



# Decolonizing Concepts before It Was Cool: Taking “Lamas and Shamans” for a Ride through Global History

Till Mostowlansky

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## Abstract

In her work on “Lamas and Shamans,” Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz takes a broad aim at the role of non-European knowledge in the humanities and social sciences. In this commentary, I take up some lines of inquiry that structure her argument, discussing them in the broader contexts of research on global history and continuing attempts to assess the status of categories deriving from non-European intellectual traditions.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2008, as I was preparing to apply for a PhD position supervised by Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, I came across a published lecture that she had given a year earlier at the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (Kollmar-Paulenz 2007). In her lecture on the historical development of religion as a discrete field of study in its own right in Asian—and particularly Mongol—societies, Kollmar-Paulenz criticized the then-widespread argument that, since the concept of religion had been a recent European “invention,” non-European religions must also be modern constructions. Of course, her critique was spot-on. What appealed to me even more, however, was the fact that Kollmar-Paulenz drew on her mastery of Mongol and Tibetan history to show that the constitution of an autonomous field of religion (*śasin*) in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries happened in interaction with political and economic processes of power, not unlike the establishment of religion in Enlightenment-era Europe. After my undergraduate studies in the early 2000s—a period strongly dominated by post-structuralism and deconstruction theory—I was intrigued to read a scholar dedicated to seeking knowledge at the margins.

Somewhere between my (fortunately successful) application to Bern in 2008 and the completion of my dissertation five years later, Kollmar-Paulenz further developed her lecture into the 2013 book chapter, “Lamas und Schamanen: Mongolische Wissensordnungen vom frühen 17. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur Debatte um aussereuropäische Religionsbegriffe,” the decennial of which we celebrated last year. While staying true to the original intention to explore the role of *śasin* in Mongol society, the chapter takes much broader aim at the role of non-European

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Corresponding author: Till Mostowlansky, Geneva Graduate Institute.

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knowledge in the humanities and social sciences. In the following reflections, I take up some lines of inquiry that structure her chapter, discussing them in the broader contexts of research on global history and continuing attempts to assess the status of categories deriving from non-European intellectual traditions. Against this backdrop, Kollmar-Paulenz's chapter is a major contribution to the debate around religion as a universal category, a call for a more serious engagement with theoretical thought outside the context of Western-dominated academia, and a roadmap of how to decenter the concepts we work with.

## 2. Deprovincializing knowledge

Kollmar-Paulenz opens her chapter with a nod to Dipesh Chakrabarty's book *Provincializing Europe*, which, since its original publication in the year 2000, has accumulated thousands of citations across the humanities and social sciences. She thereby highlights Chakrabarty's critique of the global asymmetry of knowledge in which contemporary social scientists largely draw on a recently "fabricated" entity called "the European intellectual tradition" (Chakrabarty 2008: 5). In contrast, concepts coming out of, for instance, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic intellectual environments (Chakrabarty is thinking of South Asia here) remain excluded from the discussion. Chakrabarty (2008: 6) views this situation as rooted in the lack of training and motivation on the part of social scientists, which prevents them from inserting these concepts into lineages of theoretical reflection. As becomes clearer later in the book, this asymmetry is embedded in much longer histories of colonialism that have fed into present-day imbalances of power. In short, the asymmetry of knowledge traditions, whereby one tradition is recognized as theoretically sophisticated and vibrant and the other is viewed as an outdated relic whose only value is to be studied as a historical artifact, is alive and kicking. *Provincializing Europe* has served as an important reminder of this inequality. Chakrabarty's work is not, however, unproblematic; ultimately, it cannot escape the specter of Europe. The persistent orientation toward the "European intellectual tradition" as a point of reference, even if for the purpose of biting criticism, also bolsters, highlights, and normalizes the dominance of this particular knowledge. In the preface to the 2008 edition, Chakrabarty makes it clear that *Provincializing Europe* is in fact more about Europe than anything else:

“ To “provincialize” Europe was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity. (Chakrabarty 2008: xiii)

