced. This dissemination was extremely important for the establishment, which saw the “esotericization” of the lives, activities, and environment of the ordinary people as a powerful device for controlling them. In general, “popular” texts dealing with Buddhism (performances, sermons, *kana* literature, and narratives) were not directly concerned with esoteric doctrine—one must recall that, because of Mikkyō’s belief that it expressed the absolute point of view of the perfectly enlightened Buddha, it was not easy for Mikkyō to translate its doctrines into everyday language and practice. However, the discourse to which such popular texts belong, and therefore their semiotic presuppositions, discursive strategies, and rhetorical devices, are definitely esoteric.⁵² In the *engimono* genre, Mikkyō succeeded in transposing its absolute logic of the unconditioned (*jinen hōni* 自然法爾) into a narrative of karmic events that occurred at specific historical moments in specific places (see KURODA 1989). These widely circulated materials were the major vehicle for the “popularization” of the esoteric conceptions and the power relations that they implied.

⁵⁰ See RAMBELLI 1992 and GRAPARD 1987. Another vivid example of these combinatory practices can be found in Dairyū’s *Sangai isshin-ki*, where the stages of the human embryo are associated to the Thirteen Buddhas via various operations on their names.

⁵¹ The absolute value of phenomena and particularities—i.e., of differences—is one of the major themes of most exoteric and esoteric *hongaku* (original enlightenment) texts from the middle Kamakura period; for an introductory account of this subject, see RAMBELLI 1993. Concerning the plural nature of Tantric symbols and entities, see BOON 1990, pp. 79–83.

⁵² Recent discoveries have revealed the existence of an esoteric genre of *setsuwa* literature, an example of which is the *Aizen ō shōryū-ki* 愛染王紹隆記 in KUSHIDA 1979, pp. 819–41.

The diffuse beliefs and practices of the uninitiated concerning such sacred esoteric objects as images, texts, amulets, and talismans constitute *semiopietas*, “a primarily religious mood of relation to sacred [signs]” (GRAPARD forthcoming). *Semiopietas* is the esoteric “easy path” (*idō* 易筍) to salvation, represented mainly by the *himitsu nenbutsu* 秘密念仏 and *kōmyō shingon* 光明真言 practices. For most of these practices no formal initiation was required—all that was needed was a transmission with simple explanations, usually called *kechien kanjō* 結縁灌頂; furthermore, practices pertaining to *semiopietas* were considered to be efficacious even when not correctly performed, provided the intention was right, as explained for instance by RENTAI in his *Shingon kaiku-shū*. Since the salvific power of signs is intrinsic to them, the uninformed usage of Mikkyō amulets or talismans (usage that leaves meaning out of consideration) has its theoretical foundation in semiognosis, and is legitimated by the weight of tradition and the idea of an unaltered secret transmission (see also RAMBELLI 1991, pp. 20–21; 1992, pp. 240–42).

Ritual and the Adamantine Dance

I have claimed that at the background of the various avatars of Tantrism, at least in Japan, lie certain ideas on cosmology and soteriology that possess a semiotic nucleus defining phenomena as manifestations of the Dharmakāya and that—above all—deal with the power of symbolic actions to produce salvation. Mikkyō envisions the cosmos as a fractal structure, in which each phenomenon is “formally” similar to all others and to the totality. This recursive cosmology, unique to Mikkyō, is related to a recursive soteriology that attributes enormous importance to ritual practice and visualization (see ORZECZ 1989). One may assume that certain configurations of the Mikkyō episteme lay at the basis of the combinatory doctrines and practices that developed in premodern Japan in a way that was mainly locale-specific and lineage-grounded (GRAPARD 1992).

Allan GRAPARD points to the existence of an “episteme of identity” (1989, p. 182) underlying Japanese mythology and mountain asceticism, an episteme that sees “the world (nature) and words (culture) in the specific lights of similitude, reflection, identity, and communication”; GRAPARD (1989, p. 161) explicitly refers to the preclassical European episteme as reconstructed by Michel Foucault. I suggest that such an “episteme of identity,” at least in its more systematic forms, was first codified on the basis of Mikkyō doctrine, and that it then assumed cultural hegemony in medieval Japan. The Mikkyō epis-

teme appears to be characterized by the workings of what Tsuda Shin'ichi calls the "logic of yoga," which asserts the substantial non-differentiation of all things on the basis of concepts of analogy and resemblance. This opens the way, in turn, to a kind of "symbolic omnipotence," based on the belief that ritual—indirect "symbolic" practices—produces numberless powers by virtue of the structure of the signs involved in the ritual process (TSUDA 1978, 1981).⁵³ It should be clear, however, that such epistemic constructs, far from being simple ritual or meditative escamotages, were directly related to the creation of a ritualized world (closely connected to power and dominant ideology) in which each event and each phenomenon was cosmologically marked and played a salvific function. Moreover, as forms of visualization based on a complex semantic and ritual network, symbolic practices grounded on the logic of yoga produced a cognitive transformation; when seriously performed, esoteric practices disclosed a different world.

