

CULTURAL DIFFUSION AND ALCHEMY

by

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Summary

The spread of alchemy is a most interesting, challenging example of cultural diffusion. The “independent invention” thesis is out of the question in the case of alchemy. The alchemy tradition has been transmitted to the Occident by the Muslim Sufis, and Sufism in its turn has received alchemy mainly from India, but also from Taoism.

WHEN WE speak of alchemy, we speak of an ancient tradition which is much older than our modern, post-“Enlightenment” Western civilization. It is not so easy, and obviously has never been easy anywhere, to find somebody who could say with some degree of definiteness what alchemy is all about (1). Especially here in the West, where we have been indoctrinated for about 200 years with a materialistic, so-called “scientific” world-view or “Weltbild”.

Alchemy present in four great civilizations

This seems rather strange in view of the fact that alchemy has always been present, has been studied and practised, in at least four of our great civilizations: those of China, India, the Muslim world, and of the Occident. These four alchemistical traditions, though distinct, have quite obviously been in contact with one another, and have influenced each other. Their affinities and mutual

interconnections have by necessity to lead us to suspect that we have here a most interesting example of cultural diffusion.

The affinities and mutual interconnections between these four alchemy traditions have, however, as yet not been studied with the necessary thoroughness and competence which they deserve. The only exception so far seems to be Eliade’s *FORGERONS ET ALCHEMISTES* (2).

There are not so many scholars around with the necessary competence. A recently published lexicon of alchemy explains the reason, why it deals only with the alchemical tradition of the Occident, with the statement that “it became clear that it was nearly impossible to find knowledgeable authors, who would have been able to discuss the alchemy of India and China with the same competence” (3).

Role of Chinese Taoist and Tibetan diaspora

It is true: there are indeed such authors, who do possess the necessary competence. But they are very few, and not so easy to locate. One would have to look for them especially in Taiwan and the overseas Chinese communities, but today one might find them almost everywhere. There may be a certain number of them among the learned lamas and yogis of the Tibetan diaspora in western countries. But they might conceivably also be found under the disguise, so to speak, of Taoist yogis and adepts. Also among certain advanced Qi-Gong practitioners in South East Asia (4).

TIBET IS IN this respect an especially interesting case, situated as it has always been between the ancient and great civilizations of China and India. In the course of time it had become a true and most potent melting pot of several traditions: Bön shamanism, Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhism, and Taoism, to name the most important of them.

India: Alchemy, Yoga and Tantrism

Eliade (5) emphasizes the manifold affinities and interconnections between Indian alchemy on the one hand, and Yoga and Tantrism on the other. There were, and probably still are, many yogi-chemists in India, and it was therefore generally understood that the yogic "siddhis" (special "powers" acquired by "Tapas", i.e. austerity practices) were a prerequisite for the attainment of certain higher alchemistical products.

For somebody in India, respectively in India's sphere of influence, it would therefore, because of these affinities and interconnections, always have been rather obvious that alchemy had to do with "mystic", i.e. yogic and tapas practices. In the Occident, where neither yoga nor tantrism

were part of the cultural heritage, and where the Inquisition kept a watchful eye on potential heretics, it was nearly impossible, for centuries, for most people to become initiated into this secret art and science. And even today in the West, indoctrinated as we are with a materialistic, "scientific" world-view, there is still a kind of a problem there.

Alchemy and pantheism

From such observations we can already arrive at a first conclusion, to wit that we have to exclude the Christian civilization of the Occident from the list of possible candidates, where alchemy might have had its origin. The alchemical heritage can only have been "infused" into the Occident from elsewhere. All the more so since alchemy has always been associated with a pantheistic world-view. And pantheism had always been (for some reason only theologians seem to understand) anathema and tabu for the Church.

As a matter of fact, all these four alchemy traditions of which we spoke (China, India, the Muslim world, Occident) have more or less the same, underlying philosophy or "Weltbild": a pantheistic world-view, in which all things in the universe are quasi-"real" or so to speak "dream-like" manifestations of some divine Spirit-Energy-Consciousness-Life.

FOR INDIA AND China this has to be expected, because this is also the underlying philosophy of the higher forms of (Advaita) Hinduism, Mahayana/Vajrayana Buddhism, and Taoism. The same can incidentally be said of the higher forms of shamanism, be it for instance "Toltec" shamanism of Mexico (6), which might conceivably very well have been influenced by Chinese Taoism, or Tibetan Bön, of which Nicolazzi (7) states that its underlying philosophy has always been shamanistic.

Alchemy in pre-Columbian America?

With respect to Mexico we have to state that as yet nothing definite is known today about an alchemy tradition, which might possibly also have been in existence among the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas. The ruthless efficiency, with which the European conquistadores utterly destroyed and annihilated these civilizations, is well known. From the point of view of the history of ideas and the sciences, and of the history of civilization generally, this sad state of affairs is most regrettable.

IN VIEW OF more general diffusionist considerations (8) it seems, however, rather probable that alchemy has also reached the Americas, perhaps even via more than one path. There is an impressive corpus of evidence that certain parts of the Americas may have been heavily influenced, perhaps even colonized for some time, from civilizations in India, China, and Southeast Asia generally.

Notwithstanding the ravages and mass atrocities perpetrated in Mexico, Peru, and other parts of the Americas by the Spanish conquistadores, there exists at least a possibility, perhaps even approaching a small probability, that somewhere in the Americas may still be to find individuals who practise some kind of pre-Columbian alchemy. This would be quite a task for a doctoral dissertation, but the results of such an investigation would be of the greatest interest for the historian of the spread of ideas and certain cultural phenomena.

