

## Re-inscribing *Maṇḍala*: Semiotic Operations on a Word and its Object

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*Maṇḍala* is one of the distinctive elements of the Japanese Buddhist episteme,<sup>1</sup> background of the so-called “*kenmitsu* system” (*kenmitsu taisei*).<sup>2</sup> As such, *maṇḍala* plays an outstanding role in the history of Japanese culture.<sup>3</sup>

Among the numerous definitions of *maṇḍala*, perhaps the most comprehensive and suggestive one was proposed by Giuseppe Tucci. Tucci calls *maṇḍala* a “psychocosmogram”, a graphic representation of the cosmos and the individual spirit of the ascetics practising it.<sup>4</sup> Also, according to Yamasaki Taikō, “the esoteric *maṇḍala* illustrates enlightenment, and so the true self. As such it also depicts the entire body-mind of the cosmos, ... the *maṇḍala* symbolically represents the “universal form” of all things and beings”.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, psychoanalytic studies, postulating on the basis of a universal, transpersonal intuition, are ill suited to dealing with the *maṇḍala* as a cultural product, exposed to historical, social, and ideological contingencies of various kinds. Moreover, what does it actually mean that *maṇḍala* is a representation of the cosmos? Which are its codes? What is the underlying semiotic system? The usual iconographic descriptions fail to explain the epistemic nature of the relations connecting the esoteric cosmos with the *maṇḍala*; as a result, the *maṇḍala* is depicted as a cumbersome mnemonic instrument. The approach taken here will be different. This is neither a history of the developments of *maṇḍalas*, nor a study of the *maṇḍala* in itself. Rather than concentrate on the *maṇḍala* as it is, I will try to bring

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<sup>1</sup> By “episteme” is meant a “metasemiotics of culture”, “the attitude that a socio-cultural community adopts in relation to their [*sic*] own signs (see J. Lotman, M. Foucault)”: A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris: Hachette, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Kuroda Toshio, *Nihon chūsei kokka to shūkyō*, Tokyo: Iwanami, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> This fact, together with the undeniable fascination of the *maṇḍala*, has aroused the interest of many scholars. For a general introduction to *maṇḍala*, see Togano Shōun, *Mandara no kenkyū*, Kōyasan, 1927 (reprinted as Togano Shōun zenshū, Vol. IV, Kyoto: Rinsen Shoten, 1982); Tajima Ryūjun, *Les deux grands maṇḍalas et la doctrine de l'ésotérisme shingon*, Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise, and Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959; Giuseppe Tucci, *Teoria e pratica del mandala*, Roma: Ubaldini, 1969 (English translation: *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*, London: Rider, 1961); Yamasaki Taikō, *Shingon. Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*, Boston and London: Shambala, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Tucci, *op. cit.* p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Yamasaki, *op. cit.* p. 126.

into focus some of the principles and practices which allowed esoteric culture to produce such a peculiar object. Firstly, I will point out that the production and the exegesis of *maṇḍala* presuppose peculiar semiotic strategies.<sup>6</sup> Then I will show that the esoteric tradition carried out, first on the Indian subcontinent and later in East Asia, a semiotic re-articulation of the term “*maṇḍala*”, strictly connected to a “symbolic” transformation of the object *maṇḍala*. This complex process turned *maṇḍala* into a powerful soteriological device. We will see that *maṇḍala* is not (or not just) the arrangement of mystical visions and enlightenments guided by a “mysterious necessity intrinsic to human spirit”, as it has been suggested by Giuseppe Tucci under the influence of Carl Gustav Jung.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, *maṇḍala* is the result of a material effort (more or less conscious) directed to the creation of a definite object, as an answer to doctrinal, historical, and cultural requests.

### 1. The Fourfold Maṇḍala (*shiju mandara*)

In the present study we will concentrate our attention on the *shingon* fourfold *maṇḍala* (*shiju mandara*), since this complex apparatus has the status of semiotic articulation of the *hokkai*. The fourfold *maṇḍala* is described for the first time in Kūkai’s *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* and, in more detail, in two apocryphal texts, the *Shiju mandara gi* and its variant, the *Shiju mandara gi kuketsu*, traditionally attributed to Kūkai.<sup>8</sup> These two apocrypha will be the main primary sources of the present article.

Modern scholars consider the authenticity of both the *Shiju mandara gi* (hereafter, *Shimangi*) and its *kuketsu* (hereafter, *Kuketsu*) dubious, although it seems that at least during the second half of the Heian Period the *Shimangi* was generally considered to be an original work of Kūkai’s.<sup>9</sup> Be that as it may, in the present study we are concerned less with the authorship of the works than with the conceptions they expose and their importance in the formation of the mandalic idea in Japan.

According to the *Dari jing*,<sup>10</sup> all the *nyorai* (Skt.: *tathāgata*) possess a

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<sup>6</sup> The underlying hypothesis of the present study is that *mikkyō* differs from the Mahāyāna particularly in its basic semiotic assumptions. Different concepts of language and signs also imply different structures and functions. Semiosis is the process of the creation and interpretation of signs and reality. Semiotics is the theoretical discourse on semiotic phenomena.

<sup>7</sup> Tucci, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Kūkai, *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*, in: T. LXXVII/2428: 381b–384a; *Shiju mandara gi*, in: *Kōbō Daishi Zenshū*, Kōyasan: Kōyasan Daigaku, 1968, Vol. IV, pp. 250–8. The *Shiju mandara gi kuketsu*, *ibid.*, pp. 259–71, will be quoted only when it differs significantly from the *Shimangi*. The numbers following each quotation refer to the relevant page of the *Kōbō Daishi Zenshū*.

<sup>9</sup> On the problems of attribution, see Matsuzaki Keisui, “Shiju mandara gi ni tsuite”, *Taishō Daigaku kenkyū kiyō* (Bukkyō gakubu—bungakubu), No. 72 (October 1986), pp. 79–90.

<sup>10</sup> i.e. the so-called *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (Jap.: *Dainichi-kyō*). *Dari jing* is the Chinese pronunciation of the abbreviation in traditional use in Central and East Asia for the *Da piluzhena chengfo shenbian jiachi jing*, T. XVIII/848.

threefold secret body: *ji* (written signs), *in* (seals, i.e. *mudrā*), *gyōzō* (images and representations).<sup>11</sup> Kūkai explains: *ji* stands for *hō-mandara*; *in* refers to the various symbols (ritual objects) of the deities, i.e. *sanmaya-mandara*; *gyō* indicates the Buddha’s body endowed with the Thirty-two signs, i.e. *dai-mandara*. Each of these three bodies performs movements and actions, corresponding to *katsuma-mandara*. In this way, the *hosshin*’s modalities of manifestation and activities are all reduced to a specific model, the *maṇḍala*. On the basis of explanations scattered throughout the various texts of the *Jingang ding jing* lineage,<sup>12</sup> Kūkai organizes the following mandalic typology:<sup>13</sup> (i) *dai mandara* is the semiotic body of buddhas and bodhisattvas, the pictorial representation of their forms, and also the realization of the *yuga* of the *horizon* through the Five phases (*gosō*); (ii) *sanmaya mandara* is constituted by ritual and symbolic objects held by the deities, by their representations, and by their *mudrās*; (iii) *hō mandara* is constituted by the deities’ sonic and written seeds (*shuji*); it is constituted also by the *samādhis* of the *hosshin* and the expressions and meanings of all *sūtras*; (iv) *katsuma mandara* corresponds to movements and activities of the various buddhas and bodhisattvas, but also to their sculptural representations in metal or clay.<sup>14</sup> After proposing this classification, Kūkai says, in accordance with a rhetoric rule very common in the esoteric tradition,<sup>15</sup> that infinite variants of the fourfold *maṇḍala* exist, but they are all non-separate and interrelated (*furi*).<sup>16</sup> The same classification can be found also in the *Shimangi*: (i) *dai mandara* represents images of the deities drawn in the five colours; (ii) *sanmaya mandara* represents their objects (sword, lotus, and so on); (iii) *katsuma mandara* is constituted by sculptures (in clay or bronze); (iv) *datsuma (hō) mandara* contains the written seed letters of the deities.<sup>17</sup> The *Shimangi* stresses the fourfold *maṇḍala*’s role as a general cosmological model: (i) *dai mandara* is equivalent to sentient beings (*ujō*); (ii) *sanmaya mandara* is equivalent to the milieu in which sentient beings live (*hijō*); (iii) *katsuma mandara* represents the “differentiated activities and the distinct

<sup>11</sup> T. 848: 44a.