The logic of yoga thus underlies Shingon ritual practice, which is often despised as a degeneration of "true" Mikkyō by scholars who forget that ritual effort aimed at cosmic integration and political legitimization is a demonstration of the fundamental principles supporting the esoteric episteme. As we have seen, basic to Shingon Mikkyō are its peculiar semiotics and semiosis. Ritual action is not a degeneration of "pure" Mikkyō or a relic of earlier "miscellaneous" forms, as many scholars insist, but is directly related to the postulates of the esoteric episteme itself.⁵⁴

The basic epistemic framework of the Shingon tradition, with its complex interrelations of cosmology, soteriology, semiotics, and ritual, was shared by virtually all esoteric lineages in Japan. It should be stressed, however, that the preceding account applies mainly to those learned monks (*gakuryō* 学侶) who attempted to manifest the esoteric universe through meditation and ritual and who exploited to the utmost degree the power that they attributed to esoteric (or esoterized) signs—a semiotic power that reinforced, and was reinforced by, economic, social, and political power in the framework of a coherent sociocosmic order. It is possible to argue, on the basis of diaries and

⁵³ It should be noticed, however, that my treatment of these subjects is different in perspective and approach from that of Tsuda, which lacks explicit semiotic and ideological concerns.

⁵⁴ Since the present essay is concerned mainly with the formation of the epistemic space and the conditions of possibility in the Japanese esoteric Buddhist discourse, all-important questions concerning ritual practice have remained in the background. Epistemic problems of esoteric rituals, such as the ritual manipulation of symbolic entities, will be the subject of a future study.

other textual evidence, that the aristocrats and, to a certain extent, the ordinary people also lived in such an esotericized, ritual universe.⁵⁵ They shared the same mentality and ensemble of combinatory beliefs and practices; at the bottom of their way of life was an awareness—rarely discussed explicitly or critically—that the cosmos is an unceasing “adamantine dancing performance” (RAIHŌ, T 77.731a), a continuous transformation of shapes similar to the endless movement of waves on the surface of the sea, governed by linguistically grounded combinatory rules.

This awareness is related to a diffuse heterology/heteropraxy that pervades the entire Indian tradition (and perhaps the entire Buddhist world as well) and emerges from what Iyanaga Nobumi calls “mythologie ‘buddhico-ésotérico-śivaïte’.”⁵⁶ The epistemic aspects of this mentality have been referred to as “Siwaic Semiotics” (BOON 1990, p. 70). Medieval Japanese ideals, rituals, and practices of orthodoxy and identity were thus underlain by a combinative episteme of transformation, in itself an avatar of Indian śivaïtic mentality. The epistemic field manifested itself and was actualized in at least two ways: in a fully conscious way through semiagnosis, and in a simplified and uninformed way through semiopietas (semiosophia lying outside the “Tantric” mentality). Both paradigms were aimed at esoterically framing the lives of the people, and functioned as powerful means of social control. But when the incessant “adamantine dance” of shifting forms was properly performed and ritually controlled, the esoteric cosmos took on the shape of an immense salvific “machine,” where all movements were ritualized and oriented to individual self-realization and universal salvation.

In the above discussion of Mikkyō heterology, I mentioned ambiguous, marginal, and antisystematic forms of Japanese esoteric Buddhism. These can be seen to represent “Tantric” tendencies aimed at countering the systematic, “mandalic” Mikkyō—Mikkyō as an organic part of the *kenmitsu* system—that I have outlined. These trends, all related in some way to the complex and multifarious *hijiri* phenomenon,

⁵⁵ Their lives were probably similar in structure and basic attitudes to that of Jinson 尋尊 (1430–1508), abbot of the Daijō-in *monzeki* 大乘院門跡 of the Kasuga-Kōfuku-ji 春日興福寺 complex, as it has been portrayed by Allan GRAPARD (1992, pp. 171–85). GRAPARD explains: “To Jinson, the mirrorlike relation between the heavenly bureaucracy and the structure of the [Kasuga-Kōfukuji] multiplex and of society in general was the manifestation of a pre-established harmony that could never be discussed, even less called into doubt. Such preestablished harmony, however, grounded though it may have been in myth and supported by ritual, needed another type of reinforcement...provided by economic power and, more precisely, land” (p. 174).

⁵⁶ Personal communication, 6 April 1993. For a masterful description of the workings of such a mythology, see IYANAGA 1994.

attempted to overcome the symbolic nature of the secret practices, or, at least, to exploit them in a quest for a more “direct” salvation, either individual or collective. What follows is a partial list of the most significant of these movements.

The Shingon Ritsu 律 school of Eison and Ninshō attempted to perform bodhisattva practices within an esoteric context; their activities were aimed at bringing concrete relief to suffering beings and, at the same time, at realizing “symbolic”—and therefore indirect—universal salvation. Shingon Ritsu was also very active in controlling and organizing the newly rising forces of social marginality—a potential threat to the *kenmitsu* establishment (see AMINO 1986 and ŌISHI 1987). Shugendō lineages produced new heterodox and syncretic practices and spread them throughout Japan, thus contributing to the diffusion and proliferation of Mikkyō. The Ji 時 movement of Ippen 一遍 (1239–1289) at a certain point was virtually in control of Kōya-san, although its position in the Japanese Tantric field is yet to be analyzed. Tachikawa-ryū, *Genshi kimyōdan* 玄旨歸命壇, and related trends in other schools developed direct practices grounded on the idea of absolute nondualism. The peculiar esoteric quest for paradise, a major esoteric trend since the late Heian period, is interesting because of its attempt to integrate antithetical Shingon and Nenbutsu practices. Finally, the case of *sokushinbutsu* 即身仏—a sublime and disquieting murmur pervading the whole East Asian Buddhist tradition—deserves mention because of the extremes to which the ascetics involved carried the desire to attain direct and universal salvation. The doctrines and activities of these and other movements are not fully compatible with the orthodox Mikkyō discourse that has been outlined here; as a kind of “dark side” to the secret teachings, they require further research.

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