

Essays on East Asian Religion and Culture

**Festschrift in honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki
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How Amida Got into the Upanishads: An Orientalist's Nightmare

URS APP

Oftentimes books come with little or no advance praise at all. But how about the following advertisement:

How entirely does the Oupnekhat breathe throughout the holy spirit of the Vedas! How is every one who by a diligent study of its Persian Latin has become familiar with that incomparable book, stirred by that spirit to the very depth of his soul! How does every line display its firm, definite, and throughout harmonious meaning! From every sentence deep, original, and sublime thoughts arise, and the whole is pervaded by a high and holy and earnest spirit. Indian air surrounds us, and original thoughts of kindred spirits.¹

This is what Schopenhauer wrote about the first European translation of the Upaniṣads, the Latin *Oupnek'hat* published in 1801-2 by Anquetil-Duperron.² Quite a number of people, inspired by the philosopher, tried

¹ Unless otherwise indicated the translations from various languages are by the author. Schopenhauer's original German text reads: "Wie athmet doch der Oupnekhat durchweg den heiligen Geist der Veden! Wie wird doch Der, dem, durch fleißiges Lesen, das Persisch-Latein dieses unvergleichlichen Buches geläufig geworden, von jenem Geist im Innersten ergriffen! Wie ist doch jede Zeile so voll fester, bestimmter und durchgängig zusammenstimmender Bedeutung! Und aus jeder Seite treten uns tiefe, ursprüngliche, erhabene Gedanken entgegen, während ein hoher und heiliger Ernst über dem Ganzen schwebt. Alles athmet hier Indische Luft und ursprüngliches, naturverwandtes Daseyn." Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena II* (Zürich: Diogenes Verlag, 1977), 437 (vol. 2, § 184). The given English translation is by Max Müller, *The Upanishads* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), 1: lxi.

² Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, *Oupnek'hat (id est, secretum tegendum)* (Argentorati: Levrault, 1801-1802).

reading this Latin translation only to give up after a few pages of cryptic Latin teeming with Greek particles and Persian words. Max Müller remarked that its style is “so utterly unintelligible that it required the lynxlike perspicacity of an intrepid philosopher, such as Schopenhauer, to discover a thread through such a labyrinth.”³ With the appearance of translations from the original Sanskrit texts of the Upaniṣads, the *Oupnek’hat* was soon regarded as obsolete because it was based on a Persian translation. Nevertheless it had a lasting impact: along with the *Bhagavadgītā*⁴ it opened the West’s eyes to Indian wisdom, it played a central role in the formation of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, and it influenced some famous mythologists and orientalists. Here it will live on in yet another way, namely, as a looking glass into the historical underground of orientalism and the adventures of ideas.

The Hidden Book

Since few people possess the lynx-like perspicacity needed to unlock the secrets of Anquetil’s entire two-volume *Oupnek’hat* I will concentrate on its first word and see where that leads us. I refer to the sacred word “OUM.” But first, since it is such an interesting document, a few words about the Persian translator’s preface.⁵ The author of this preface is Mohammed Dārā Shikūh (1615-1659), the eldest son of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and empress Mumtaz Mahal, the woman whose grave is graced by the famous Taj Mahal in Agra. He calls himself a “*fakir* without sadness” who in the year 1640 had met the guru of gurus, a genuine *Murwaḥhid* (unitarian) Kashmiri named Mullā Shah. The prince was an ardent practitioner of Sufism and had written several books on the subject, but after encountering the Hindu guru he wished to meet sages of all religions and to learn more in their sacred scriptures about becoming one with God

³ Max Müller, *ibid.*, lviii-liv.

⁴ Wilkins, Charles. *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreesbna and Arjoon* (London: C. Nourse, 1785. Reprint, London: Ganesha, 2001).

⁵ The entire preface is translated in E. Göbel-Gross, *Sirr-i Akbar. Die persische Upaniṣadenübersetzung des Mogulprinzen Dārā Šukoh* (Marburg: Erich Mauersberger, 1962), 13-18.

(*tauḥīd*) through extinction of I-ness (*fanā*). Aware that Allah had been a bit opaque in his communications with prophet Muhammad and convinced that God is his own best commentator, the Prince set out to study God's other revelations such as the book of Moses, the Gospels, and the psalms of David. But they appeared to him equally if not more enigmatic, and this finally led him to the secret scriptures of the Indians who happened to be his imperial subjects. He knew that they possessed the four Vedas that God had revealed to Indian prophets in the dawn of time and believed that the oldest of these prophets was called Brahma. Since he thought that Brahma was identical with Islam's first prophet, Adam, he regarded the Vedas as the oldest books in the world. The quintessence of these Vedas, so the Prince continued in his preface, is found in the Upaniṣads which are such explicit revelations by God that the strict code of secrecy of their Brahman guardians was quite appropriate. The more Prince Dārā learned about the Upaniṣads from his Indian pandits the more he became convinced that it not only was completely compatible with the Koran but could even serve as its commentary. "The Upaniṣads are even *mentioned* in the Koran," he marveled, "since it speaks of a hidden book which only someone with a pure heart can comprehend." So it came that Prince Dārā, the Sufi in search of unification, gathered some of the most learned Sanskrit scholars of his age and in 1657 produced the first ever translation of fifty Upaniṣads.⁶ The resulting book bore the title *Sirr-i akbar*, "the Great Secret." Two years later the unfortunate crown prince lost the succession battles against his younger brother Aurangzeb and was executed under the pretext of heresy.