<sup>12</sup> Kūkai talks about *Jingangding jing* (Jap.: *Kongōchō-kyō*, Skt.: *\*Vajraśekhara-sūtra*), but he actually refers to a set of texts belonging to the same lineage, such as the *Jingangding jing yuqia shubahui zhigui* (T. XVIII/869: 284a–287c), *Dayue jingang bukong zhenshi sanmoye jing banruobolomituo liqu shi* (T. XIX/1003: 609b, 610a), *Jingangding yuqia jingang saduo wu bimi xiuxing niansong yigui* (T. XX/1125: 535b, 538c), *Dubu tuoluoni mu* (T. XVIII/903: 898c–899a).

<sup>13</sup> Kūkai, *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*, T. 2428: 282c–283a.

<sup>14</sup> In this classification, Kūkai considers *mandara* as a synonym of *chiin* (“wisdom seed”), without giving any explanation. On the opinions of commentators on this, see Matsuzaki, *op. cit.*, pp. 82–3.

<sup>15</sup> This “rule”, a predication of infinity, is used on the one hand to recall the grandeur of the esoteric world-view and on the other to relativize *mikkyō* esoteric apparatus, in order to remind the practitioner of the infinite complexity of the universe and the basic impossibility of reducing it to a scheme.

<sup>16</sup> Kūkai, *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*, T. 2428: 283a.

<sup>17</sup> *Shimangi*: 251.

configurations of the *nyorai*”: in other words, it is equivalent to the *nyorai*’s universal salvific activity; (iv) *hō mandara* represents rules and precepts. The fourfold *maṇḍala*, moreover, is not just a representation of the *nyorai*, because phenomena are also endowed with it.<sup>18</sup> The four *mandara*, then, are mutually interpenetrated: each of them contains the other three.<sup>19</sup>

The classification proposed by Kūkai shows a double originality. On the one hand, it consists of the unification of heterogeneous classificatory criteria contained in different texts (*hosshin*’s, secret bodies, *mandara*, *shi-chiin*) under the common label of “*mandara* thus assigning many new characteristics to the term, *maṇḍala*. On the other hand, Kūkai comes to conceive of *mandara* as *sōdai* of the *sandai* doctrine, that is, as the semiotic manifestation of the unconditioned *hokkai*. While the first operation once more shows Kūkai’s systematizing genius, the second one, a further confirmation of the interest that semiotic problematics aroused in the founder of the Shingon tradition, marks an important semiotic step.<sup>20</sup> Kūkai made the *sandai* doctrine the general framework of mandalic conceptions and practices.

The *sandai* doctrine provides mandalic semiosis with an ontological foundation: as a matter of fact, this doctrine constitutes one of the supports of esoteric semiotics.<sup>21</sup> In short, the *sandai* doctrine explains three different modalities of existence and manifestation of the cosmos: (i) *taidai* is the cosmic substance, substratum-space on which basis phenomena manifest themselves; it is possible to identify it as *shinnyo* and/or *hokkai*. As an a-semiotical basis of semiosis, a neutral and unconditioned topos, it resists every characterization; (ii) *sōdai* refers to the countless alterations and transformations of this substratum, perceived, on an ordinary level of consciousness, as independent from it and therefore as differentiated forms; (iii) *yūdai* indicates the incessant transformation of differentiated forms in which *taidai* manifests itself; this unceasing movement is nothing other than operativity aiming at the general salvation of the beings in the *hokkai*.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the *sandai* doctrine is that it sanctions, on a deep level, a relation of identity among the three layers of existence and manifestation of the cosmos. As provisional transformations of the substratum-space (the originally enlightened cosmic substance), sensible forms are agents of salvific activity. Thus, esoteric Buddhism conceives of

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<sup>18</sup> *Shimangi*: 252.

<sup>19</sup> *Shimangi*: 252–3. In this respect, the abolishing of distinctions between *ujō* and *hijō* (*Shimangi*: 252), typical of *hongaku* conceptions, is particularly significant.

<sup>20</sup> See Fabio Rambelli, “The Semiotic Articulation of *Hosshin Seppō*: An Interpretive Study of the Concepts of *Mon* and *Monji* in Kūkai’s *Mikkyō*”, in: Ian Astley-Kristensen, ed., *Esoteric Buddhism in Japan*, SBS Monographs, No. 1, Copenhagen and Aarhus: SBS, 1992.

<sup>21</sup> The *sandai* doctrine was introduced by Kūkai in his *Sokushin jōbutsu gi*, and was later developed by many Shingon exegetes, until it became one of the main cores of *mikkyō*. This doctrine is an original development of some ideas expounded in the *Dasheng qixin lun* (T. XXXII/1666: 575b–583b; T. 1667: 583b–591c) and the *Shi maheyan lun* (T. XXXII/1668: 591c–668c).

cosmos as a global and recursive soteriological “machine”.<sup>22</sup> One of the aims of the present study is to contribute to the comprehension of the devices which produce, within the Buddhist esoteric tradition, the transformation of cosmology (a type of knowledge) into a soteriology (a type of salvific power). The *sandai* doctrine forms the cosmologic and semiotic basis of the *hongaku* conceptions proper to the Shingon tradition. Recently, *hongaku* thought has been the object of various critical discussions in Japan. In particular, Hakamaya Noriaki believes that, because of their insistence in reducing everything to a single principle (devoid of attributes and therefore ineffable), they represent a renouncement of reason and the argumentative search for truth.<sup>23</sup> Hakamaya does not yet realize that the *hongaku* conceptual system carried out a radical reformulation of language and meaningful forms. Certainly, in the *hongaku* system linguistic expressions lose the role they play in ordinary discourse. Nevertheless, they do not completely give up their status as instruments conveying the absolute of *hokkai*. Their semiotic functions are performed through different modalities. *Shinnyo* is not expressed at random, as Hakamaya seems to believe. On the contrary, all the terms used to express it, however arbitrary and fortuitous they may appear, undergo complex processes of re-motivation,<sup>24</sup> since language cannot exist separately from the cosmic substratum. Remotivation of signs is carried out through the re-organization of each expression’s semantic field, with the effect of making meaning “similar” to the expression. Sign then becomes a reproduction of its object and, at the same time, an inscription of soteriology.<sup>25</sup> In this way, language dissolves into a network of polymateric signs, a sort of minimal *maṇḍala* able to semiotically manifest the absolute. The esoteric episteme deconstructs signs in order to push language beyond its limits and force it to say the absolute and unconditioned. This semiotic operation also affects the term “*maṇḍala*” and its object, as privileged representations of *hokkai*.

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<sup>22</sup> On recursive cosmology and soteriology, see Charles D. Orzech, “Cosmology in Action: Recursive Cosmology, Soteriology, and Authority in Chen-yen Buddhism, With Special Reference to the Monk Pu-k’ung”, Ph.D, University of Chicago, 1986; *idem*, “Seeing Chen-Yen Buddhism: Traditional Scholarship and the Vajrayāna in China”, *History of Religions*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (1989): pp. 87–114. On the semiotic implication of such a cosmology and soteriology, see Fabio Rambelli, “Segni di diamante: Aspetti semiotici del buddhismo esoterico di Kakuban”, Doctoral dissertation, Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli—Università degli studi di Venezia, 1992.

<sup>23</sup> Hakamaya Noriaki, *Hongaku shisō hihan*, Tokyo: Daizo Shuppan, 1989.

<sup>24</sup> By “re-motivation” I mean the complex effort aimed at overcoming the arbitrariness of language and signs, by finding a special “natural” relation between expression, meaning, and object. The tendency to stress motivation is a metasemiotic phenomenon related to cultures and epistemes (note 1, above). See A. J. Greimas, J. Courtés, *Sémiotique*, s.v. “motivation”.

