The Mantra of Transmission

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Akio walked into Muraya, a local bar in the vicinity of Kyoto University, flustered and hungry. He had been practicing all day for a performance two weeks from then. Not only was he memorizing long verses as the main actor, he was perfecting his mask, carving it from blocks of Japanese cypress ("hinoki"). I asked him to explain the technique of carving a solid block. He held the mask with utmost care, like a delicate cherry blossom that may wither with any harshness. I was mesmerized by his hands, moving in a fluidly choreographed manner. He held the mask close and only gave it to me if I let him place it in my hands, rather than take it from him. He constantly took my fingers and ran it through the fresh scrapings, insisting I breathe, through them, the fresh Hinoki smell. I had been for a Noh performance before, and was familiar with the basic elements of this form of Japanese Opera. However there was one aspect that caught my attention most, which seemed strange given the high regard paid to respect and public manners within Japanese society. A large number of people were sleeping through the entire course of the play, just to wake up when the final verse was recited with a haunting dance that traverses time and leads one into the dream of the narrator. With a blissful smile, Akio explained the importance of sleep or closed eyes to make this performance transcend into something larger than a cultural evening.

In mainstream entertainment of the traditional art, Noh has a quality of combining poetry and is recited in an almost mantric tone, owing resemblances to Sanskrit mantras chanted by the priests. With much deliberation as most Japanese people do, Akio finally mentioned that it is the way an actor chants the verses which truly makes him a Noh Actor. The most important element of Noh is the ability to stick to the limited tonal range and to hold ones tones and movements in perfect synchronization with the lengthy repetitive passages in a narrow dynamic range. This is done to evoke an almost hallucinogenic effect on the viewer. The combination of sleep to really feel the vibrations generated by the chanting is a way one internalizes the power that Noh exudes. The performance is highly ritualized and sets the audience into a meditative trance in their mind sky, guided by the chanting in a tone reverberating through their imagination to lead them through a visual experience of referential dreams.

What struck me most about Akio's explanation was how something deeply embedded in religious practice is adopted in secular art forms. Such an
indulgence leads to a sort of role reversal of the actors in the verses. The actor now fades into the conscience of the viewer, opening up his imagination. This spell is broken by the final dance of the play, where the actor performs the last act of his dream and awakens himself through the intensity of the experience. The loud movements of his feet and subdued screeches awakens the viewer to become one with the present. This too had become one of the many affirmations of the recondite influence Buddhism held on the subculture of Japan’s defining sensibilities, originating from an Indic constitution. The root of these sorcery-like implications of simple verses leading to supernatural visualization has its foundation in the role of mantras.

The rhythm of a sound or a syllable within the esoteric precincts of many Indic religions have been famed to embody within them supernatural qualities. These sounds, in the most generic way, can be called mantras. The unique relationship between a mantra and the method of recitation, or rhythm, is said to generate ripples or vibrations through the metaphysical universe and one’s consciousness. This practice can only lead to such an experiential realm when one follows the path of tantric practices within Esoteric Buddhism or Esoteric Hinduism.

Tantra or the tantric faith, owing to its extreme means of worship, has often been a victim of strange misunderstanding leading to deeply complex issues of historical transmission. For the tantric mantras are actually conscious beings, analogous to angels in western religions. It is through the correct utterance of the mantras, coupled with rituals, that leads the adept to communicate with the heavens. Mantras often consist of seemingly meaningless succession of syllables, or of a single syllable such as Ah, Om A Hum, A Ra Pa Ca Na. The words within themselves don’t embody a specific meaning, however the act of repeated recitation directs the practitioner towards the realm of rituals complete with specific and synchronized movement of lungs, vocal chords, tongue, lips, etc. This can only be successful when performed within the framework of a purposeful body posture. These words, when read in a certain rhythm of bodily and vocal actions, serve the esoteric purpose of paranormal engagement.

Tantric practice has often been transmitted through oral tradition to avoid the misuse of its potent rituals. The ritual, if rightly executed, allows an initiate to become one with the gods, embodying the spirit to attain a state of enlightenment and transience. This is the final stage of possession leading to enlightenment, wherein one meditates on a Mandala, imagining the deity he wishes to become. He dances around the Mandala in a trance from the various potions he has consumed, after copulating with a Yogi who opens the doorway of the heavens, allowing him to transcend. The Mandalas later came to be built on a three-dimensional scale, which now serve as some of the largest temple complexes. Some of the most important ones are Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom/Bayon in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia, Mt. Koya in Japan, and Khajuraho in India. With blatant Tantric imagery and resolute building to replicate a Mandala, a fortress of gods in the heavens was now on earth. There was a large scale eruption of several religious and ritual centers. This led to some fascinating practices between the 10th and 12th centuries.

