



From Dharma to Sound: Decolonizing Definitions of Religious Community

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Abstract

This piece takes as a starting point a close reading of Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's work and connects it to ongoing debates intersecting the fields of religious studies, the anthropology of religion, sensory studies, Global South studies and decolonial theory. It argues that attention to the layered history of local language categories that articulate religious difference constitutes a form of intellectual labour towards epistemic justice.

It is a great pleasure to engage in a virtual conversation with Prof. Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz's work. I hope that many scholars who like myself, did not have access to her scholarship in German language will read the English translation (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024) at the centre of this special issue and engage with its many generative ideas. In the lack of space to comment upon the richness of thought-provoking insights exhaustively, in this short piece I will pick a selected few and bring them into dialogue with my own research agenda.

The article that I am invited to reflect upon analyses the terminology associated with the "religion" discourse in Mongolian written sources spanning across four centuries. It examines its evolving acceptations, dynamic interpretations, and reification processes. Such painstaking work has the transformative potential of dislodging European notions of religion from their normative podium and provincialising them (Chakrabarty 2008), while bringing to the forefront an already global premodern Central Asia. Already global, in the sense that confrontations and encounters with diverse religious traditions and ritual communities, from Franciscan friars (Valtrová 2016) to Tantric Buddhist missionaries, resulted in an elaborate vocabulary. Such nuanced vocabulary, as Kollmar-Paulenz does not fail to highlight, is often the result of discursive practices of exclusion, alterity, and othering, in a pluri-religious context where terms for self-definition emerge from situations of social rivalry, between negotiation and competition. The activities of shamanesses and shamans as healers and exorcists are described in competition with those of Buddhist monks, within a semantic field dominated by Mongolian equivalents of Tibetan Buddhist terms that the Mongolian elites had embraced.

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When facing new, potentially competing traditions, religious practices and concepts are assigned names (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 18–21) and these categories take a life of their own. Even when undesired appellations are assigned by outsiders and detractors, local communities—in their search for distinction and differentiation—may reclaim and self-apply these pejorative names. Thus, the derogatory *qara šasin* (black teaching) designating shamanic experts was quickly embraced as a term for self-designation (Kollmar-Paulenz 2024: 23–24). These dynamics at the interface of language and religious diversity, derived from granular and contextual analysis, have the potential of generating broader theories on religious encounters, providing transferable knowledge and interpretive keys well beyond the confines of a regional area-focus.

In the context of my own research, in modern South Asia and in the borderlands of the Bay of Bengal, similar dynamics have accompanied the emergence of discrete religious identities over the course of the 19th century. A veritable proliferation of religious movements, groups, and sects, each with their own newly reified names, appear in Bengali sources from the second half of the 19th century. *Bāul* for instance, an adjective that positively described the madness of the medieval saints, became a noun for a particular group of antinomian singers and esoteric practitioners (Openshaw 2002; Urban 1999; Lorea 2016). The time roughly corresponds with the maniacal endeavour by colonial ethnographers and administrators to list categories of people, endogamous groups, and tribes of India (e.g., Risley 1892). Some low-caste communities proudly adopted the derogatory names that higher caste outsiders had used to ridicule them. Such is the case of the Matua community (Lorea 2020). Outsiders with higher social status finger-pointed their music, drumming and trancing practices and called them “matua,” from *matta*, *mātāl*: meaning maddened, intoxicated, or drunk. The leaders of this group embraced the title and glossed it as “matua”: those who are drunk in divine love, soaked in the intoxicating nectar of the holy name. In the same decades, loosely institutionalised lineages that participated in the fluid realm of Caitanya Vaishnavism (Bhatia 2017) started to demarcate their boundaries through a precise nomenclature of sectarian scissions (Lorea 2018). A new bourgeois class of Western-educated Bengali reformers used time, resources, and the affordances of the print press to marginalise and condemn lineages that fell outside their new definitions of a pure and proper (*śuddha*) modern Vaishnava identity. Lower caste esoteric movements and upper caste reformers mutually shaped the definitions of each other’s boundaries with naming practices that have relevance and repercussions up to the present day.