An Orientalist's Nightmare

For orientalist who like neat compartments and well-defined East-West avenues, the Persian and Latin translations present quite a problem. Imagine a Mughal prince of Northern India steeped in the Islamic philosophy of Ibn Arabi, a Spanish expert of Greek Neoplatonism who

⁶ For a discussion of who actually translated from the Sanskrit see Mark Dresden, "On the Genesis of Anquetil Duperron's *Oupnek'hat*," in: Ph. Gignoux & A. Tafazzoli, *Mémorial Jean de Menasce* (Louvain: Fondation Culturelle Iranienne, 1974), 35-43.

was one of the seminal thinkers of Sufism. The prince is also intrigued by the illuminationism of Suhrawardi, a Persian mystic who stood with one leg in Greek philosophy and with the other in Sufism and the “oriental wisdom” of Zoroastrian lore. Then he endeavors to widen his horizons and for years surrounds himself with Sufi masters, Hindu yogis, an Armenian Jewish homosexual mystic poet named Sarmad who never wears a thread, a group of Neo-Zoroastrian unitarians, and a long string of Christian missionaries, fakirs, and ascets of all kinds. Instructed by Indian pandits of the highest caliber, his interest in Indian philosophy and religion is then fired up and he commissions translations of various Indian classics including the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* before embarking on the Upaniṣad translation project.⁷ He also authors a book entitled “The Meeting-Place of the Two Oceans” in which he argues that the core teachings of Islam and of Hinduism are identical and that the Indians call Allah by the name of “Oum.”⁸

This Persian translation of fifty Upaniṣads, chock-full not only of Upaniṣadic text but also of Vedantic commentary, Sufi terminology, Yogic instructions and Islamic elements, survives the prince’s execution and 118 years later falls into the hands of an intrepid Frenchman with the flowery name of Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805) who reads Persian and is both an avid Christian and a dogged philologist. He has a pronounced interest in Christian church fathers, ancient theology, neoplatonic philosophy, Hermetism, Zoroastrianism, and generally the religious vestiges of ancient cultures. He believes that our Mughal prince, whose Sufi background he ignored, had translated the ancient Sanskrit Upaniṣads word for word into Persian. Like the prince, Anquetil is convinced that his text is the oldest trace of primeval monotheism; but unlike the prince he does not have any pandits and naked poets at his side.

⁷ For the question of the prince’s collaboration in the translation process see Mark Dresden, “On the Genesis of Anquetil Duperron’s Oupnek’hat,” in: Ph. Gignoux & A. Tafazzoli, *Mémorial Jean de Menasce* (Louvain: Fondation Culturelle Iranienne, 1974), 35–43.

⁸ M. Mahfuz-ul-Haq, *Majma‘-ul-Babrain or The Mingling of the Two Oceans* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1929), 53-54. See also Daryush Shayegan, *Hindouisme et soufisme—Une lecture du confluent des deux océans: le Majma ‘al-Babrayn de Dârâ Shokûb* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).

He first makes a French translation of the Persian text⁹ but then decides that his philological conscience is better served by Latin prose tuned up with Greek particles and Persian words. So he puts away his French draft and a decade of work, and while the French revolution rages he toils for another decade on the Latin translation. Finally, after some more years during which he also reads about German idealist philosophy and writes an essay on Kant and the Upaniṣads, his impatient friends bribe a publisher to make the poor recluse an offer that matches his immense pride and the historic importance of his work.¹⁰ So, in 1801 and 1802, two volumes bulging with commentary, explanatory essays, and notes, finally see the day: an orientalist's nightmare bound in fine leather. This is the *Oupnek'hat* whose first word we will now examine.

Theologia Perennis

Gracing the beginning of the *Oupnek'hat*'s preface, glossary, and translation part,¹¹ the sacred word OUM is always duly distinguished from its profane cousins by capitalization and additional spacing. A modern researcher might explain that this word is the supreme symbol of Hindu spirituality, the manifestation of cosmic power, the supreme mystic spell, etc., but Anquetil was no modern researcher. While in India he had not found an instructor in Sanskrit; but the *Sirr-i Akbar* was written in Persian anyway. With relatively few relevant materials at his disposal Anquetil tried in a courageous solo operation to replicate what Prince Dārā had also laid claim to, namely, the production of a supremely faithful word-for-word translation.

Since the first glossary entry of the *Sirr-i akbar* equated OUM with Allah, the French translator wrote in his Latin *Oupnek'hat* "OUM:

⁹ The complete translation into French is extant in manuscript form at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Nouvelles acquisitions françaises no. 8857).

¹⁰ For biographical details on Anquetil-Duperron see Raymond Schwab, *Vie d'Anquetil Duperron* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1934); Jean-Luc Kieffer, *Anquetil-Duperron : L'Inde en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Belles-Lettres, 1983); and Romain Stroppetti, *Anquetil-Duperron, sa place et son rôle dans la Renaissance orientale* (Lille: Thèse de doctorat, 1986).

¹¹ *Oupnek'hat*, 1: 1, 7, and 15.

Deus,”¹² adding as in the Persian text that this is also called *prāṇa*. Instead of explaining this puzzling OM=God=prāṇa equivalence Anquetil referred to an article that De Guignes had published almost half a century earlier. In that article De Guignes had tried, like La Croze and others before him,¹³ to pull together all available information about Buddhism. Although the contours of the object, the Buddha’s pan-Asian religion, had become gradually clearer in the course of the 18th century, no consensus had yet developed about its name. De Guignes called its representatives the “philosophes nommés samanéens,” i.e., the *śramana* philosophers. But De Guignes and Anquetil were not just concerned about what we today call Buddhism or Hinduism. They had much bigger fish to fry, given that both were trying to unearth the textual remains of a primeval monotheism which they saw as the world’s original religion.

In his preface to volume 1 of the *Oupnek’hat*, Anquetil reports that “in the books of Solomon, the ancient Chinese classics, the sacred Vedas of the Indians, and the Persian *Zend-avesta*” he had found an identical doctrine of a unique creator of the universe;¹⁴ and in the following dissertation he adduces almost a hundred pages worth of witnesses from secular and sacred sources of antiquity designed to support this argument. De Guignes had guessed that the origin of this primeval monotheism was in Egypt and William Jones had opted for Persia; but Anquetil was firmly convinced that its cradle was in India and nowhere else. At the end of his introductory dissertation to the *Oupnek’hat* he even traced its route of dissemination: The “doctrina orientalis” of the heirs of primeval monotheism, the Brahmans who called God in their language by the name of “Oum,”¹⁵ had spread from

¹² *Oupnek’hat*, 1: 7. See the reproduction of this page with Schopenhauer’s notes at the end of this contribution.

¹³ Mathurin Veyssière de la Croze, *Histoire du Christianisme des Indes* (The Hague: Vaillant & N. Prevost, 1724).