While Chakrabarty invokes Europe as the principal point of reference in his postcolonial critique, Kollmar-Paulenz goes far beyond this approach. She does not, in fact, provincialize Europe. In her chapter, Kollmar-Paulenz *deprovincializes* historically situated Mongol knowledge as it relates to the systematization of religion (2013: 177–191; 2024: 26–36). At its core, this is a process of both teasing out the specificities of this knowledge system and making manifest its universalizing tendencies. This is as much an important intellectual agenda as it is an intervention into the

politics of knowledge. With this underlying ambition, “Lamas and Shamans” implicitly addresses some of the concerns that have since become central to more recent debates revolving around decoloniality in the humanities and social sciences. For instance, Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012) draw on cases ranging from Latin America to the Eurasian borderlands to argue for the establishment of a social theory that becomes increasingly delinked from Eurocentric readings of history, knowledge, and modernity (see also Mignolo 2007). Grosfoguel (2007; 2013) notes that knowledge produced and distributed within a pyramidal university system on a global scale and over hundreds of years requires not only a decentering of concepts, but also a fundamental reassessment of institutions that reverses the established flow of knowledge from North to South. Kollmar-Paulenz’s analysis of the systematization of religion in a Mongol context speaks to these concerns in concrete ways. While many theoreticians of decoloniality continue to debate these processes in abstract terms, Kollmar-Paulenz gets down to work. As “Lamas and Shamans” shows, she is not preoccupied with academic buzzwords. And that is precisely why the chapter is a stellar example of decolonizing, i.e., *actually deprovincializing*, concepts before it became widely fashionable to do so. In the chapter, Kollmar-Paulenz builds on postcolonial approaches, carefully deprovincializes religion in the context of Mongol knowledge production and embeds these newly gained insights in broader strands of global history.

### 3. The power of global history

For Kollmar-Paulenz (2013: 184; 2024: 30), the history of religion—as an integral part of global history—is both an object of critique and a pathway beyond Eurocentric points of view. With reference to Richard King’s (1999) study on orientalism and religion in South Asia, she argues that the lukewarm acknowledgment of Asian Buddhists’ role in co-constructing modern Buddhism is not sufficient. This perspective, she notes, perpetuates an analytical dichotomy between East and West that attributes proactive qualities to the West and reactive ones to the East. In this asymmetry of knowledge and power, Asians only appear as active agents of history with the commencement of colonial encounters in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Before this period, they were presented as timeless. To counter this gaze, Kollmar-Paulenz conceptualizes a global history of religion that explores entanglements of historical agents and geographic areas from multi-centric perspectives. The ambition is to conduct such analyses with equal treatment of different forms of knowledge as the first principle, yet without losing sight of unequal power relations. Emerging from her case study on the conceptualization of religion in the Mongol context, Kollmar-Paulenz identifies three lacunae. First, in the case of the European history of religion, while there has been considerable interest in pluralism and the transfer of knowledge between different domains of society and religious denominations, comparable interest has been lacking with respect to Asian societies and other non-European contexts. Second, analytical categories that derive from outside the European history of religion have not been researched in historical perspective to the same extent as the category of religion. This has prevented an equal treatment of such categories and renders them ahistorical. Third, the untheorized usage of terminology from non-European

traditions and the refusal to connect them to widely theorized concepts (such as religion) create more problems than they solve. While this approach may shield the researcher from accusations of cultural imperialism, it also provincializes non-European concepts and isolates them from global analysis (Kollmar-Paulenz 2013: 185–191; 2024: 31–36).

Kollmar-Paulenz’s critique of a Europe-centered history of religion and her call to work toward equal treatment of diverse forms of knowledge resonates with the decolonial turn in a variety of academic disciplines. At the same time, her approach focuses on *šasin* as a comparative category, includes notes on Mongol views of “Christian religion” (Kollmar-Paulenz 2013: 182; 2024: 29), and emphasizes transregional connections. These three points—equal treatment of knowledge, recognizing comparative categories in non-European intellectual traditions, and the transfer of concepts in transregional perspective—connect to a broad range of research pursued in the humanities and social sciences. One example of particular modes of analytical engagement in a given space is Shahab Ahmed’s (2016: 81) “Balkans-to-Bengal complex,” a concept proposed to amalgamate a multiplicity of societal forms connected by a common paradigm of Islamic life and thought. This focus on the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” builds on Ahmed’s observation that the study of Islam has been disproportionately focused on prescriptive authority, constrained by legalist understandings, and marked by the overuse of binaries. This prescriptive fixation on law, he argues, derives from the emergence of the modern nation-state—both secular and religious—as the “*definitive and constitutive authority* [that] is necessarily vested in *legal discourse*—every law becomes an act of defining and constituting Islam, the state, and, thereby, the Muslim citizen” (Ahmed, 2016: 530, emphasis in original). To counter this tendency, Ahmed (2016: 282) proposes “explorative authority” to account for the contradictions, the multiplicity of truths and values, and the hybrid and counter-hegemonic self-expressions and ethics within Islam. Even though Kollmar-Paulenz explores a different historical and geographic territory, Ahmed’s proposal resonates with the broader agenda that she puts forward in her chapter. Her analysis of encounters between Tibetan Buddhist monks and Mongol shamans in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries emphasizes the importance of taking into account diverse religious economies, the alignment of religious specialists with political power, and tensions between oral and scriptural traditions.