<sup>25</sup> For a description of an analogous case, see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Inscribing the Bodhisattva’s Speech: On the Heart Sūtras Mantra”, *History of Religions*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1990), pp. 351–72.

## 2. The Functions of *Maṇḍala*

*Maṇḍala* is basically a sacred space. As such, it is considered as endowed with the attribute of circularity (symbol of perfection). Sacred space is the place where rituals and religious practices are performed, i.e. the ritual platform (*dan*) and the temple (*dōjō*).<sup>26</sup> The archetype of this Buddhist sacred space is the area surrounding the *pippalī* tree, under which Śākyamuni entered *nirvāṇa*. Bi-dimensional, pictorial (but sometimes also tri-dimensional, sculptural) representations of sacred space, today's best known *maṇḍala*, developed as variants of ritual platforms. Also, the ascetic's body and the everyday world, filtered through meditation, came to be acknowledged as mandalic spaces. Finally, *hongaku* thinking in Japan made sacred space (*maṇḍala*) coincident with the ordinary world.

*Maṇḍala* is a complex object endowed with different functions, depending on the socio-cultural contexts and the historical periods in which it is used. Anyway, it is possible to identify five main functions, often interrelated: (i) *the ascetic-meditative function*, the most studied. *Maṇḍala* is used in order to produce in the ascetic altered states of body-language-mind (*samādhi*) and a different knowledge of reality; the kind of knowledge and the depth of *samādhi* depend on various factors, among which are the degree of initiation and individual ability; (ii) *the magical function*: the practice of the *maṇḍala* is a manipulation of signs directed towards the production of an action upon reality. The esoteric rituals for *genze riyaku* (worldly benefits) are the best examples of this; a can also be used as an amulet or a talisman, protecting its owner from illness and misfortune;<sup>27</sup> (iii) *the devotional function*: mandalic conceptions have informed also the practice of pilgrimage and the use of space (in other words, meditative processes have been transposed onto geographical space);<sup>28</sup> (iv) *the didactic-mnemonic function*: the *maṇḍala*, a reproduction of the cosmos, is also a scheme that summarizes the doctrines and practices of the esoteric system; as such, it can be used for the transmission and memorization of Shingon knowledge;<sup>29</sup> (v) *the ideological function*,

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<sup>26</sup> This translation of “*maṇḍala*” is clearly indebted to Daoist thought and practice. On this problem, see for instance Orzech, “Seeing Chen-Yen”, pp. 109–13.

<sup>27</sup> In this respect, the *maṇḍala* is not unique. Giorgio Raimondo Cardona, in fact, considers the *maṇḍala* as a special kind of pentaculum, “typology of magical objects”. Pentacula exist in many cultures all around the world and “are built on an interplay of correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm: such correspondences ensure control over otherwise unruly forces, which can be duly restrained and directed through a model” (*Antropologia della scrittura*, Torino: Loescher, 1981 [rev. ed. 1987], p. 181).

<sup>28</sup> On this problem, see Allan G. Grapard, “Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness: Toward a Definition of Sacred Space in Japanese Religions”, *History of Religions*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (February 1982), pp. 195–221.

<sup>29</sup> Such a mnemonic function is the final result of the process of the mandalization of *dhāraṇīs*, which, according to Ujike Kakushō, marked the development of far-eastern esoteric Buddhism. See Ujike Kakushō, *Darani no sekai*, Osaka: Tōhō Shuppan, 1984; *idem*, *Darani shisō no kenkyū*, Osaka: Tōhō Shuppan, 1987.

the least studied: as a reproduction of reality and an epitome of a certain kind of knowledge, the *maṇḍala* presupposes and represents multi-levelled political conceptions and structures of power.<sup>30</sup>

Through centuries of doctrinal developments, the *maṇḍala* became the general scheme of the cosmos, containing all beings (considered as holographs of the absolute) and all processes (considered steps in the universal movement towards salvation).<sup>31</sup> In the end, every form of knowledge in Japanese medieval culture (cosmology, medicine, esoteric doctrines, poetry, music, and so on) came to be mandalized, thus exploiting all possibilities of a global, correlative way of thinking.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. A Semiotic Approach to *Maṇḍala*

*Maṇḍala* is an organic model of the cosmos in all its aspects. As a model, it can adapt itself to various situations, contexts, usages. Therefore, it is endowed with enormous productivity. *Maṇḍala* constitutes a powerful device for the esoterization of knowledge and cultural practices; it is able to absorb heterogeneous elements, providing them with a definite status within *shingon mikkyō*. As a model of the cosmos, *maṇḍala* is a representation of sacred space and of the ascetic journey to salvation. It contains an iconography, with its peculiar cultural references. But iconography in itself is not enough to fully understand *maṇḍala* and its usages. It presupposes one or more texts as its background, a set of doctrines, data on cosmology and soteriology, the knowledge of religious and ritual practices, and social and political ideas and goals. For its nature, *maṇḍala* is not a mere semiotic device, as a mnemonic instrument, a graphic representation of knowledge and practices. On the contrary, it is essentially a structured and articulated set of various semiotic systems, rooted in an organic correlative principle. *Maṇḍala* is able to completely represent *shingon mikkyō*'s episteme, and can be defined as a sort

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<sup>30</sup> The status of the *maṇḍala* as a device, not just of knowledge, but also of power, will be the topic of a subsequent study. For a general introduction on the relationship of the Buddhist establishment with institutional power in ancient and medieval Japan, see Kuroda Toshio, *Nihon chūsei no kokka to shūkyō*, Tokyo: Iwanami, 1975; *idem*, *Jisha seiryoku*, Tokyo: Iwanami, 1980; Satō Hiroo, *Nihon chūsei no kokka to bukkyō*, Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1987; Allan G. Grapard, *The Protocol of the Gods*, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> From the late Heian Period onwards, Japan underwent a multilayered process of mandalization, ranging from local areas to the whole country, which was re-organized as the twofold *shingon maṇḍala*. On this subject, see for instance Grapard, “Flying Mountains and Walkers of Emptiness”; in spite of its general spiritualistic approach, some interesting suggestions can be found also in Kamata Tōji, *Basho no kioku*, Tokyo: Iwanami, 1990.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance Kuriyama Shūjun, “Kōgyō Daishi no Gorin kuji myō himitsu shaku to chūsei Nihon bunka ni okeru gozōkan shisō: Ryōjin hishō no kudenshū to Kissa yōjōki wo chūshin to shite”, in: *Kōsō den no kenkyū*, Tokyo: Sankibō Busshorin, 1973, pp. 241–52. The workings and cultural presuppositions of such a mandalization will be the subject of a subsequent study.

of polymateric “encyclopedia”.<sup>33</sup> As such, *maṇḍala* presupposes (and sometimes shows) peculiar laws of organization, semiotic concepts, and practices, which are worthwhile studying in order to better understand the nature of far-eastern esoteric Buddhism. To sum up, the main semiotic characteristics of *maṇḍala* are the following: (a) polymatericity: *maṇḍala* cannot be considered only from a pictorial point of view; on the contrary, it is a complex device appealing to all human senses and faculties; (b) plurilinguism: Japanese mandalic knowledge (handed down through Chinese and Sanskrit texts) is a “heterology” of doctrines and practices from all Asia;<sup>34</sup> itself, as a “text”, yields many “readings” and usages, according to the user’s level of initiation and ability; (c) panchrony: the whole cosmos is always and at the same time present within *maṇḍala*; (d) omnicomprehensivity: *maṇḍala* contains in principle every kind of knowledge and practice, and its content can be freely expanded without compromising the cohesion of its system;<sup>35</sup> (e) polysemy: the content of *maṇḍala* is organized on many levels of sense and semantic fields; (f) semi-symbolism: in *maṇḍala*, signs are motivated; a conformity (at least partial) between the various elements of signs and of mandalic semiosis takes place; (g) “syncretism”: *maṇḍala* is characterized by a complex, “syncretic” (in a semiotic sense) nature.<sup>36</sup> The exigency to solidly assure attainment of salvation lays at the basis of special semiotic operations, carried out in order to re-motivate the supports of practices, so as to change them in topological spaces containing the characteristic of the universe. According to esoteric doctrines, meditation on *maṇḍala* is an immersion in the space of enlightenment, but this is possible exactly by virtue of the structure of the mandalic sign itself. The following two sections are an attempt to outline the principal semiotic operations, including the etymological strategies, carried out by the Tantric tradition in order to change the semiotic structure of *maṇḍala*.