¹⁴ “Eâdem animi libertate fruens, Libros Salomonis, antiquos Sinarum Kims, sacros Indorum *Beids*, Persarum *Zend-avesta* perlegas, idem dogma, unicum Universitatis parentem, unicum principium spirituale invenies, in illis clarè et pellucidè” [...]. *Oupnek’hat*, 1: viij.

¹⁵ “Nomen Dei semper (ὄει) in ore Brahmanum, et *propriâ linguâ*, ἰδίᾳ φωνῆι, id est, samskreticè pronunciatum, est *Oum*.” *Oupnek’hat*, 1: cv.

India via Persia to the Mediterranean and thus to the Egyptians, Jews, and the philosophers of Greece and Rome.¹⁶

But this primeval religion was also disseminated north- and eastward from its Indian homeland, and this is where Buddhism comes into play. Anquetil held that the doctrine of the four Vedas and of the Upaniṣads is identical to the Buddhist *dharmā* transmitted by Shakyamuni to his disciples which—according to the legendary account of the *42-Chapter Sūtra*¹⁷—had made its way from India to China in the year 65 of the common era.¹⁸ In this light, De Guignes' explanation which Anquetil refers to at the beginning of the Sanskrit glossary may be a bit less confusing:

Phutta or Foto [chin., Buddha] signifies Mercur and shows great similarity to the Phta of the Egyptians, which is one of the names of Thot or Mercur, the inventor of the sciences. Similarly, Amida, of which Fo said that he was older than himself, shows some similarity with the eternal God of the Egyptians named Emeth, Emeph or Kneph. For the Indians Om signifies the highest, eternal, and indestructible being. Thus the exclamation that is so often repeated: Omi-to-fo, i.e., O Fo who emanates from Omo. If one links the two Egyptian words Emethplita one arrives at the same idea, namely: O Phta who emanates from Emeth.¹⁹

For De Guignes and Anquetil, “OM” was the Indian name of primeval humanity's God. God had revealed himself as Omi-to (Amida), the

¹⁶ “Quae hūc usquē à diversis auctoribus allata sunt loca, fidem faciunt dogmata Indica, sub nomine *doctrinae orientalis*, ex Indis ad Persas, è Persis ad Graecos et Romanos permeasse.” *Oupnek'bat*, 1: cviiij-cix.

¹⁷ This Chinese Buddhist scripture was first translated into a European language by Joseph de Guignes in vol. 2 of his *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres tartares occidentaux, & c. avant Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent* (Paris: Desaint & Saillant, 1756-1758), 227-233.

¹⁸ “Hinc liquet doctrinam librorum apud Indos singulari reverentiā asservatorum, quatuor *Beid* et *Oupnek'bat*, eandem esse quam discipulis suis, annis ante Christum natum 1027, tradidit *Xaca* vel *Xé*, *Xekia*, qui videtur esse *Keschn* [...] cujus secundum nomen in libro *Mahabarat*, *Bazdiw*, erit Indorum *Boudha*, vel *Bouda*.” *Oupnek'bat*, 1: 42, note 1. See also note 19 below.

¹⁹ C. L. J. de Guignes, “Recherches sur les Philosophes appelés Samanéens,” *Mémoires de Littérature tirés des Registres des l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions & Belles Lettres* 26 (1759), 776.

“teacher” of Buddha whose doctrine of OM was disseminated all over Asia. The well-known formula of Amida veneration, Omi-to-fo, consequently was regarded as an expression of primeval monotheism, the religion of OM. In this paragraph De Guignes thus drew a giant monotheistic arc from Greece and Egypt to India, China, and Japan: whatever their gods were called, they all were somehow linked to OM. That Anquetil saw things in like manner is shown in his footnote to the word OUM at the beginning of his first translated Upaniṣad:

Oum, or *Omitto*, whom Fo [ch. Buddha], a thousand years before Christ, named as his Master who is greater than himself, and through whose invocation the greatest sins are expunged.²⁰

As mentioned before, Prince Dārā had furthermore stated that OM signifies *prāṇa*.²¹ In a note about this term Anquetil again clearly linked the teaching of Fo or Buddha to the Vedas:

Here it is apparent that the teaching of the books which the Indians had preserved with such singular reverence, the four Vedas and the Upaniṣads, is one and the same with that which *Xaca* or *Xé* or *Xekia*, born in the year 1027 B.C., transmitted to his disciples.²²

If for Anquetil the teaching of the Buddha and that of the Upaniṣads appeared to be identical: what teaching did he think of? Of the religion of OM, of course: primeval monotheism. This monotheism not only extends to the most remote past but also has a well-known modern goal. Anquetil explained:

The term *Oum*, the Word of God, the Creator in charge, refers to God himself, the Creator; all-encompassing, [He is the] lord of all things, old and new. The Word of God, as the primary cause of everything and apparent from eternity, is with God himself. [...] These special letters [OUM] which express His essence refer to the Word of God, and if one

²⁰ *Oupnek'hat*, 1: 15, note 2.

²¹ *Oupnek'hat*, 2: 730.

²² *Oupnek'hat*, 1: 42, note 1. As the Latin text quoted in note 15 indicates, Anquetil held that Shakya corresponds to Vishnu (misprinted as *Keschn* instead of *Beschn*) whose second name in the *Mahabharata* is said to be *Buddha*.

considers this with attention it becomes clear that what is thus named [OUM] in the ancient Indian books does not differ from the Word or Logos of God of the sublime Evangelist (John I, 1-3).²³

Anquetil thus in essence held that the core teachings of the Upaniṣads, of Shakyamuni, and of the Gospel of John are identical. But why just the Gospel of John and not the entire New Testament? Because Anquetil was not after popular Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. For him and also for Prince Dārā, the Upaniṣads are the most ancient representative of the “secret” tradition, of a *theologia perennis* or *prisca theologia* reserved for the select few; which is why their translations are entitled *Sirr-i akbar* (The great secret) and *Oupnek’bat* (Secretum tegendum; i.e., the secret to be guarded in silence). We now see two ends of this eternal esoteric theology: the Upaniṣads at the beginning, and the Gospel of John at the end. But where exactly does Buddhism fit in? And did Anquetil have a *particular kind* of Buddhism in mind?