#### 4. The making of discursive traditions

Kollmar-Paulenz’s discursive approach to how Tibetan and Mongol elites established a comparative perspective on different religions leads her to assess *šasin* as a multivalent category (2013: 175; 2024: 23–24). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, she argues, *šasin* moved beyond its predominantly Buddhist connotations and came to be used to describe the practices of shamans (e.g., *qara šasin*) in contradistinction to *sira šasin*—the form of Tibetan Buddhism widespread among Mongols. She remarks that not only did shamans over time take up *qara šasin* as a category of self-description; other traditions also became integrated into this comparative

understanding of *šasin*, specifically, Islam encountered through interaction with Kazakhs and Uyghurs, and Christianity in the context of missions and missionaries.

Kollmar-Paulenz's analysis shows how *šasin* became the dominant category for describing religious denominations more generally. Yet it is important to note that *šasin* is not simply a recent rendering of the Western concept of religion into Mongolian. Rather, it is a category that has emerged historically and organically and thereby transports knowledges and meanings from a specifically Mongolian context and conceptualization of the world. This is not to suggest, however, that it has not been influenced by interaction with European and North American discourses on religion. The modern conception of shamanism, Kollmar-Paulenz argues, is a case in point, as it has been influenced by discourses on *šasin* and by Western notions of shamanism as a global religious system.

While the discourses on *šasin* and their links to religion as a global category are specific to the Mongolian case, Kollmar-Paulenz's analysis also points to pitfalls in the broader perspective (and ways around them). Decolonial thought over the past two decades has emphasized the locality of knowledge and the importance of unearthing concepts deriving from social contexts beyond Western intellectual traditions. At the same time, this has resulted in a resurgence of cultural relativism, static notions of emic categories, and a neglect of global agency on the part of the colonized. In short, while Europe has been thoroughly provincialized vis-à-vis previously ignored intellectual traditions, the process of deprovincializing those very traditions has not come very far yet.

The social scientific study of Islam is a useful example in this regard, as it has been shaped by a spectrum of approaches ranging from a Eurocentric, secularist frame—particularly in research on diaspora and migration—to textual and legal normativity and stances underlining ontological difference (Llopart i Olivella and Mostowlansky 2023). Meanwhile, Islamic scholars such as Al-Attas (2020) have explicitly engaged with Islamic concepts as alternatives to religion as a comparative analytical category. This has happened in a process that Asad (1993; 2018) describes as the establishment of a “discursive tradition” emerging from polyphony and reformulation. In his view, Islam's internal, historically rooted diversity has enabled Islamic scholars' longstanding, creative, and productive engagement with religion as a universal category in interaction with categories deriving from Islamic contexts.

Kollmar-Paulenz (2013; 2024) attempts a similar balancing act in a clear and structured manner that opens a pathway forward. She emphasizes the depth and complexity of a local concept, *šasin*, and the ways in which this concept has been expanded to serve as a tool of comparison. And yet she also goes beyond the frame of the local by focusing on how the discursive making of *šasin* as a comparative category from Mongolian and Tibetan repertoires connects and interacts with the globalized category of religion. This endeavor, she argues, requires profound linguistic and historical expertise in traditions of thought outside the “European intellectual tradition.”

However, political, structural, and practical challenges to such a move toward a more balanced global history (of religion) are enormous. It would require, as Kollmar-Paulenz indicates, recognizing and granting equal status to scholars beyond the bounds of Western-dominated academia. Given the progressing commodification of higher education and research, this is a crucial and urgent endeavor.

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## About the author

**Till Mostowlansky** is Research Professor in Anthropology and Sociology at the Geneva Graduate Institute. He is the author of *Azan on the Moon: Entangling Modernity along Tajikistan's Pamir Highway* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017) and co-editor of *Infrastructure and the Remaking of Asia* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2023).

Mail: [till.mostowlansky@graduateinstitute.ch](mailto:till.mostowlansky@graduateinstitute.ch)