Postcolonial scholarship has emphasised the repercussions of Christian-inflected ideas of religion imported by European colonialism. Universalism, charity, a sober aesthetic regime, devoid of idolatry and superstition, and privileging abstract non-dualist philosophy, became the hallmarks of modern (neo) Hinduism. But the influence of “the West” was not the sole historical agent shaping modern ideas about Indian religions (Weiss 2019; Hatcher 2020). Intra-religious debates in (written *and* oral) Bengali sustained by groups with different social status were already at play and equally crucial in developing the lexicon that practitioners adopt up to this day for designating their sense of affiliation and belonging. This is not to undermine the fact that European epistemic

colonisation and cultural imperialism contributed to repress and reframe indigenous discourses around religion. British politics and poetics of “*divide et impera*” unquestionably produced rigid religious formations, and indeed can be factored among the decisive impulse behind modern Hindu-Muslim polarisation, communalism, and ongoing ethnic conflicts (Baruah 2020). But the notion that top-down divisions operationalised by colonial policies were embedded within an allegedly fluid, harmonious, syncretic grassroots religiosity is both factually and epistemically misleading (Wong 2018). It obfuscates the sophisticated ways in which precolonial South Asian societies had already, for centuries and in dozens of languages, discussed and phrased religious alterity, doctrinal divergences, heterogeneity, and incompatibilities of praxis.

Dharma, panth, sampradāya, jāti, mat, to name a few: the wealth of vocabulary employed to define and distinguish “religion” in modern South Asia testifies, similarly to the Mongolian case, to nuanced internal debates where European notions are but a few among the many components contributing to the modern construction of “religion” as a domain-specific order of knowledge. Hand in hand with the emergence of Indian charitable “missions” and proselytising monastic organisations, colonial India also saw a revival of interest towards Yogic, Tantric, and esoteric traditions among urban educated elites (Strube 2022; Cantú 2023), which in turn influenced the ways modern orthodox religious establishments presented themselves both locally and globally.

The heterogeneous Baul tradition of songs, music, and esoteric ritual practice, sanitised and elevated to the status of indigenous cultural heritage by 20th-century intellectuals (Tagore 1931), can serve as an emblematic example. An “interweaving of emic and etic discourses,” of Western and non-Western scholarship, and of historically dynamic discourses on orders of knowledge, as Kollmar-Paulenz (2024: 31) suggests, collectively contributed to the eclectic range of nomenclature utilised by Bengali scholars who wrote in English about the Baul tradition, variously discussed as “obscure religious cult” (Dasgupta 1962), “heretic tradition” (Dasgupta 1994) or the path of “mystic minstrels” (Chowdhury/Roy 2014).

Although Kollmar-Paulenz does not spell it out as such, her intellectual intervention is a step forward towards decolonising the study of religion (Nye 2019). To dig deep through the layered history of local language to articulate religious difference is not simply an empirical contribution. The digging is, on a larger scale, a labour towards epistemic justice. It aims to give academic representation, and thus validity and scientific legitimacy, to theories from the global South. In the process, repressed epistemologies, and ways of knowing that have been delegitimised through historical processes—European colonialism, superimposition of modern Western science as neutral, rational, and universal, cultural imperialism, and exploitative forms of neo-colonialism—can find a place in the international sphere of academic knowledge (De Sousa Santos 2014).

Such place is not merely a token slot of diversity that shows “other,” alternative epistemologies to then reinforce the hegemonic position of global North modernity as the sole spring of rational and abstractable thought. As Kollmar-Paulenz demonstrates, and as Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010)

would likely second, theories of religion from Asia and in Asia not only estrange European normative concepts and orientalist presuppositions of what religion ought to be, but also engage them in a constructive dialogue for a truly global history of religion, ultimately reformulating the future of our field with a multi-centric viewpoint.¹

In the history of modern academic practice, Asia has provided the white Western scholar with a pool of empirical data, a field for fieldwork, a mine to extract archival sources, a paradise of ancient languages and traditions for the emergence of both philological and anthropological studies on “the East.” While the information and the informants are Asian, what really matters for academic prestige—the method, the theorisation, the analytical dimension—remain European. The decolonising suggestions in Kollmar-Paulenz’s article indicate that our discipline needs to employ methods and theories that are close to the people and the traditions that scholars work with. Asian religions would then become not only sources of data, but generative springboards to theorise on religious language and cultural encounters globally, with transferable frameworks that emerge indeed from Asian languages and regions but can be applied in fruitful ways to other contexts of human history and society. This requires not only fine-grained “area” studies and decolonial sensibilities, but also infrastructural changes, new hiring policies, designing new syllabuses, rethinking the archive and the canon of the field, tackling the gender and race gaps in the politics of citation, and welcoming the reverse gaze of new generations of scholars from / based in / trained in Asia that are qualified to employ indigenous theories to critically study religion in the global North.