The Exoteric and the Esoteric

Contrary to the views of numerous researchers,²⁴ Buddhism was not “created” by Western orientalist from the 1820s when they finally began to read Sanskrit texts and agreed on the word “Buddhism” and its cognates. Named and delimited in a variety of ways, the phenomenon was already well-known in the preceding centuries.²⁵ In 1787 for example, one

²³ “Nomen *Oum*, Verbum Dei, Creator ei praefectus, Deus ipse est, Creator; cuncta comprehendens, omnis rei dominus, antiquum et novum. *Verbum Dei*, ut primaria, universalis rerum causa, ostensum ab aeterno, cūm Deus ipse sit ... *Verbum Dei* specialibus istis characteribus, qui essentiam ejus expriment, exponunt, in antiquis Indorum libris designatum, à *VERBO* (λογῶν) Dei, de quo sublimè Evangelista (JOANN. I, 1-3), re attentè consideratà, in se non differre deprehendetur.” *Oupnek’bat*, 2: 730-731.

²⁴ Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11, and Roger-Pol Droit, *Le culte du néant. Les philosophes et le Bouddha* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 36. Similarly also Bernard Faure, *Bouddhismes, philosophies et religions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 17; Frédéric Lenoir, *La rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l’Occident* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 90; etc.

²⁵ See Urs App, “The Tibet of the Philosophers,” in: Monica Esposito, *Images*

year after Anquetil-Duperron published a first sample of four Upaniṣads in French, the German Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) wrote that the “Religion des Schaka” was likely to be the largest religion on earth. Dominant in Tibet, Mongolia, and Manchuria, it also extended far south:

Also toward the South this religion is widespread; the names Sommona-Kodom, Schakscha-Tuba, Sangol-Muni, Schigemuni, Buddo, Fo, Schekia are all one with Schaka; thus this sacred monastic tradition [...] is found in Hindustan, Ceylon, Siam, Pegu, Tonkin and up to China, Korea, and Japan.²⁶

But Buddhism had vanished in India almost a millennium earlier—so why did Herder mention Hindustan among the countries where Buddhism “reigned”? The answer is given a few pages later in his famous *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Humanity*. Its chapter on India begins with a sentence that has so far eluded specialists: “Even though the teaching of the Brahmans is nothing but a branch of the widespread religion that, from Tibet to Japan, has formed sects or governments [...]”²⁷ It is clear that for Herder Hinduism was simply a branch of the pan-Asian religion of Schaka. In each country this religion had taken somewhat different forms, but the indophile Herder liked its brahmanic branch best:

of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient (forthcoming).

²⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. by Wolfgang Pross (München / Wien: Carl Hanser, 2002). Werke III/1: 407.

²⁷ “Obgleich die Lehre der Bramanen nichts als ein Zweig der weitverbreiteten Religion ist, die von Tibet bis Japan Sekten oder Regierungen gebildet hat; so verdient sie doch an ihrem Geburtsort besondere Betrachtung, da sie an ihm die sonderbarste und vielleicht dauerndste Regierung der Welt gebildet hat” (Herder, *op. cit.*, 411). The generally excellent annotation by Wolfgang Pross is silent on this crucial point, and the author of the only monograph on the subject—to which Pross defers in such matters—got it completely wrong since he thought that Herder’s “Buddhism” and “Hinduism” correspond to the Buddhism and Hinduism that we know today: “When Herder expresses himself about the mythology and religion of the Indians we do not get anything to hear about Buddhism. Rather, the subject is then Hinduism.” Jürgen Faust, *Mythologien und Religionen des Ostens bei Johann Gottfried von Herder* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1977), 152.

In contrast with all the sects of Fo [chin., Buddha] which dominate the Eastern world of Asia, this one is the blossom; [it is] more learned, more humane, more useful, more noble than all the bonzes, lamas, and talapoins.²⁸

Once we get used to the idea that before the 19th century the boundaries of Buddhism were rather different from those we know today and that some famous people regarded it as a branch of ancient monotheism, the views of early researchers of Asian religions appear slightly less confusing. But how were the well-known differences among Asian religions accounted for? There was a variety of opinions about this, ranging from the spread of Egyptian cults to the practices of the offspring of fornicating angels or the character of Noah's sons. However, a great many European sources of the 17th and 18th centuries attempted to explain such differences on the basis of an Oriental story about the death of the Buddha. Here is my translation of Grosier's version of 1787:

When he had attained the age of 79 years he felt by the weakening of his forces that his borrowed divinity would not prevent his having to pay tribute to nature like other men. He did not want to leave his disciples without revealing the secret to them along with all hidden profundities of his doctrine. Having gathered them he declared that until this moment he had always believed that he should only make use of parables in his discourses; that for forty years he had hidden the truth under figurative and metaphorical expressions; and that on the verge of disappearing to their gaze he wanted to finally manifest his real feelings and reveal to them the mystery of his wisdom. You must realize, he said to them, that there is no other principle of all things than emptiness and nothingness; it is from nothingness that everything arose, and it is to nothingness that everything must return; this is where all our hopes end up.²⁹

According to Grosier these words were at the origin of the three major sects of Asia:

²⁸ "Gegen alle Sekten des Fo, die Asiens östliche Welt einnehmen, ist diese die Blüte; gelehrter, menschlicher, nützlicher, edler, als alle Bonzen, Lamen und Talapoinen." Herder, *op. cit.*, 415.

²⁹ Jean-Baptiste Alexandre Grosier, *Description générale de la Chine* (Paris: Moutard, 1787), vol. 2: 205-206.

The last words of the dying *Fo* elicited much confusion and divisions among his disciples. Some held on to his first doctrine; others adopted the second and formed a sect of atheists. A third group wanted to reconcile the two and gave rise to the famous distinction between an exterior and an interior teaching.³⁰

Like countless others, from Jesuit missionaries to Pierre Bayle, Grosier regarded the interior or esoteric teaching of the Buddha as an absurd and nihilistic atheism.