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<sup>33</sup> The general semiotic concept of “encyclopedia”, as it is formulated by Umberto Eco and further developed by Patrizia Violi, is an efficacious way of expressing the global knowledge of a culture. See Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, *op. cit.*; *idem*, *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, *op. cit.*; Patrizia Violi, “Le molte enciclopedie”, in: Patrizia Magli, Giovanni Manetti, Patrizia Violi, eds., *Semiotica: Storia, teoria, interpretazione. Saggi intorno a Umberto Eco*, Milano: Bompiani, 1992, pp. 99–113. For a discussion of *maṇḍala* as an “esoteric encyclopedia”, see Rambelli, *Segni di diamante*, *op. cit.*, pp. 283–8.

<sup>34</sup> In the *Shimangi*, for instance, Indian terms are translated into Chinese and read in the Japanese way. But we can speak of “plurilinguism” also in Bakhtin’s sense: the *Shimangi* refers to popular religious rituals of “Western countries” (*Shimangi*: 251, 257).

<sup>35</sup> According to the *Shimangi*, the four *maṇḍalas* contain all dharmas in the following way: all doctrines, inner and outer, mundane and ultramundane = *hō mandara*; all individuals, mundane and ultramundane = *dai mandara*; all non-sentient beings, mundane and ultramundane = *sanmaya mandara*; all events and activities, mundane and ultramundane = *katsuma mandara* (*Shimangi*: 256–7).

<sup>36</sup> In the sense explained in A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémotique*, Vol. 2, Paris: Hachette, 1986, pp. 217–19.



If expression and meaning, sign and reality, means and end of meditation are essentially identical, then—since they are connected by a relation of motivation—the practitioner and the *honzon*, and the practitioner and the deity are identical. In this way, the concept of *sokushin jōbutsu* acquires a semiotic foundation, and salvation reveals itself as the result of peculiar semiotic conceptions and practices.

#### 4. Manipulating Etymology

*Mandara*, or *mantora* (Chinese *mantuluo*), is the transliteration of the Sanskrit *maṇḍala*.<sup>37</sup> The term *maṇḍala* has a long history in India: it occurs in various contexts with many different meanings. As a key term of Indian tantric Buddhism, *maṇḍala* begins to appear in phonetic transcription in the Chinese translations of Buddhist texts and their commentaries only towards the sixth century, in works traditionally considered as *zatsumi* (non-systematized esoteric teachings). The *Shimangi* quotes two main translations of the term *mandara*, i.e. “ritual platform” and “perfect circle”:

the men of old called it *dan*, meaning with it only the sense of “flat, even surface”. [This translation] misses the other numberless names and meanings, such as *sanmitsu*, *shi-chiin* and so on. Modern men, on the contrary, by calling *maṇḍala* “perfect circle”, attribute to it all its principles with no exclusion.<sup>38</sup>

The Far Eastern esoteric tradition ascribes to the term *mandara* a long series of interpretative translations, only in part deriving from Indian Tantrism. The *Shimangi* is no exception,<sup>39</sup> although a more comprehensive list can be found, for instance, in a work by Kakuban (1095–1143):

*Mandara*: its correct translation is “perfect circle”; ... it is also translated as “gathering”, ... “peerless flavour, unsurpassable flavour”, ... “generative power”; ... in times past it was translated as “ritual platform [*dan*]”, because it is perfectly flat.<sup>40</sup>

From this definition by Kakuban, and from many others by various authors, it is possible to deduce that the semantic field of the Japanese term *mandara* (and perhaps also of its Chinese equivalent *mantuluo*) is much wider than the Sanskrit original. According to the tradition, *mandara* refers not only to both the Sanskrit terms, *mantra* and *maṇḍala*, but also to the mind, to *samādhi*, and to the *prajñā*, of the bodhisattva. The polysemy of the term *mandara*

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<sup>37</sup> In contemporary usage, “*mandara*” is normally written with a different character for “*da*”.

<sup>38</sup> *Shimangi*: 250–1.

<sup>39</sup> The other meanings it gives are “unsurpassable”, and “peerless flavour” (*Shimangi*: 251).

<sup>40</sup> Kakuban, *Shingachirin hishaku*, T. LXXIX/2520: 37c–38a.

leads the esoteric exegetes to suppose the existence of a deep connection between, on the one hand, *shingon* (*mantra*) and *mandara* (*maṇḍala*) as the instruments of practice; and, on the other hand, as the mind of the asceticism and the *prajñā* of the bodhisattvas as the results of practice.<sup>41</sup> The esoteric definitions of “*maṇḍala*” produced by both Indian and Chinese cultures are marked by their incongruity and heterogeneity, to the point that one cannot help recalling a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” mentioned by Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, how can a single term mean all this without differentiation? How can the same object be characterized by all these properties? As in Borges’ “Chinese” taxonomy, in the case of the meanings of the term *maṇḍala*, too, a forgotten logic underneath should exist, defying our intellectual systems.

In order to shed light on this problem, the semantic structure usually associated with the terms *maṇḍala*, *mantuluo* and *mandara* within the Buddhist esoteric tradition will be taken into account. The hypothesis that will be discussed here is that the peculiar status attributed to the object, *maṇḍala*, within the esoteric tradition is connected also to the semiotic operations of re-articulation of the name, *maṇḍala*. In other words, *maṇḍala*’s soteriological value does not depend just on an act of faith, but it is grounded also on re-motivation of language aimed at revealing the non-arbitrariness of signs.

Indian tantric Buddhism already operated an interesting semantic reformulation of the term *maṇḍala*, in order to make it more suitable to the epistemological needs of the esoteric system. The primary meaning of the term in the ordinary usage is “circle”. Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit-English dictionary lists the following meanings of the word *maṇḍala* in its ordinary usage:<sup>43</sup> circular, round; a disc (especially of the sun or moon); anything round; a circle, globe, orb, ring, circumference, ball, wheel; a district, arrondissement, territory, province, country; a surrounding district or neighbouring state, the circle of a king’s near and distant neighbours; a multitude, group, band, collection, whole body, society, company.<sup>44</sup> In Indian culture, moreover, the term *maṇḍala* refers also to supports for meditation, also called *yantra*; they are often built in religious ritual and ceremonies. The meaning of *maṇḍala* in religious jargon depends perhaps on the circularity which probably characterized early *maṇḍalas* as supports of Buddhist

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<sup>41</sup> The polysemy of the term *mandara* is a consequence of the fact that the Chinese transliterated both Sanskrit terms *maṇḍala* and *mantra* as *mantuoluo* or *mantuluo*; the reference to the mind and to *prajñā* is made through the interpolation of Sanskrit *maṇḍa* (“essence”). Such polysemy is probably not fortuitous, and the deep relations it suggests are an intentional ambiguity.

<sup>42</sup> See also Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1967 (“Preface”).

<sup>43</sup> Only entries relevant to the present discussion are given here. Buddhist or esoteric implications are not considered by the dictionary.

<sup>44</sup> M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit English Dictionary*, New Delhi: Marwah Publications. 1986 [reprint], p. 775. For an etymology and a history of the term *maṇḍala*, see also Toganoo, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–6.

meditation.