When one enters the temple of Bayon, in the center of the Angkor Thom Complex, fifty-one towers with faces point in four directions. There are other elements which contemporary scholars are struggling to decode. The temple’s entrance is flanked with hundreds of Yoginis with garlands, embracing pillars on the eastern side. A temple that suddenly displays over three thousand women dancing on a lotus pedestal in the ardhabharyanaka pose (bent knees with one foot raised till the upper thigh, indicating a tandava like dance) can only suggest tantric roots.

These sculptures and engraving in relief, within the brilliant metaphysics of the temple, were brought to life by the repetitive chanting of the mantras. Jayavarman VII, the mysterious king who built these mystical temples, confuses art historians, for they cannot clearly understand the nature of Tantric practices. However, ritual paraphernalia, an uncanny emphasis on Yogini Mandalas, the representation of Hevajra, his controversial sculpture in the MET, New York, and his curious presence on a lintel in the suburban temple of Banteay Chmmar only reaffirm a strong esoteric affiliation which highlights a strong mantra repository.

It was these mystical stories from India and China and the art it commissioned for the affiliates that resulted in the continental adoption of Buddhism between the 1st and the 12th centuries. Glorious and intricately drawn Mandalas, bronze ritual paraphernalia, sculptures allowing the visualization of the god leading to unity and transcendence between the practitioners, made China and India great centers of learning, resulting in the institution of universities such as Nalanda and Taxila. Chinese travelers like Faxian (337-422) and Xuanzang (600-664) record the main centers of pilgrimages and practices in India in their accounts. They gave India the romantic status of The Rome of the Eastern world and highlighted Buddhist practices, sacred sites, redrawn murals. This led to large-scale replication and illustration on a pan-Asian scale. The story of Buddha feeding himself to a hungry tiger as an act of compassion in the city of Taxila found much resonance in many cultures to then be replicated in the cave temples of China and on a portable house shrine now housed in Japan. Cave temples
too were drawn from the accounts of the Chinese travelers and were replicated as a mass initiation of the country into the realm on Buddhism.

The most riveting development in the course of Buddhism were the caves of Ajanta. Models of the murals have been extant in all the countries that adopted this form of Buddhism almost as if the travel accounts deemed the construction of a cave temple imperative. The Chinese constructed Dunhuang which was influenced by India and the Sri Lankans, Dambulla, and Japan. Even though it is not a cave temple, the vestibule at the base of the temple pagoda has been opened up and designed in an acutely cave fashion.

Despite this large-scale architectural engagement, the meaningless syllables of the faith played a pivotal role in converting the site into a temple. This was done by consecrating it, wherein a deity is summoned to approach and inhabit the sculpture. These rituals were only to be done with the correct chanting of Mantras, for which large delegations of priests were exchanged between India and China. And these delegations led to large-scale exchanges in religious artifacts such as Sutras, Dhamanis, and Mandalas.

After a golden period of 200 years of esoteric flourish, these metaphysical engagements suddenly faded as stories after the 13th century. Tantric practices were soon banished, replaced by mainstream religions all across South and South East Asia. Mantras now had past glory and a seminal role in shaping a certain subculture in most countries. Assuming invocative roles within the artistic progression of performing arts, its predominance is now seen in a mature way in Japan. Recitation and chanting have now taken other dimensions. Rather than creating a whirlpool of effects that finally led to an ultimate goal, it receded into the peace of meditative practices. It is this rhythmic chanting of a mantra that replaces the chaotic sounds of one’s internal conversations, and allows the person to enter into a realm of calmness.

And then arose religiously influenced poetry, which conjures the effect of a plain yet deep emotion as in Tanka, with deeper religious roots than Haiku, a form of Waka poetry. When one reads poetry of this sort, the same elements are seen in function. A specific rhythm applied with a scientific purpose, to profess a sense of calmness.

Sending my soul away  
To where the moon has sunk  
Behind the mountain,  
What shall I do with my body  
Left in the darkness?

Monk Saigyo  
(1118-1190)

another year is gone  
a traveler’s shade on my head,  
straw sandals at my feet  
Matsuo Basho  
(1685)

Talking about four disparate cultural phenomena, such as Noh, Mantras, Buddhist Architecture, and finally poetry, one may wonder about the connection. These four elements represent the secular, artistic, religious and sometimes political elements of the mantra. The rhythm of the mantra was recognized by man early enough to be shared among polities far and wide. The power of the the mantra spread on a Pan-Asian scale, shaping major histories of the past. And currently, even when its usage is limited to mountain monasteries, its basic principles and usage is reminiscent in popular literature and performances. Its invocative role still intact, and the secret of its power well preserved.