Nothingness is the principle and end of all that exists; from nothingness our first parents arose, and to nothingness they returned after their death. All things differ from each other only through their form and their qualities. From the same metal one can fashion a man, a lion, or some other animal; and if one melts them they again lose their particular shapes and qualities and form a single identical *substance*. The same holds true for all animate and inanimate beings; however varied they may seem by virtue of their shapes and qualities, they are in fact one and the same thing, and they are the outcome of the same principle which is nothingness.³¹

But a small group of researchers held a completely opposite opinion of this interior or esoteric doctrine. Some of them were, as one would expect, admirers of Spinoza, others freemasons, and again others pantheists who liked to pen their motto “Hen kai pan” [One and All] in each other’s guestbooks. However, they included also more or less orthodox Christians such as De Guignes and Anquetil. For De Guignes this esoteric doctrine was what set the *Samanéens* apart from the idolatrous masses. The *Samanéens* had realized that one cannot positively describe the supreme eternal being, the origin of everything, and they had regarded exterior worship as futile since idols cannot represent the formless One. In the article quoted by Anquetil, de Guignes explained:

Just for this reason one finds with the Samanéen, who is ever dedicated to meditation, no trace of exterior worship; however, that does not mean that he is atheist. He simply is intent on eradicating all his passions in order to prepare himself for reunion with his divinity. Therefore the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 207-208.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 208-209.

principles of the Samanéens, emptiness and nothingness, do not signify the destruction of the soul but only that we have to annihilate all our senses and ourselves in order to merge in a certain way wholly into the bosom of the divinity which has drawn all things out of nothing and itself forms no part of matter.³²

For De Guignes, the esoteric Buddhists were thus the genuine kind. They had understood the meaning of the founder's deathbed confession, and like Christian mystics inspired by Neoplatonism they stressed the necessity of a negative, apophatic expression of the divine. They were thus seen as part of a brotherhood spanning many cultures, the heirs of primeval monotheism and champions of perennial theology. Anquetil's essays and notes in the *Oupnek'hat* make it absolutely clear that he saw this perennial theology as the heart and soul both of the Upanishads and of Buddhism's "inner teaching." Amida as the master of Buddha was of course right in the middle of it. But when and how did the Europeans discover this esoteric teaching of Asia? To find out we must leave the *Oupnek'hat* and travel back in time.

The Zen of Amida

Our first stop is Abbé Banier (1673-1741), one of Anquetil's predecessors at the Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in the first half of the 18th century. In his magnificent illustrated tomes on the ceremonies and customs of all peoples he pulled together plenty of information about Amida. *Amida* or *Omyto*, he explains in the Japan part of volume 6, "is the god who cares about the souls, preserves them, and saves them from the punishment that they merit for their sins." People invoke him by saying *Namanda* which is said to signify "blissful Amida, save us."³³ Banier insists

³² C. L. J. de Guignes, "Recherches sur les Philosophes appelés Samanéens." German translation in "Untersuchungen über die Samanäischen Philosophen." *Magazin für die Philosophie und ihre Geschichte* 3 (1780): 86.

³³ Antoine Banier und Jean Baptiste Le Mascrier, *Histoire générale des cérémonies, moeurs, et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Paris: Rollin fils, 1741), vol. 6: 17.

that Amida is “indeed what most directly designates the Supreme Being”³⁴ and goes on to explain:

A proof that Amida is the Supreme Being can be drawn from the description which the believers provide of this divinity. It is, they say, an invisible substance, formless, necessary, separate from all elements, [a substance] which existed before nature and is the source of all that is good. It has no beginning and no end; it has created the universe, it is immense and infinite.³⁵

This is quite an extraordinary description of Amida as creator God. It is exactly the kind of statement which could form the basis for identifying OM with Deus and Amida. Luckily, Abbé Banier indicated his source: Athanasius Kircher’s *China Illustrata*. Additionally, he explained that Kircher “speaks of Amida by the name of *Fombum*.”³⁶

Our second stop is therefore Kircher’s *China Illustrata*, published in 1667. Like the *Oupnek’hat* this beautiful book is a very expensive object of desire for bibliophiles. It is the second book by Kircher containing explanations about Japanese religions and their supposed Egyptian origin. Already Kircher’s magnificent three-volume *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* of the early 1650s featured among its amazing etchings an image of “Amida Numen Iaponiorum”.



Fig. 1: Amida in Athanasius Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, vol. 1 (1652), p. 404.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Banier, *op. cit.*, vol. 6: 18. Kircher had already included much of this information in the first volume of his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus, hoc est universalis hieroglyphicae veterum doctrinae temporum iniuria abolitae instauratio* (Roma: Vitalis Mascardi, 1652), 404 ff.

In Kircher's more famous *China Illustrata* a more European-looking variation of this Amida is depicted next to a three-faced Dainichi statue,³⁷ thus uniting two "gods" that had first been described by the Jesuit Japan missionaries of the mid-16th century.³⁸ In *China Illustrata*'s chapter on "Parallels between Chinese, Japanese, and Tartar Idolatry" Kircher explains that the Japanese borrowed their idolatry from China and mentions two major kinds of religion in Japan: people who *do not* believe in a yonder, and people who *do*.

There are many sects in Japan which have been, and still are, different from each other, but these can be reduced to two main ones. The first denies that there is any other life than that which we perceive with our senses and that there is any reward for good works or punishment for crimes which we do in this world except those we get while we live on the earth. Persons who profess this view are called Xenxus.³⁹

In Kircher's eyes the non-believers in a life after death thus belong to the Zen tradition. The believers in a yonder, on the other hand, are members of a variety of sects:

The first of these is called Xedoxius [Jōdo-shū, Pure Land Buddhism] after a man who is the subject of many silly stories and lies. He was said to

³⁷ Kircher, Athanasius. *China monumentis, qua sacris qua profanis, nec non variis naturae et artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata* (Amsterdam: Jacob Meurs, 1667), 144.

³⁸ On the beginning of this mission see Urs App, "St. Francis Xavier's Discovery of Japanese Buddhism. Part 1: Before the Arrival in Japan, 1547-1549," *Eastern Buddhist* 30, no. 1 (1997): 53-78; Part 2: "From Kagoshima to Yamaguchi, 1549-1551" *Eastern Buddhist* 30, no. 2 (1997): 214-44; and Part 3: "From Yamaguchi to India, 1551-1552." *Eastern Buddhist* 31, no. 1 (1998): 40-71.