When tantric Buddhism takes possession of a non-esoteric term or concept, it carries out a process of esoterization concerning both its semantic structure and its form.<sup>45</sup> In the case of *maṇḍala*, former meanings are displaced into the background; in their place, as a general meaning of the term, a special interpretation of etymology is introduced.<sup>46</sup> “*Maṇḍala*” is divided into the root *maṇḍa* and the suffix *-la* (completion, possession); it turns out to indicate “that which possesses [-*la*] *maṇḍa*”. As meanings relevant to our discussion, Monier-Williams’ dictionary gives under the entry *maṇḍa*, *inter alia*, “the scum of boiled rice (or any grain); the thick part of milk, cream; the spirituous part of wine, etc.; (also ‘foam or froth; pith; essence; the head’).”<sup>47</sup> At this point, Buddhist Tantrism formulates an esoteric exegesis of the term *maṇḍa*. A secondary ordinary meaning (“essence”) is chosen as the main esoteric sense. Then, “essence” is interpreted as “true essence of reality”, *bodhi*, Buddha-nature, ultimate truth of the Dharmakāya’s absolute knowledge. The final step of the esoteric semantic reformulation consists in recovering the original meanings of both the terms *maṇḍa* and *maṇḍala*, and recycling them as semantic markers, specifiers of the characteristics of “that which possesses *maṇḍa*” (i.e. *maṇḍala* as a category of objects). The label of the reproduction of the esoteric cosmos is now ready: its name is not definitely independent of its object.

All this was further developed in China and in Japan, where the original Sanskrit term *maṇḍala*, in its esoteric acceptations, was explained through translation of and commentary on its intentional characteristics. For instance, two main interpretative translations of *maṇḍala* are distinguished in the *Shimangi*, as we have already seen: *dan* and *rinnen gusoku*. These terms belong to two different orders of meaning. The first, *dan*, the “old” one, is the translation of *maṇḍala* in a specific acceptance. In this case of connotative usage, *dan* refers to the platforms used for initiation and other esoteric rituals, as described at length in the *Dari jing* and the *Dari jing shu*.<sup>48</sup> The second translation, the “modern” one, *rinnen gusoku* (“perfect circle”), echoes the original, ordinary meaning, although it is marked with the attribute “perfect”, somehow signalling its esoteric value. This double meaning reflects the transition in China from the phase of *geyi* (“matching meanings”) to more philologically correct translations. This is, in turn, homologous to the development from the superficial knowledge (*kengyō*) of the

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<sup>45</sup> On the process of esoterization, see Rambelli, *Segni di diamante*, pp. 317–37.

<sup>46</sup> Etymology is never a neutral operation; in this case, it is the result of a symbolic regime applied to the term *mandara*.

<sup>47</sup> Monier-Williams, *loc. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> The translators’ choice of translating *maṇḍala* with *tan* (Japanese *dan*), the platform used in Daoist rituals, established another meaningful semantic displacement; but since it concerns the substance of the content, and not the forms of the content we are dealing with here, it lies outside the scope of the present article.

ancients to the profound and perfect knowledge of modern men, to whom esoteric teachings (*mikkyō*) are available.

Therefore, the original meaning of “circle” evolves into a semantic marker and is used to characterize *maṇḍala* (“that which possesses essence”) as “endowed with the perfection of a circle” (*rinnen gusoku*), in the sense that it is as perfect as a circle, and thus perfectly endowed with power and virtue.<sup>49</sup> The “alimentary” semantic field, related to the primary and original meaning of *maṇḍa* (which actually refers especially, as we have seen, to delicacies and delicious flavours), determines the translation of *maṇḍala* as “peerless flavor” (*muhimi*), “unsurpassable flavor” (*mukajōmi*): “flavour” stands here metaphorically for the sublime qualities of *bodhi*.<sup>50</sup> Since one of the original meanings of was “a multitude, group, band, collection”, the esoteric *maṇḍala* can also be defined as a particular assembly, because it gathers together (*shūshu*) the powers and virtues of *siddhis*. *Maṇḍala* is further endowed with a generative power (*hosshō*), since it is able to produce countless manifestations of the Three Mysteries (*sanmitsu*) of the Dharmakāya (this latter virtue is not drawn from the ordinary Sanskrit meaning of *maṇḍala*). This last characterization is important, because by its virtue *maṇḍala* is no more an instrument of religious practice; on the contrary, religious practice is produced by *maṇḍala* as a manifestation of the *sanmitsu* of the *hosshin*.

The overall process of esoterization of *maṇḍala* is carried out not just through a doctrinal reformulation and a graphic restructuring (the so-called systematization that opposes *junmitsu* and *zatsumitsu*), but also and especially through a semiotic operation consisting in the manipulation of its meaning. This fact explains the apparent incongruity and heterogeneity of the esoteric definitions and synonyms of the term *maṇḍala*.

Why did the esoteric Buddhist exegetes engage in such a semantic tour de force? The restructuring of meaning proved necessary in order to establish *maṇḍala* as an esoteric object and an esoteric concept as well, as an entity allowing direct contact with the absolute—just because it shares (it is made to share) the nature of and its principles. This is only possible through an investment of value based on a relation of motivation that connects the expression (*maṇḍala*) to its meaning (that which possesses the essence), and the instrument to its end (*bodhi*, *siddhi*). Such etymological work represents a semi-symbolic process of the re-motivation of language, directed to the negation of the arbitrariness of signs.

In early Buddhist usage, *maṇḍala* referred to a support for meditation;<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Actually, the situation is more complicated, because Far Eastern *maṇḍalas* in general are not just circles: but since it is “perfect”, *maṇḍala* must contain all geometrical forms.

<sup>50</sup> *Dari jing shu*, T. 1796: 625c. It is worth noting that in *mikkyō*, *bodhi* is often expressed through metaphors of the senses, especially flavours.

<sup>51</sup> It is possible that originally supports for meditation had a circular form. Roderick S. Bucknell and Martin Stuart-Fox argue that both *maṇḍala* and *kaṣiṇa* (a set of circles used in an

later, with the development of Tantrism, the term came to indicate the platform for initiation and other esoteric rituals. The need for motivation arose from the fact that efficacy of rituals (and, therefore, their goals) ought to be necessarily related in some way to the supports used and the space where they were performed. Only in this way could the result be assured.

From the need to provide practitioners with a solid guarantee for the possibility of reaching their goal (which, according to *mikkyō*, is easy, certain, and fast), etymological strategies were put into practice, directed to the re-motivation of the object and its name, in order to justify their use by virtue of their sharing Buddhahood. Thus *maṇḍala* changed from a mere instrument for meditation or place for initiation into something fundamentally identical to the end itself for which it was used. It is clear, therefore, that esoteric doctrines are related to semiotic conceptions: they owe their power also to manipulations of signs and meanings. It transpires that *Hongaku* thought is closely related to its semiotic instruments, metaphors, practices, and ritual instruments. In particular, the concept of *sokushin jōbutsu* reveals a semiotic foundation.

The esoteric transformation of *maṇḍala* is thus completed: from a simple circle used by beginners as a support for meditation, in the course of a few centuries it changes into an extraordinary machine, endowed with countless powers, for which nothing is impossible. In the end, *maṇḍala* itself as a soteriological device takes control of esoteric practice and produces the attainment of *bodhi* and all *siddhis*.

The etymological work we have attempted to describe took place in the span of few centuries, side by side with the development of esoteric doctrines and practices. Doctrinal and ritual re-organization went along with semiotic restructuring as interdependent processes. It is not possible to tackle one but neglect the other.

