Chapter One, "Adamantine signs: The episteme of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism" says, EB is based upon a system of meaning which distinguishes between signifier and signified. The text examines semiotic interpretations of EB, Rambelli attempts to frame Buddhism, whose focus was on the "absolute language" of mantra (7). As the bulk of the book. The primary difference between the Esoteric school (hereafter referred to as EB for purposes of conciseness) and other forms of Buddhism is that it traces its lineage not back to Sakyamuni Buddha (that is, Siddartha Gautama), as do most other traditions, but to Mahavairocana Buddha (xvi). The Esoteric tradition views Mahavairocana as "the ultimate source of all possible signs, thoughts, and representations as personified by the cosmic Buddha." He is seen as an eternal being, coexistent with the entire universe, wherein all things are part of a "single totality" (xvii). This informs the EB view of world itself as an "ongoing cosmic sermon" being preached by Mahavairocana (xviii). His teachings and revelations form the basis of Esoteric Buddhism. At its most basic level, Rambelli says, EB is based upon a system of meaning which distinguishes between signifier and signified, as nōsen and shosen, respectively (xiv).

Chapter Two, "Cosmic sermon" being preached by Mahavairocana (xviii). His teachings and revelations form the basis of Esoteric Buddhism. At its most basic level, Rambelli says, EB is based upon a system of meaning which distinguishes between signifier and signified, as nōsen and shosen, respectively (xiv).
The foundation of EB’s interpretive process is the three orders of meaning which, Rambelli says, correspond to “different modes of semiotic knowledge:” semiosophia, semignoniosis, and semioipieta. Semiosophia refers to “the exotic forms of knowledge of signs (sō), according to which language and signs are considered to be arbitrary and illusory, but nevertheless usable as expedient means (upaya) in order to indicate the truth,” (15). Semisigniosis, on the other hand, is knowledge gained through specific ritual practices. Finally, semioipieta is a term denoting “the diffuse beliefs and nonspecialized practices of the uninitiated concerning such Esoteric entities as sacred images, texts, amulets, and talismans” (17). The relation between semiosophia and semisigniosis is “represented by the two-level semantic structure of Esoteric signs,” which Rambelli refers to as the “exo-esoteric doctrine,” separating the teachings of Mahavairocana into the superficial and the secret (9). The superficial (jisō) is based on physical appearance or shape “the primary meaning at this level is usually a term that begins with the same sound as its expression” whereas the esoteric (jig) is “treated as a condensation of another sign it stands for” (16).

These two terms correspond quite nicely with the Peircean categorization of signs as icons and indices (Peirce 8). The remainder of the chapter is concerned with a discussion of a text on mantra by Shogei (a Pure Land and Esoteric monk and commentator). This is followed by a brief look into the life and work of scholar monks typical of the period, before closing on a brief discussion of the codification of ritual in the Esoteric school.

Chapter Two, “Ontology of signs: The pansemiotic cosmos of mandala” concerns the ontological foundations of Esoteric Buddhism, as exemplified by the concept of Sōdai, “the semiotic configuration of the universe, refers to the countless alterations and transformations” of substance (39).

The beginning of the chapter draws parallels between the artistic philosophy of Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini and EB’s own “pansemiosis,” in which every signified is itself a sign (40). These signs all ultimately originate with Mahavairocana, whom Kukai says is the Dharma itself, the source of all signs.

Language also originates with Mahavairocana, as a result of what Ryuichi Abe terms “semiogenesis”: Mahavairocana intoned the letter A, thereby bringing language itself into existence (47).

Rambelli refers the subjects of study of Esoteric Buddhism as “microcosmic macrosigns,” denoting “openended clusters of alloforms, objects, actions, states, and qualities – distinct occurrences of the different modes of the cosmic substance” (57). The most common examples of these macrosigns in EB are the stupa and the mandala, both of which Rambelli explores in great detail.

As a fundamental and immediately recognizable aspect of both Buddhist and Hindu practice, mandala is the focus of much of the chapter. For Esoteric Buddhists, the mandala is the fundamental model of the universe but even more than this, the universe itself is a mandala (59). Rambelli goes through the definition of the a mandala, as well as different typologies, before discussing the seven “main semiotic characteristics” of the mandala functions, its use as a liturgical and devotional instrument, a magical object, and its use as an ideological device within the sociohistorical context of Buddhism in Japan (66).

To underscore the importance of the mandala to the Esoteric tradition, Rambelli emphasizes the fact that the universe itself is seen as one all-encompassing pansemiotic mandala (77).

Chapter Three: “The secrets of languages: Structure of the Esoteric signs,” focuses more on the general relationship between Esoteric Buddhism and language. Rambelli covers a lot of ground, including the Buddhist preoccupation with the confusion of reality and appearance, re-framed as a problem of linguistics: “The external world, then, is essentially a linguistic and semiotic construction and thus devoid of ontological reality” (80). Following this is a discussion of the word of the Buddha and the importance of distinguishing between the words themselves and “the signs conveying” the Buddha’s message (82). Again, the emphasis on Sanskrit is stressed. An exegesis on Kukai and the primacy of the uttered sound follows: “sound...is always the signifier of a noun or of a semantic unit. And since every sound signifies something, there is no distinction between levels of articulation” (85), that is, no distinction between phoneme and morpheme.