³⁹ Athanasius Kircher, *China Illustrata with Sacred and Secular Monuments, Various Spectacles of Nature and Art and Other Memorabilia*, tr. by Charles van Tuyl (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University, 1987), 131. Kircher here cites his fellow Jesuit, the missionary Luis Gusman. "Xenxus" is a Portuguese-style transliteration of *Zenshū* 禪宗 (Zen sect). Kircher quoted Gusman's original text in Spanish (p. 139 of the Latin edition): "Aunque las sectas de *Japon* son muchas, y muy diferentes, pueden se reducir à dos principios universales. El primero es, de los, que niegan aver otra vida, mas de las que perciben por los sentidos exteriores, ni premio, ni castigo por las buenas o malas obras. Los que professan esta secta, se llaman *Xenxus*."

be a son of the king of the East who had two sons. His wife died, and he did so much penance for her and for those who adored her, so that to be saved one has only to say “Namu Amida Buth,” that is, “Blessed Amida, save us!” Their superstition is so great that they say these words with great tenderness and devotion, one time for every bead in their rosaries.”⁴⁰

This description of Amida shows no similarity to Banier’s creator God. But Kircher goes on to explain that there are different ways of understanding Amida:

The rustic people understand Amida in a gross and material way. They think that he is the most beautiful human they could imagine. The teachers and the wise people understand his beauty as spiritual and in a mysterious way, as did the ancient Egyptians.⁴¹

Here, of course, Kircher relies again on the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion. If the Pure Land believers have a gross and exoteric conception of Amida, the “Honbun” adepts of the Zen tradition are in a position to appreciate Amida’s esoteric secrets:

The sect called Hombum [*honbun*] of Jenxii [*Zen-shū*] feels quite differently about Amida than does that of the Xodoji [*Jōdo-shū*], as we have already said. They say that he is an invisible substance, separate from any element, existing before anything else, and the source of everything good.⁴²

⁴⁰ Kircher, *op. cit.* (tr. van Tuyl), 131. Kircher quoted Gusman’s original text in Spanish (p. 139 of the Latin edition): “La prima destas se llama de los *Xedoxius*, que quiere dezir, hombres del qual cuentan mil patrannas y mentiras, que fue hyo de un Rey de *Levante*, y tuvo dos hys, y que muerta su muger, hizo por ella, y por todos los, que le adorassen, grande penitencia, de manera, que por salvar se no tuviessen necesidad mas que repetir estas palabras: *Namu, Amdia* [sic], *Buth*, que quieren dezir, *Bienaventurado Amida salva nos*: yași las dizen con grande efficacia y devotion, passando las cuenta de sus rosarios, que por estotraen siempre en los manos.”

⁴¹ Kircher, *op. cit.* (tr. van Tuyl), 133. Kircher’s original Latin reads (p. 142): “*Amidam* enim, quem rudes praeter multa figmenta, eximium hominem fuisse asserunt, Doctiores fabulas de eo vulgò creditas, exemplo *Aegyptiorum* ad mysticos sensus detorquent.”

⁴² Kircher, *op. cit.* (tr. van Tuyl), 132. Kircher’s original Latin reads (p. 141): “Hanc sectam *Jenxiorum Fombum* nominant, quae longè aliter de hac *Amida* sentit, quàm *Xodoxiorum* secta, de qua paulò ante: dicunt enim esse invisibilem

Honbun

Kircher explicitly identifies this “Fombum” or “Hombum” (*honbun* 本分) with Amida.⁴³ Just as Sicilian farmers may conceive God in a gross and material way compared to the theologians of the Vatican, the Japanese also had primitive as well as sophisticated conceptions of Amida. Relying on Luis Frois, Kircher apportions the sophisticated theologians of Japan to the Zen sect and lets Frois explain:

They say that Fombum has always existed and that he will have no end. He was created for himself alone. His being fills the earth and sky and he occupies everything physical to show his immensity in the infinity of his essence. They assure us that he doesn’t work hard to govern his creatures. Without any difficulty he contains them in his own being. They say that he has no quality or color which can be seen by people. Finally, this Fombum has a thousand rare perfections and is the source of every good thing.⁴⁴

Here we are finally approaching a major root of Anquetil’s view of Amida. It lies in descriptions by early Japan missionaries of Zen doctrine which spread through the entire Western literature, usually under the label of

substantiam, separatam ab omni elementorum compositione, ante omnem creaturam existentem, omnium fontem bonorum.”

⁴³ On p. 132 of van Tuyl’s translation Kircher refers to this figure as “Amida or Fombum.” See also Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* vol. I, 407 where he asserts that “Fombum” is another name of Amida: “Depingunt illi Numen illud suum celebre Amidam, vel alio nomine Fombum.”

⁴⁴ Kircher, *China Illustrata* (tr. van Tuyl), 133. Kircher quotes Luis Frois’ original Portuguese letter (p. 142): “Na primeira questaon propòs que os *Jenxus* tinhaon haver hum ser invisivel separado da natureza dos quatro elementos, à que chamavaon por outro Fonrai Come Mogui, e que os atributtos, que os litrados davaon à este ser invisivel, eraon os seguintes, convem à saber, que antes deste Mundo, ceos e terra serem creados o Fombum semper fora enunca tivera principio, nem havia de ter fim, e que por elle foraon creadas todas as couzas, que seu ser estava dentro na terra e nos ceos, e fora delles, por naon ser limitado à lugar finito que non governo, e conserva ção de todas as couzas, naon padecia movimento algum; nem tinha cor, nem accidente visivel, poronde dos olhos corporais podesse ser visto, que os homês e todas as criaturas tinhaon, havia neste Fombum em mais eminente graon de perfeição, per ser fonte perenne de todo obem.”

“inner” or “esoteric” teaching. Kircher’s “Fombum” (*bonbun* 本分), whose description he picked up from Luis Frois, is a typical Zen term. In the well-known Zen phrase collection *Zenrin kushū* 禪林句集 it is often used, for example, in explanations of set phrases in order to explain the true meaning of a symbolic phrase or, put in another way, the hidden esoteric meaning of a symbolic or allegorical expression. For example, next to the phrase *Myōju ten’ei o zessu* 明珠絕點翳 (“The bright pearl is beyond all cloudiness”)⁴⁵ there is the comment: “This verse uses the bright pearl to illuminate *bonbun* 本分.”⁴⁶ In his recent *Zen Sand* volume, Victor Hori has rendered *bonbun* 本分 as “the Fundamental,”⁴⁷ but in general *bonbun* simply means “what is at stake.” It thus can apply to just about any phrase and is of course frequently used for that which is at stake in Zen, whether one calls this “one’s original face” or “the sound of one hand” or “the great matter” or “nothingness” (*mu* 無) or “bright pearl.”