## 5. Mandalic Semiosis

As we have already seen, the reformulation of the term opened the way to reformulation of the object, *maṇḍala*. As a consequence, *maṇḍalas* were correlated to aspects of the cosmos, to esoteric practices and doctrines. Indian Tantrism had already created syncretic schemes correlating different cosmic systems of five divisions—natural elements, colours, geometrical forms, buddhas (with their *bījas*), and so on. In the Far East, Buddhist esoterism developed in close contact with the knowledge and practices related to yin-yang doctrines and Daoism. Thus, the Indian tantric cosmology presented

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ancient meditative technique also described in the Pali Tipiṭaka), represent different developments of an earlier set of coloured circles used as a support for meditation. See Roderick S. Bucknell and Martin Stuart-Fox, *The Twilight Language: Explorations in Buddhist Meditation and Symbolism*, London: Curzon Press; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

in the Chinese translations of the esoteric texts<sup>52</sup> interacted with a different correlative thought. In Japan, Kūkai was perhaps the first who laid firm theoretical foundations for esoteric correlative thought.<sup>53</sup> However, the emergence of a new integrated vision of the cosmos, in which *onmyōdō* knowledge and practices of Chinese origin were integrated within the esoteric system, did not occur until the late Heian period with the work of Kakuban. The criteria that govern correlations, however arbitrary, are not purely conventional. In other words, elements are associated on an analogical basis, and presuppose metaphorical or metonymical relations. These processes have never been exhaustively studied.<sup>54</sup> In general, once a contact point between two elements is found, a total transfer of their properties takes place, in order to confer to each one of the terms all the attributes of the other. This shows the working of a fundamental logical postulate of esoteric Buddhism, which regulates the integration of *mikkyō*'s heterology.<sup>55</sup> As a matter of fact, according to the esoteric doctrines, all cosmic series are nothing other than transformations of the same substance, of the same substratum-space, defined in various ways (*hokkai*, *isshin*, *shinnyo*); for this reason, the parts and the whole share the same characteristics. The *Shimangi* acknowledges various correspondences between the fourfold *maṇḍala* and various orders of the esoteric reality.<sup>56</sup> First of all, the four *maṇḍala* are associated with the Three Jewels (*sanbō*): *dai mandara* corresponds to the Buddha, *hō mandara* to the Dharma, *samaya mandara* to the Saṃgha, and *mandara* to the Three Jewels as a whole. The text describes further correspondences:

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<sup>52</sup> On the correlations of the five elements in Chinese and Tibetan esoteric texts, see Toganoo, *op. cit.*, pp. 411–20.

<sup>53</sup> On the relationships between Japanese *mikkyō* and Chinese correlative systems, see Murayama Shūichi, *Nihon onmyōdō shi sōsetsu*, Tokyo: Hanawa Shobō, 1981, pp. 197–241; *idem*, *Nihon onmyōdō shiwa*, Asahi Culture Books, Osaka: Osaka Shoseki, 1987, pp. 155–99. On Kūkai and his correlative thought, see also Rambelli, “The Semiotic Articulation of Hosshin Seppō”.

<sup>54</sup> The main correlations of the *Dari jing* and the *Jingang ding jing* are explained in, for instance, Toganoo, *op. cit.*, pp. 411–20.

<sup>55</sup> This postulate can be formulated as: Whatever A and B, if A is similar to (=possesses at least one property of) B, then A is identical to (=possesses all the properties of) B. In this form it is a development of the explanations of the “logic of yoga” by Tsuda Shin’ichi: “Tantara bukkyō ni okeru yōga no ronri”, *Risō*, No. 535 (December 1977), pp. 123–43; *idem*, “A Critical Tantrism”, *The Memoirs of the Tōyō Bunko*, Vol. 36 (1978), pp. 167–231 (in Part 171). See also Rambelli, *Segni di diamante*, pp. 108–10.

<sup>56</sup> *Shimangi*: 252–4.

<i>Three Jewels</i> . <sup>57</sup>	Buddha	Dharma	Samgha
<i>sanmitsu</i> :	shinmitsu	gomitsu	imitsu
<i>sanbu</i> (three sectors of <i>maṇḍala</i> ):	butsubu	rengebu	kongōbu
<i>deities of the sanbu, according to the Suxi'dijing</i> ( <i>Kuketsu</i> 269):	Konrinbutchō	Batō Kanjizai	Shūkongōshu
<i>deities of the sanbu, according to the Dari jing</i> ( <i>Kuketsu</i> 269):	Birushana	Kanjizai	Kongōsatta
<i>santen</i> . <sup>58</sup>	gedatsuten	hosshinten	hannyaten

The text then explains the correspondence of the four *maṇḍalas* with the fourfold *hosshin*, on the basis of three different combinations.<sup>59</sup> The *Shimangi* deals at length in particular with the correspondences explained in the *Dari jing*, which we have recapitulated in the following scheme.<sup>60</sup>

- *forms*<sup>61</sup>
  - square
  - circle
  - triangle
  - crescent
- *elements*
  - earth
  - water, space
  - fire
  - wind
- *meaning*
  - identity
  - pervade all things
  - courage (*Kuketsu* 260: surrender)
  - great power, destruction (*Kuketsu* 260: sweeps away misfortune)

<sup>57</sup> The text explains that the Three Jewels are interrelated and each of them also contains the other two.

<sup>58</sup> *Santen* refers to the three circles that constitute the *shittan* letter *i*, which esoteric hermeneutics made the object of many correlations.

<sup>59</sup> *Shimangi*: 254–5.

<sup>60</sup> *Shimangi*: 257–8.

<sup>61</sup> The *Shimangi* also quotes the *Jingang ding jing*, according to which the shapes of *tan* are the following five: circle, square, triangle, lotus, vajra (*Shimangi*: 257).

- mandalic rituals
  - *zōyaku* (increasing of material benefits)
  - *sokusai* (eliminating of disasters)
  - *chōbuku* (subjugating of evil spirits)
  - *kōchō* (not explained); *Kuketsu* 268: *keiai*
- aims
  - since *bonnō* have been repressed, fortune and happiness arise
  - eliminate *bonnō* and do not allow them to arise further
  - since good fortune is produced, disasters disappear
  - (not mentioned)
- aims<sup>62</sup>
  - when the letter A is recited, misfortune (due to the bad *karma* generated by *bonnō*) disappears
  - when misfortune (due to the bad *karma* generated by *bonnō*) disappears, virtue and original wisdom increase
  - the negative karmic power of *bonnō* is eliminated
  - if we believe that *bonnō* and *bodai* are distinct, they they conflict with each other; when we realize that there are no distinctions, conflicts cease and everything is in harmony

It is interesting to note how the text accurately dissolves the articulations and classifications it introduces, by asserting the interrelation and interpenetration of the four *maṇḍalas* or, in other words, eliminating all discriminations. This is probably a special case of the esoteric discursive strategy I call “proliferation and dissolution of sense”. With reference to this, the last paragraph of the *Kuketsu* is particularly meaningful, where the substantial non-distinction of *ri* (“principle”) and *chi* (“knowledge”) is explained. At this point, we may formulate some of the basic characteristics of *maṇḍala*.

- (i) *maṇḍala* is the substratum of true knowledge, the topos of *hongaku*, the absolute world of the enlightenment of the *hosshin*, and at the same time the reproduction of *hokkai* through topological criteria, in the sense at least that also spatial dislocation of its elements is significant.
- (ii) Because of its peculiar status as a global representation of the Absolute, *maṇḍala* cannot be monomateric. It must manifest itself through many semiotic substances (painting, sound, space, language, etc.); moreover, it is possible to translate it in other semiotic systems, on the basis of complex rules of correlation and transformation.

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<sup>62</sup> According to the *Kuketsu*.



- (iii) By virtue of its polymateric nature, *maṇḍala* is an index, a glossary of the whole cosmos and of the relations established among its elements. It presupposes, as such, strict rules of correlation (cosmic codes).
- (iv) Each *maṇḍala* is part of a hierarchy that represents, in various forms and in many ways, the esoteric cosmos.<sup>63</sup> *Maṇḍala*, as manifestation (*sōdai*) of the cosmic substance (*taidai*), is the most faithful representation of *hosshin seppō*, a pansemiotic discourse, a cosmic theophany.