Next, he moves to the subject of mantra, explaining its origins and history, determining that mantra originally developed as “primordial protolinguistic expressions” (96). Investigations of the phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of mantra follows, segueing into the subject of Indian scripts. The ubiquitous Kukai also founded the school of shittagaku, focused on interpretation of the Indian shittan script, which plays a prominent role in Rambelli’s investigation of EB’s exegetical methods. Sanskrit was considered the holy language because of its exoticism -- “the foreign is considered to be more authentic” (13). Rambelli concludes this discussion of mantras by evoking Peirce’s conception of “infinite semiosis” (100) (Eco 1979, 69), in which each signified is also a signifier, leading to an unending chain of signification. The chapter concludes with a case study on
Chapter Four is entitled “Inscribing the diamond path: A semiotic soteriology” and describes how enlightenment is achieved through semiotic processes. Again, the “visual culture” of Esoteric Buddhism is emphasized: “Shingon meditation was essentially eidetic and consisted in the visualization of particular images. Even signless or formless meditation...is a contemplation of the ultimate semiotic nature of the Dharma realm” (127). Following this is a description of the “relationship of conformity between the structure of a mantric expression, the structure of the salvation process in which it occurs, and the ‘meaning’ of the mantra’s elements” (131). This is illustrated by an exegesis of a commentary by the 12th century Japanese priest Kakuban – his own exegesis on the mantric syllables “a bi ra un ken” (139), as well as a more detailed look at the mandala: “The visualization process aims at establishing a connection between the graphs of the mantra and their multiple meanings on the one hand, and the parts of the human body and the elements in the external world they correspond to by virtue of the correlative logic of the East Asian Esoteric Episteme” (146), as explicated in the first section of the book. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Buddhist texts themselves as a simulation of practice; that is, text as ritual. Here Rambelli explores the obvious parallels with Austin’s theory of performative utterances (155).

The fifth and final chapter, “The empire and the signs: Buddhism, semiotics, and cultural identity in Japanese history,” is an analysis of the influence of semiotics upon Japanese identity. Beginning with a reintroduction of Roland Barthes and Empire of Signs, the discussion moves on to the ways in which the Japanese language has shaped the spirit of the Japanese people (174, focusing particularly on Zen Buddhism’s ties to Japanese nationalism and jingoism, particularly the “militaristic and quasi-fascist ideology” of pre-World War II Japan (180).

EVALUATION

Rambelli’s book is ultimately geared more towards those interested in Buddhism -- specifically Esoteric Buddhism -- than to students of semiotics, though there may be appeal for students of Sanskrit as well. Although specific theories of semiotics are occasionally mentioned, they are merely incidental and almost always brief, rather than the focus of any discussion. Instead of a Buddhist “theory of semiotics,” as indicated by the title, the work is more accurately an interpretation of Esoteric Buddhism in the spirit of semiotics. The vast majority of the book is relegated to interpretations of Shingon texts, including exegeses of exegeses by medieval scholars. Those areas of the text that are strictly semiotic in nature could be relegated to a chapter-length essay or journal article.

The text is not entirely devoid of semiotics in the strictest sense. Much of Rambelli’s discussion of mandala (of which there is quite a bit) is based in traditional semiotic theories. He notes that the “constitutive, essential qualities” of the mandala can be represented by a variation on the semiotic square (see Chandler 106) which he refers to as a “meta-semiotic square,” contrasting the concepts of “one” and “many” with their oppositions in “not-one” and “not-many” (73). He returns to the semiotic square at the end of Chapter Three when discussing the nature of signs in Esoteric Buddhism, this time contrasting ideas of “endowed with marks” and “devoid of marks” (124). Further nods to known theories of semiotics include a reference to mandala as a rigid designator, see Kripke 293, due to it being coextensive with the “Original” mandala of Buddhist mythology (Rambelli 76). Rambelli also defers to semiotics when discussing the interpretation of the mandala as an “esoteric encyclopedia,” (66) referring to Eco’s encyclopedia theory of reference, an alternative to “dictionary” theories of Putnam, among others (see Eco 1986, Chapter 2).

The secondary importance of semiotics as such is a double-edged sword in terms of comprehensibility. Though the text is easily accessible in terms of semiotics for anyone with a basic introductory or superficial level of familiarity with the subject and its key aspects, the bulk of the Buddhist material is extremely dense and therefore very difficult for anyone without a background in Esoteric Buddhism. The book, then, is of limited importance for those interested in semiotics. However, for students or enthusiasts of Buddhism, especially the Esoteric school, it has the potential to be an extremely enlightening and informative piece of work.

REFERENCES


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Versions:
Format: Paperback
Pages: 280
Prices: U.K. £ 27.99
Format: Hardback
Pages: 280
Prices: U.K. £ 85.00

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