The earliest trace of *bonbun* in Western sources, to my knowledge, is a manuscript report from the year 1556 (just seven years after the beginning of the Jesuit mission in Japan). This report, entitled *Sumario dos erros*, is the result of the first intensive study of Japanese religion based on the help of knowledgeable Japanese informants. It also contains what may be the nucleus of the story about the Buddha’s change of opinion shortly before his death which gave rise to so much speculation and eventually contributed to the classification of all of Asia’s religions in terms of “outer” and “inner” doctrines. The *Sumario dos erros* was never printed. Nevertheless, as is often the case especially with early reports from the missions, it apparently was well studied. There are several extant copies and translations from the Portuguese original into Italian and Spanish.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Victor Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003), 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ The most complete copy is the third *via* of the Portuguese original (Biblioteca Nazionale Roma [BNR], Fondo Gesuitico 1482, no. 33). Apart from the Italian version which is slightly shorter (BNR, Fondo Gesuitico 1384, no. 7) there are also a Spanish version (Ajuda library, Lisbon, Cod. 49-IV-49, 301v-304) and several fragments (Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu, Rel. doc. dub. 1577-1730). See Léon Bourdon, *La Compagnie de Jésus et le Japon, 1547-1570*

Here I translate from the manuscript of the Biblioteca Nazionale, Fondo Gesuitico 1384, no. 7 which I examined nine years ago in Rome. On its cover there is the following interesting remark in Italian:

I have my doubts if this ought to be printed, even though there is nothing noxious in it, with the exception of the end of the part already pointed out about the soul being mortal.⁴⁹

This is exactly the part which we are interested in; it is the end of what I believe to be the earliest detailed biography of the Buddha⁵⁰ that made its way to the West:

And in the end, after having produced all these scriptures and spent so many years on them, he [Shaka] said that of all that he had written nothing was true, though it was good to have written it as it had served the purpose of drawing people to yet one more book which he wanted to compose. It would be [about] Jondo [淨土] (which is the place of rest) and sungasu (which is the place of torment); he expressly declared that there is nothing other than matter of the four elements. To this he gave the name Fobene, saying that this Fobene neither lives nor dies nor feels, and that it had formed the elements to which he gave the name Genro.⁵¹

(Lisboa / Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian / Centre Culturel Portugais, 1993), 261.

⁴⁹ The cover sheet of BNR, Fondo Gesuitico 1384, no. 7 also indicates content and language (“Japonensium errores partim Hispanicè, partim Italicè”).

⁵⁰ Earlier biographies such as that included in Marco Polo’s account of Ceylon or of the Barlaam and Josaphat corpus lack many of the most distinctive characteristics and events of the Buddha legend.

⁵¹ BNR, Fondo Gesuitico 1384, no. 7: 49v-50r. *Genro* possibly stands for *kenro* 顯露 which signifies “phenomenon” or “outward aspect.” My transcription of the Italian manuscript reads: “Et ultimamente dopo d’hauer fatte queste scritture, e spesi tanti anni in quelle, disse che di quanto hauea lui scritto no n’era niente uero. benche fosse stato bene à scriuerlo per tirar la gente ad intender un altro libro, che di nuouo uoleua comporre; il quale sarebbe Jondo (che è luogo di riposo) et sungasu (che è luogo di tormento) dichiarò particolarmente, che non ui era altro, che la materia de gli quattro elementi; alla quale pose nome Fobene; dicendo che queste Fobene non uiueua ne moriua, ne sentiua, et che questo haueua formati gl’ elementj, ai quali anche pose nome Genro.”

Clearly we have here a fusion (or rather confusion) of *hōben* 方便 (expedient means) and *honbun* 本分. The passage is not entirely clear, except for the last sentence which is exactly the one which prevented publication of the report. It tells us that what the Buddha's teaching is really about is something that neither lives nor dies, something eternal that forms all the elements, and that just this eternal creative substance was the subject of the Buddha's ultimate teaching which superseded earlier expedient doctrines that were lies.

Conclusion

At the outset I pointed out that the *Oupnek'hat* is, among other things, a looking glass into the underground of orientalism. So what did we see? For one thing, we saw that conceptions such as Edward Said's are terribly naïve, limited, and inaccurate. As Anquetil's *Amida* shows, the history of ideas is a very complex field of study in which colonialist motives play but a minor role. Simplistic "West discovers East" narratives collapse as soon as one starts digging, and it becomes clear that instead of grand theories and narratives we need case studies that try not to project the present upon the past⁵² and take complex interchanges and motivations seriously. For example, the entire supposedly *Western* "orientalist" underpinnings of Richard King's reflections on "'Mystic Hinduism', Vedānta and the politics of representation"⁵³ collapse when one realizes that the "discovery of Vedānta as the central theology of Hinduism" was not an ideological innovation by Anquetil-Duperron, as Mr. King argues, but rather a rather faithful reflection of the view of Prince Dārā and his Indian pandits that also found expression in other works such as the *Dabistan*.⁵⁴

⁵² I am thinking, for example, of Edward Said's and his epigones' projection of early modern colonialist motivations on past centuries; Aryan-obsessed authors' backward projection of 20th-century Nazi ideology; and some Buddhologists' projection of their modern conception of Buddhism on the past.

⁵³ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion. Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (London / New York: Routledge, 1999), 118-142.

⁵⁴ David Shea, and Anthony Troyer. *The Dabistán, or, School of Manners* (Paris & London: B. Duprat / Allen and Co.), 1843.