What is the semiotic work that produces esoteric signs? In other terms, how is the complex meaning related to expressions? In general, esoteric sign functions are expressions directly matched to their content: according to the definition of Umberto Eco, it is a case of *ratio difficilis*. Content and expressions are pre-formed, exist in advance: what is originally missing is a code to join them. The discovery of this code is a creative work, the product of both an interpretive effort and an operation on the sign. The result is that the “nature of the expression is *motivated* by the nature of content”.<sup>64</sup> All elements of *maṇḍala* have been chosen in order to express a certain content. In other words, the form of the content determines the form of the expression. But this is not enough: the structure of reality itself concurs in determining the expression; the ascetic’s meditative journey and its goal influence the choice of the signs to represent themselves. In this case, as Umberto Eco writes, “the relations existing on the plan of the content are projected (in the cartographic sense of the term) on [*sic*] the plan of the expression”.<sup>65</sup>

Usually, esoteric expressions (*shingon* and *shittan*) and *maṇḍalas* are described as instances of symbolism. Now, the conceptions of the nature of symbols generally share the idea of a union of expression and meaning, or of a sign and its object; often, such a union is veined by a mystical and irrational flavour. On the contrary, it is possible to show that, in the esoteric Buddhist episteme, (i) expressive forms do not possess just a subjective sense, but conform to a whole, firmly established tradition; (ii) a very articulated structure of the content exists; (iii) above all, specific rules exist which direct the interpretation and use of signs. For all these reasons, it seems convenient to set apart the vague notion of symbol, and to substitute it with the concept of semi-symbolism, endowed with a greater euristic and explanatory efficacy.

*Maṇḍala*, and the various kinds of expressions which it is composed of, constitutes in fact an attempt at overcoming the arbitrariness of signs. *Maṇḍalas*, hypercomplex semiotic structures, constitute polyphonic and plurilin-

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<sup>63</sup> According to Shingon tradition, all things convey a meaning as manifestations of *hosshin* in his modality of *tōrushin*.

<sup>64</sup> Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Milano: Bompiani, 1975, pp. 246–7.

<sup>65</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Torino: Einaudi, 1984, p. 45.

guistic texts which are able to represent series of cosmic elements, connected by relations of necessity and motivation. By virtue of the existence of such an “iconic” relation between expression and meaning, it is possible to consider the esoteric semiotic structure among the semi-symbolic systems, “systèmes signifiants ... caractérisés non par la conformité entre des unités du plan de l’expression et du plan du contenu, mais par la corrélation entre des catégories relevant des deux plans”.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, the system of *maṇḍala*, homologating several cosmic series, whose elements constitute complex semiotic functions, is grounded “sur une véritable redondance du signifiant: par exemple, une dizaine des catégories (de formes, de couleurs, de techniques ...) peuvent substitutivement ou collectivement constituer la forme de l’expression”.<sup>67</sup> Such a system can be defined as a “syncretic semiotics”. The motivation existing between expression and meaning is due to the fact that both are considered two different epiphenomena of a single non-dual reality. The results of rituals and soteriological practices are necessarily connected in some way to their supports, to the spaces in which they take place, to the processes in which they are articulated. In this way, their efficacy is assured.

As a consequence of this, a clear-cut distinction between “meaning” and “power” in the expressions is missing. In fact, esoteric signs do not simply stand for a sense or a possibility of action: they are that sense or that action. Accordingly, the expressions are, on a certain level, no longer signs: they become receptacles of knowledge and power spots where that knowledge changes into operational force.<sup>68</sup>

## 6. *Maṇḍala* as a Fundamental Modelling System<sup>69</sup>

The main limits affecting ordinary language, as far as the description of the Absolute is concerned — linearity, temporality, and fragmentation—are transcended by the *maṇḍala*, a polymateric text and panchronic model which encompasses everything. The abundance of signs, forms, and meanings pro-

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<sup>66</sup> A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Sémiotique*, Vol 2, p. 203. According to Greimas and Courtés, “conformity” is the “correspondence, term to term, between units of two comparable semiotic objects, or of two layers (expression and meaning), or of two levels of language”.

<sup>67</sup> Greimas and Courtés, *Sémiotique*, Vol. 2, p. 204.

<sup>68</sup> Stanley Tambiah has pointed out that in cultural practice, Buddhist transcendent thought produces concrete transformations of mundane, non-enlightened reality: Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Sasaki Kōkan develops this point and stresses that the knowledge contained in Buddhist texts is able to transform itself into a power active upon reality: Sasaki Kōkan, “Sō no jushika to ō no saishika: Bukkyō to ōsei to no musu-bitsuki ni kansuru ichishiron”, in: Kuroda Toshio, ed., *Kokka to tennō: Tennōsei ideogōi to shite no bukkyō* (Bukkyō to nihonjin 2), Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1987, pp. 49–91. Esoteric expressions, in particular, are endowed with such an active power: one of the aims of the present paper is to show how this transformation occurs.

<sup>69</sup> What follows is just a first introduction to this complex.

duces an exchange of senses and helps the direct perception of the analogical interrelation of all things.

Within the Japanese Shingon episteme, *maṇḍala* seems to constitute the principal model and metaphor for interpreting reality. In other words, esoteric Buddhism understands the universe as an immense *maṇḍala*, while a long Western tradition compares the world with a Book.<sup>70</sup> *Maṇḍala* is not just a representation: the *hokkai* unconditioned is itself a *maṇḍala*, and *maṇḍala* is also the general shape of phenomena. Everything is meaningful, a figure in the picture of the universe, a part of *hosshin seppō*.<sup>71</sup> True reality is accessible to man not through a “reading” of phenomena (this metaphor never appears in esoteric texts), but through the semiotic practice of *maṇḍala*, the microcosmic inscription of the soteriological process. The interpretation of the world, according to the criteria of esoteric Buddhism, is an initiatory practice. This does not mean that, as in the romantic conceptions of Novalis or Friedrich Schlegel, the whole cosmos speaks countless languages and everything can stand for everything, because every fragment represents the whole. This vision, the fruit of a poetic imagination free of constraints, does not tolerate any systematization, any regularity.<sup>72</sup> Despite superficial similarities with the romantic perception, the esoteric cosmos, on the contrary, is not the product of an individual imagination, but a structured and articulated cultural system. Within *maṇḍala*, with its polymatericity and polysemy, ordinary language is subordinate to a plurality of systems of representation. The book, the written text, at least in the Shingon tradition, tends to be mandalized, transformed into an initiatory journey.<sup>73</sup> Now, if language is a special kind of *maṇḍala*,<sup>74</sup> an ontological and a semantic model at the same time, it is possible that Japanese esoteric Buddhist episteme considers *maṇḍala* as a primary modelling system of the cosmos and human experience. This hypothesis has been already suggested by Giorgio Raimondo Cardona regarding Tibetan *maṇḍala*, “expressive form” which “is not immediately translatable in the forms of language”.<sup>75</sup> *Maṇḍala* presents in fact a stratified knowledge, which, in order to be understood, does not necessarily require the mediation of ordinary language and linguistic modelling.

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<sup>70</sup> See for instance Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981.

<sup>71</sup> See Rambelli, “The Semiotic Articulation of Hosshin Seppo”, q.v.

<sup>72</sup> See Blumenberg, *op. cit.*; Tzvetan Todorov, *Théories du symbole*, Paris: Seuil, 1978.

<sup>73</sup> The cultural importance of *maṇḍala* in Japan and in other Asian cultures still needs to be thoroughly examined, as well as the concept of “book”. Even if *maṇḍala* can be considered as esoteric Buddhism’s main modelling system, the book plays an important role in Buddhist culture, as in the case of the *Heart Sūtra* or the *Lotus Sūtra*. On the impact of the latter on Japanese culture, see George J. Tanabe, Jr., and Willa Jane Tanabe, eds., *The Lotus Sutra in Japanese Culture*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989.

<sup>74</sup> This fact is especially evident in the works by Kūkai. See for instance, Kawamura Minato, *Kotodama to takai*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990 (in particular, pp. 95–6).

<sup>75</sup> Giorgio Raimondo Cardona, *I sei lati del mondo*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1985, pp. 9–10.

