

A Response to D. Max Moerman

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Moerman's essay is illuminating and fascinating. Reflecting the interpretive skills and knowledge of the accomplished field expert, the essay nonetheless opens a window onto a complex slice of a society and culture that invites the non-expert to consider implications for other fields of inquiry. Among these other fields I include the formative discourse on critical comparative scriptures. I should like to limit my response in this forum to issues having to do with this new discourse.

Many of the problems and issues Moerman discusses in regard to early medieval Japan—articulations/ideologizations and representations of types of otherworldliness; appropriate and compelling forms of piety, including degrees and types of askesis; crises of authority and leadership; media of traditioning and their processes and politics, including the production of scriptural canons, among so many others—have been argued to be part of the historical civilizational dynamics and orientations characterized by some historians and philosophers as pertaining to the “Axial Age.” Whether the major arguments about such an “age” are accepted or not, what Moerman describes as having taken place in medieval Japan are reflective

of the orientations and practices long associated with some well-recognized historical reverberations and permutations. Among such dynamics are the psychology, practices, and politics that revolve around scriptures, the focus of Moerman's chapter. These dynamics represent some complex psycho-social-cultural and historical questions and problems: What are scriptures? Why do we invent and use scriptures? What is the nature and effect of the work that we make scriptures do for us?

With his focus on early medieval Japanese practices involving the burial of the scriptures that are the Dharma in the form of the sutra, Moerman provides what I consider to be a fascinating example of how scriptures are engaged—and why. He only hints at or assumes but does not fathom the burial rituals as part of a larger set of social-cultural dynamics—most important for a student of critical comparative scriptures—involving claims about discourse and knowledge. These dynamics may be called scripturalizing (my elaboration and revision of the arguments of W. C. Smith). Although it cannot be fathomed in the context of this discussion, I should like at least to make an attempt to advance the cause by a small measure, using Moerman's analysis as springboard.

I should like to suggest that there at least four stages in the dynamics of scripturalizing—the time of the sage figure; the period of oral transmission of the words of the sage; the death of the sage figure and the creation of texts as codification of words of the sage; and the times of the meta-text, in which varied

rituals and types of engagements reflect interest in going beyond lexical or content meaning.

The Sage figure. Held as the embodiment of truth and wisdom, auctoritas/power, the actual presence of this figure is understood to be critical to any group formation. S/he—yes, females were and are indeed possible as wise ones in some stages and types of social formation —was the sign of completeness, fulfillment of all that mattered. But upon his or her non-presence—devolution, translation/transformation, ascension, death, execution—the traumatized circle of devotees may inspire or require a substitution of some type.

Oral Transmission of Words of the Sage. Oral transmission—remembrances, mimetic recitations—of the words of the sage figure may in some social formations be ongoing during the presence or lifetime of the sage figure. But the traumatizing event resulting in the non-presence of the sage figure triggers even more and different and conflicting transmissions, representing differentiation of and tensions within the social formation.

The Text. It is not a given or a universal, but along with other historical factors and considerations, the non-presence of the sage figure can precipitate, even mandate, efforts at preservation, codification, and standardization of the words of the sage figure. Writing and its representation as materiality and the social ordering in textualization (what S. Pollock refers to as literization and literarization) have been a response to such challenges and problems in certain civilizations.

Textualization represents social-ization, the structuring of a particular social

economy; and it has all too often facilitated center-formation, hierarchicalization, social verticality, social-cultural canon-ization, uni-fication, and uni-formity—that is, until some within the structured order no longer see the text as solution.

Notwithstanding the ingenuity that is or can be exegesis, it can come to be seen as problem to be overcome. Then something more—or less—is sought.

Meta-text. Texts, textuality and textualization become the problem. Over time and especially within certain ex-centric groups, they come to be viewed as flattening, even deadening, of experience. What is sought is a way (back) to fluidity, a way toward a more expansive arena in which to negotiate the world. Somewhat like the sage figure, the text is made to disappear. Of course, it does not really disappear: there is really no getting around it or burying it. Rather, it is problematized: it is made the site around and in relationship to which authority and knowledge and power and identity and communication issues are negotiated. Because this now physical/material, but also discursive and linguistic, site provokes an orientation that may in turn facilitate critical distance and experimentation with new forms of and impetuses for engagement, this negotiation represents the potential for more social power. In this situation a social formation can come to terms with what a text can be made to do for it—including the terms and the work about which Moerman writes regarding Japanese Buddhist burials of the Dharma.

These stages are for analytical purposes; they should not be seen as historically determined and mutually exclusive. They reflect moments in and aspects of a possibly larger theoretical-analytical cycle of social relations, interests,

and goals. Moerman's discussion begs many questions that a discourse on critical comparative scriptures should be compelled to engage for the sake of opening even wider windows onto the different and fascinating ways of being human.