With regard to the history of the West's discovery of Asian religions we saw in a nutshell that 20th-century classifications do not apply and that Japan played a seminal but still little-known role in this discovery. A good example of this influence is Denis Diderot's portrayal of the doctrine of the Indian "Bramines":

They assert that the world is nothing but an illusion, a dream, a magic spell, and that the bodies, in order to be truly existent, have to cease existing in themselves, and to merge into nothingness, which due to its simplicity amounts to the perfection of all beings. They claim that saintliness consists in willing nothing, thinking nothing, feeling nothing ... This state is so much like a dream that a few grains of opium would sanctify a brahmin more surely than all his efforts.⁵⁵

Just as Amida and Zen got into the *Oupnek'hat* via 16th century reports about Japanese Buddhism, the legend of the Buddha's "last teaching," whose first traces in the West stem from Japan, miraculously found its way via Diderot, Hegel and Karl Marx into the minds of hundreds of millions of 20th-century communists. The late pope's vision of Buddhism,⁵⁶ too, reflects views already present in 16th-century Jesuit letters from Japan.

We furthermore noted that the widespread claim that Buddhism was a Western orientalist creation of the early 19th century is a modern fiction that ignores centuries of study and information exchange. Buddhism may have originated in India, but *Japan* is where the West's discovery of non-islamic Asian spirituality really began, where natives were first questioned

⁵⁵ "Ils assurent que le monde n'est qu'une illusion, un songe, un prestige, et que les corps pour exister véritablement doivent cesser d'être eux-mêmes, et se confondre avec le néant, qui par sa simplicité fait la perfection de tous les êtres. Ils font consister la sainteté à ne rien vouloir, à ne rien penser, à ne rien sentir ... Cet état ressemble si fort au sommeil, qu'il paraît que quelques grains d'opium sanctifieraient un bramime bien plus sûrement que tous ses efforts." English translation from Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990), 59-60. Halbfass points out that Diderot depended on Bayle and only added the remark about opium, an idea which was later used by Hegel and made world-famous by Marx.

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 84-90.

in their own tongue, where sects and doctrines were described based on such informers, where religious vocabularies were first explored, where dictionaries were redacted, and where religious texts were studied. This heritage was very much alive not only in the 17th and 18th centuries, as we have seen, but also at the beginning of the 19th century when the first professors of Far Eastern languages at the University of Paris intensively studied materials produced in 16th- and early 17th-century Japan and tried to reconstruct the history of Indian Buddhism based on genealogies cooked up by Zen Buddhists.⁵⁷

And lastly, the infiltration of Amida into the *Oupnek'hat* is a good example of the fruitfulness of misunderstandings and of the need to savor, study, and trace rather than discard them. Just like saints who never existed in the flesh, they can work miracles and dispense great favors. In 1814, for example, young Schopenhauer encountered Amida in the *Oupnek'hat*; he crossed out Prince Dārā's Allah, replaced Anquetil's Deus by "Brahm. Omitto," and (with the help of Amida?) struck a gold mine of inspiration. Decades later he gushed about his favorite book:

Oh, how thoroughly is the mind here washed clean of all early engrafted Jewish superstitions, and of all philosophy that cringes before those superstitions! In the whole world there is no study, except that of the originals, so beneficial and so elevating as that of the *Oupnekhat*. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death!⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, "Sur la succession des trente-trois premiers patriarches." *Mélanges Asiatiques*, vol. 1 (Paris: Dondey-Dupré, 1825), 113-28.

⁵⁸ "Und o, wie wird hier der Geist rein gewaschen von allem ihm früh eingepflichten jüdischen Aberglauben und aller diesem fröhnenden Philosophie! Es ist die belohnendeste und erhebendeste Lektüre, die (den Urtext ausgenommen) auf der Welt möglich ist: sie ist der Trost meines Lebens gewesen und wird der meines Sterbens seyn." Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena II* (Zürich: Diogenes Verlag, 1977), 436 (vol. 2, § 184). English translation by Max Müller, *The Upanishads* 1: lxi.

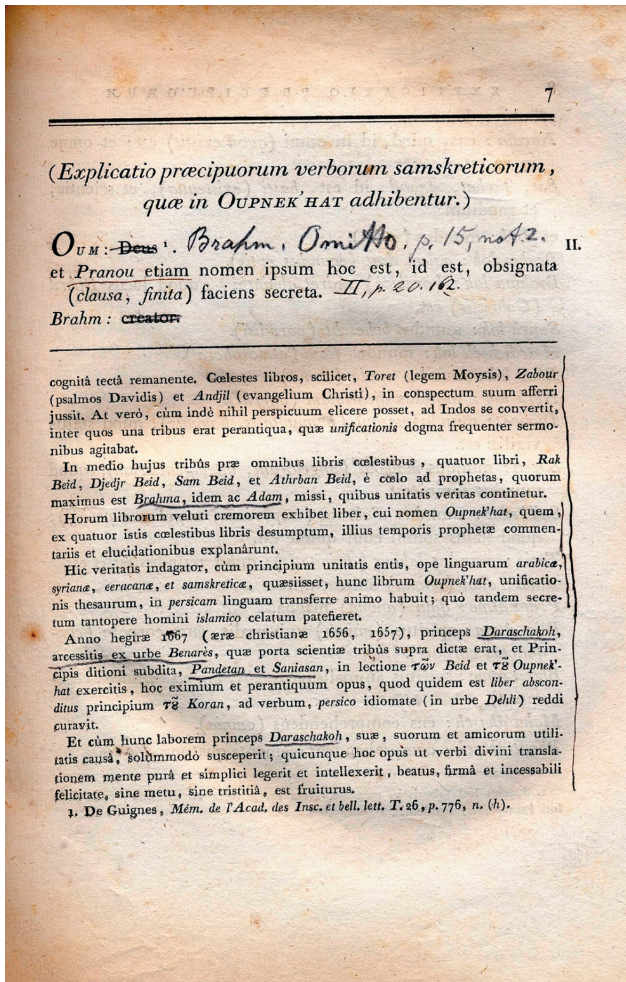


Fig. 2 – Amida (Ommito) in Schopenhauer's copy of Anquetil-Duperron's *Oupnek'hat*⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, *Oupnek'hat (id est, secretum tegendum)* vol. 1, p. 7. Argentorati: Levrault, 1801. Reproduction of this page of Schopenhauer's *Oupnek'hat* copy with his handwritten notes courtesy of the Schopenhauer-Archiv, Library of the University of Frankfurt am Main (director Jochen Stollberg).