Kollmar-Paulenz offers us a concrete example to reflect upon, with her focus on the language that Mongolians developed to make sense of competing socio-religious formations. *Šasin mörgöl* and *böge mörgöl* refer to two different communities of practitioners. In Mongolian, *mörgöl* denotes “bowing” in a literal sense, placing emphasis on the physical act of reverence (“bowing before the [Buddhist] Dharma” and “bowing before the shaman”). These phrases underscore the visible and performative aspects “inherent to the Mongolian understanding of religion” (2024: 21). Conversion to the teachings of the Buddhist dharma involved loud recitations of mantras and *dhāraṇīs*, as well as the implementation of various ritual practices. Kollmar-Paulenz notes that embracing the dharma signified, first and foremost, physical performance—embodied acts, sensory engagements—that needed to be “performed publicly, before an audience.” Such aspects, she adds, do not take precedence in “our everyday understanding of religion” (2024: 22). The author implicitly points to a normative understanding of religion that is entrenched in Protestant presuppositions (Schopen 1991; Cheah 2011).

¹ Chen’s *Asia-as-Method* argues that there is an urgent need to rewrite and remap history to shift the frame of reference from Europe and North America to a comparative framework with multiple local and regional referents. The book emphasizes the importance of inter-referencing and inter-Asian cultural studies, encouraging societies in Asia to become each other’s point of reference, so that subjectivities impacted by the epistemic violence of colonialism and imperialism could be rebuilt. See Chen (2010).

But the adoption of Buddhism into Mongolian societies has little to do with private belief, and more with embodied performance. It is not about the silent, inner, personal relationship with God, but rather a sonorous chanting of powerful syllables, a highly public, audible, sensory participation. Echoing the intervention of Birgit Meyer (2009) and other scholars of religion, aesthetics and media who have helped reframe the field (e.g. Grieser/Johnston 2017), religious communities can be then redefined by moving away from mentalistic preoccupations with theological, doctrinal or scriptural dimensions, and focusing instead on “sensational forms” (Meyer 2009), or shared aesthetic, embodied and sensory ways of mediating the divine that are collectively performed and co-create the identity and sense of belonging of those who participate.

This shift in the understanding of religion, from text-bound groups of believers to epistemic communities of sensory practices, has changed the way I conceptualise religious communities in my own scholarship. Subaltern, so-called untouchable, Bengali-speaking performers of the Matua community have taught me to pay attention to sonic ways of being in the world. In the first half of the 19th century, they differentiated themselves from the older and more prestigious Bengali Vaishnava fold to pursue upward social mobility, and to maintain the salvific performance of their collective music-making, singing, and dancing ritual called *mātām-kīrtan*. Like the loud mantras and dhāraṇīs of the Buddhicised Mongols discussed by Kollmar-Paulenz, Matua practice is centered around the repetition of efficacious sounds: sacred drums (*ḍāṅkā*), the syllables of sacred songs (*kīrtan*), and trance-inducing mantras (*haribol*). Thinking with such *communities of sound* prompts us to redefine religious communities and the ways we study them because they remove the latent assumption that doctrines and scriptures constitute “real” religion. By provincialising the importance accorded to institutions, textual specialists and elite priestly classes, communities of sounds underscore the agentic roles of subaltern and often silenced community makers: listeners, dancers, ululating women, stateless musicians, peripatetic storytellers and their participating publics. More broadly, they inspire us to think of community as a way of listening; religious identity, in this sense, is largely a result of what we hear, the stories we are told, the sounds we are entrained and socialised to play, the ingrained ways in which we move our bodies and attune our emotions, according to the soundscapes and kinetoscapes that we inhabit.

The relevance of the ideas contained in Kollmar-Paulenz’s scholarship, who is indebted to the cultural owners of the traditions that she studied and worked with in several Asian countries, should provide fruitful food for thought not only for academics, but also for revising the priorities of public institutions. The support structure that makes it possible for students to seek training in Asian languages and cultures is perennially on the edge of collapse in countless universities. In our increasingly neoliberal models of education, subjects without immediate economic impact and applicability become tinged with the prejudice of being little-known, remote, impractical, and attract dwindling numbers of students. The trend among managerial boards of educational

institutions is to cut down on resources dedicated to focused regional, linguistic, and cultural-historical studies in precise geo-political areas.

Against this current, Kollmar-Paulenz's article brings to the forefront the renewed need to train future generations of scholars in the imperfect and yet crucial field of "Area Studies." Only the in-depth knowledge of regional languages, classical and vernacular literatures, contextual social and cultural dynamics, and their entangled histories with their "Others" would make such a contribution possible.² As Kollmar-Paulenz's work demonstrates, scholarship on religion emplaced in a particular linguistic and regional history, combined with cultural immersion and deep historical understanding, can contribute to transdisciplinary fields and to conceptual issues much broader than the niche of one's own "area" of specialisation.

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² Among other advocates of the area studies approach and their contribution, see Charles Macdonald (2020) and George Quinn (2019).

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