Since Kūkai at least *maṇḍala* represents on the contrary a semiotic system that transcends language. Each of its parameters is codified: each element represents a sense which does not require its formulation in linguistic terms. *Maṇḍala* too is thus part of those semiotic systems in which “the graphic function is entrusted with the duty of modelling contents endowed of a vital ideological importance . . . , nay, the totality of what one has to know about the world (hence its secret, initiatory value)”.<sup>76</sup>

## 7. Transmission of the Mandalic Episteme

In the above pages we have outlined the semiotic work needed for the production of esoteric expressions such as *maṇḍala*. In our analysis from the outside, we have tried to show the structuring intervention by the members of the esoteric tradition. From an internal point of view, on the contrary, esoteric signs are not arbitrary and handed down on the basis of conventions. Their transmission, from master to disciple, is secret and initiatory. The first ring of this initiatory chain is Dainichi Nyorai: signs and practices related to his teachings are born in the self-presence of the Unconditioned.

The myth of the appearance in the sky of the first *maṇḍala* is part of this general framework.<sup>77</sup> It is not by chance that the *maṇḍala* was copied by Shanwuwei (the one who brought the esoteric teachings to China, an important junction between an Indian mythological past and a Chinese historical present), and that that picture became later the prototype of the most important Shingon *maṇḍalas*, called *genzu mandara*, “picture that reproduces the [original] *maṇḍala* as it manifested itself”. Even today, *genzu mandara* are considered to be perfect copies of this original and unconditioned *maṇḍalas*, whose image and whose meaning are strictly transmitted by means of a causal chain.<sup>78</sup> Such traditions and legends further confirm the idea of *maṇḍala* (but also of other esoteric expressions) as unconditioned entities,<sup>79</sup> transcending arbitrariness of signs, cultural codes, and everyday semiotic strategies. The most striking fact in this characterization of the esoteric expressions is the stress on the fidelity and accuracy of initiatory knowledge—and hence on the fidelity and accuracy of everything concerning

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<sup>76</sup> Cardona, *Antropologia della scrittura*, p. 51.

<sup>77</sup> The legend of the appearance in the sky of the original *maṇḍala* to Shanwuwei is reported for the first time around the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century. According to another tradition, the original *maṇḍala* appeared in the sky when the bodhisattva Nāgārjuna opened the Iron Tower where he was to be initiated into esoteric mysteries. On the origin of this legend and the meaning of the term *genzu*, see Togano, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–104.

<sup>78</sup> The term *genzu mandara* refers only to the Tōji’s *ryōgai mandara* (Twofold *maṇḍala*) and its copies. According to the tradition, the original set of *ryōgai mandara* was brought to Japan by Kūkai. In this case, the idea of the perfect reproduction of the Original *maṇḍala* is superimposed on the idea of the direct, unaltered transmission of Chinese esoteric tradition to Kūkai.

<sup>79</sup> As is well known, *shingon* and *shittan* are also unconditioned, *shingon* as the phonetic substance of the universe, *shittan* as transcriptions of another appearance in the sky.

signs. In other words, according to the esoteric episteme, its initiatory signs cannot be used to lie, cannot lie. We find here the paradoxical idea of an absolute sign, directly and ontologically connected to the object or the event for which it should stand. The problematics of the absolute sign are developed on three different levels: the internal structure, as motivated and analogical signs; the power with which these signs are endowed; their transmission by way of a rigid causal chain.

As we have seen, *maṇḍala* is the global semiotic representation of *hokkai*, and its direct tie with reality is supposed to be an analytic property. The active power on reality with which the esoteric signs are endowed lies in this direct connection with the Unconditioned. The “unaware”, uninformed usage of *maṇḍala* as amulet or talisman—devices of easy attainment—usage that leaves meaning out of consideration, is grounded on the weight of tradition and on unaltered secret transmission.

In general terms, the transmission of *maṇḍala* is articulated in three steps: (i) there is the occurrence of a primary speech act, in which Dainichi Nyorai, in his original modality of existence and immersed in the supreme *samādhi*, preaches the Law (including teachings about *maṇḍala*); this speech act is reinforced by the appearance of the *maṇḍala* in the sky (pure topos by excellence). The image of the *maṇḍala* is based therefore on a primary, unconditioned display; (ii) sacred words and signs, with their meanings and their usages, are kept in a corpus of revealed texts and their commentaries, the result of a secret knowledge tracing back directly and without changes to Dainichi Nyorai himself; (iii) there is a group of men and women putting these teachings into practice and transmitting them: the people who have received the initiation to the secret Shingon teachings. The above three steps correspond to the Three Jewels, core of Buddhism and foundation of the supernatural power of its practices and its signs.<sup>80</sup> The expressive forms used by *mikkyō* are not just instruments for the interpretation of reality, vehicles of a lofty and sublime communication. Esoteric signs are unconditioned and absolute: this paradox is at the core of the nondualistic Shingon system. Thus, esoteric expressions lose their status of “signs”, since they no longer stand for something else in some respect or capacity, according to the well known definition by Charles S. Peirce. Shingon esoteric episteme, in which signs are microcosms, holographs of the *hokkai*, is a complex semiotic system organized in order to abolish itself and dissolve into Absolute reality.

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<sup>80</sup> See Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, esp. pp. 197–8); *idem*, “The Magical Power of Words”, now reprinted in his, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, pp. 22–8.

## List of Characters

butsubu	佛部
Batō Kanjizai	馬頭觀自在
Birushana	昆盧遮那
bodai	菩提
bonnō	煩惱
chi	智
chōbuku	調伏
dai mandara	大曼荼羅
Dainichi Nyorai	大日如來
dan	壇
<i>Dari jing</i>	大日經
<i>Dari jing shu</i>	大日經疏
datsuma mandara	達摩曼荼羅
da yue bu kong zhenshi sanmoye jing banruo bolomituo liqu shi	大樂金剛不空真實三摩耶經 般若波羅蜜多理趣積
dōjō	道場
<i>Dubu tuoluoni mu</i>	都部陀羅尼目
furi	不離
gedatsuten	解脫點
geyi	格義
genze riyaku	現世利益
gomitsu	語密
gosō	五相
gyō	形
gyōzō	形像
hannyaten	般若點
Heian	平安
hijō	非情
hokkai	法界
hō mandara	法曼荼羅
hongaku	本覺
honzon	本尊
hosshin	法身
hosshin seppō	法身說法
hosshinten	法身點
hosshō	發生
imitsu	意密
in	印
isshin	一心
ji	字
<i>Jingangding jing</i>	金剛頂經

<i>Jingangding jing yuqia shubahui zhigui</i>	金剛頂經瑜伽十八會指歸
<i>Jingangding jing yuqia jingang saduo</i>	金剛頂經瑜伽金剛薩多
<i>wubimi xiuxing niansong yigui</i>	五秘密修行念誦義軌
junmitsu	純密
Kakuban	覺鑿
Kanjizai	觀自在
katsuma mandara	羯摩曼荼羅
keiai	敬愛
kengyō	踰教
kenmitsu taisei	踰密體制
kōchō	鈞召
kongōbu	金剛部
Kongōsatta	金剛薩多
Konrinbutchō	金輪佛頂
Kūkai	空海
mandara, mantora (Ch.: mantuluo)	曼荼羅
mikkyō	密教
muhimi	無比味
mukajōmi	無過上味
nyorai	如來
onmyōdō	陰陽道
rengebu	蓮華部
ri	理
rinnen gusoku	輪円具足
sanmaya mandara	三摩耶曼荼羅
sanbō	三寶
sanbu	三部
sandai	三大
sanmitsu	三密
Santen	三点
Shanwuwei	善無畏
shichiin	四智印
shiju mandara	四種曼荼羅
<i>Shiju mandara gi</i>	四種曼荼羅義
<i>Shiju mandara gi kuketsu</i>	四種曼荼羅義口決
<i>Shingachirin hishaku</i>	心月輪秘積
shingon	真言
shinmitsu	身密
shinnyo	真如
shittan	悉曇
shuji	種字
Shūkongōshu	執金剛手
Shūshu	聚集
sōdai	相大

sokusai  
sokushin jōbutsu  
*Sokushin jōbutsu gi*  
*Suxidi jing*  
taidai  
tōrushin  
ujō  
yin yang  
yūdai  
yuga  
zatsumitsu  
zōyaku

息災  
即身成佛  
即身成佛義  
蘇悉地經  
體大  
等流身  
有情  
陰陽  
用大  
瑜伽  
雜密  
增益