Alchemy in the Occident "secret" for a twofold reason

For the alchemy traditions of the more western (seen from India) Judaeo-Christian-Islamic regions, where fixed religious dogmas and beliefs and little tolerance for heretics – the exact opposite of the tolerance in China and India – have always been the

norm, the more or less pantheistic world-view of alchemy constituted an ever-present danger for the alchemists. Throughout all of these countries it was rather dangerous when found guilty of harbouring deviating or heretic views about God and theological problems.

Where the Inquisition reigned the risk was very high: one risked to be tortured and burnt at the stake (like e.g., in 1600 AD, Giordano Bruno, who also had a more or less pantheistic philosophy). So alchemy in the Occident became a "hermetic" or "secret" art and science for a twofold reason.

In the first place alchemy, as we have seen above, is a "mystic" endeavour like yoga or tantrism. They are all efforts to attain or realize something, to wit the "awakening from the dream", so to speak, and the realization and manifestation of the "magic" powers inherent in man. All such systems have by necessity to function by the way of a transmission of information from a master to an apprentice or beginner, with only oral transmission for important information. Therefore alchemy, too, had to be considered as a (to a certain extent) "hermetic" or "secret" art.

The famous Chinese alchemist and Taoist Ko Hung (254 – 334 AD) for instance stated that in the field of alchemy, books are only of limited value, more something for a beginner, and that the "secret" remainder can only be transmitted orally (9).

IN THE SECOND place, the alchemists in the Christian Occident had to veil or conceal their knowledge, their world-view, and their whole system because of the Inquisition, as described above.

Arab-Islamic alchemy

Direct neighbour of the Occident was the Arab-Islamic world, and the Mediterranean has always functioned as a turntable for an

intercultural exchange of goods and ideas (10). Now since this civilization also had rigid religious dogmas and was, like the Occident, allergic against heretics and "infidels", it seems at first sight rather unlikely that it should have transmitted the alchemy tradition to the Occident.

BUT LUCKILY the Muslim world has its own and very active mystics, namely the Sufis. It has to be regarded as highly probable that they, and they alone, have organized the transfusion of the alchemical tradition into the Occident. Shah (11) in his excellent book on them shows that they were very active in the field of alchemy.

The Sufis were also often regarded as heretics by the orthodox Muslim Establishment, and they seem to have themselves received transfusions from Taoism (via Inner Asia) and perhaps Bön shamanism, but especially from Advaita-Vedanta Hinduism. "Avalon", the great authority in this field, states that "Sufism is either a form of Vedanta or indebted to it" (12).

This statement means that Sufism had also acquired from India, along with the alchemy tradition, a more or less pantheistic philosophy. Both have then been transmitted together, via already established semi-secret channels, to interested individuals and circles in the Occident.

So far then we seem to have been able to establish, with a high degree of probability, a path of cultural diffusion for the alchemy tradition, from India via the Muslim world and the Sufis, toward the Occident.

Importance of Inner Asia for spread of alchemy

AS MENTIONED above the indebtedness of Sufism towards India may, however, not be

the only path of indebtedness in the case of alchemy. In addition to cultural diffusion from the great Indian subcontinent, we may also have to reckon with a certain indebtedness of Sufism via Inner Asia towards Taoism, and possibly also some other traditions.

Not only Tibet, but the whole Inner Asia along the Silk Road, has been a true melting pot of languages, "races", cultures, and religions, over at least two millennia. The region was relatively cultured, and wealthy, and relatively peaceful for prolonged periods. In other words: there existed the right conditions for cultural exchange on a grand scale. Which did indeed occur. In this Inner Asia the Muslim world had come into direct terrestrial (not only maritime) contact with China, where Taoism was virtually omnipresent.

Taoist alchemy

ACCORDING to Blofeld's excellent monograph on Taoism (13), alchemy played a great role in this tradition. One might even say that alchemy was the Taoist philosophy, art and science par excellence (14). When discussing the Chinese Taoist work about alchemy TSAN TUNG CHI, Blofeld mentions two specific Taoist concepts with respect to the nature of existence, to wit A) the de facto identity of mind and matter, and B) the identical functioning of natural laws on each level of being (15). This is obviously a typically alchemistic "Weltbild".

We have to take it for certain that this Taoist variant of alchemy will also have influenced the alchemical tradition of Sufism. We must also not forget that, in addition, the ayurvedic tradition of India, in which alchemistic preparations played a part, will surely not only have reached Tibet, but also other parts of Inner Asia. The general shamanistic background of these regions has also to be taken into account.

The three "substances"

Under such circumstances it appears virtually obvious that the Sufic alchemy tradition will have probably been an amalgam of ideas and practices from several sources. The main source, directly or indirectly, will have been India, but there will have been Taoist Chinese and possibly also shamanistic influences. In how far Hinduistic-Vedantic and Taoist concepts have influenced each other, and in which direction, respectively if they had a common source, has to this writers knowledge as yet not been studied.

IN THE WEST, the Iberian Peninsula played a special role in the transmission of the alchemistic philosophy from the Muslim world to the Occident. Islamic Spain was then part of a great and impressive Muslim civilization, and many Europeans went there to study at Islamic universities.

Shah (16) mentions that at least since "Geber" alias Jabir Ibn el-Hayyan, Arab-Muslim as well as European alchemy know to concept of the three "substances", of which all in creation is made: "sal" (matter), "sulfur" ("soul", Consciousness), and "mercury" (spirit, Life). Jabir lived and taught in Sevilla, in Moorish Andalusia (17). In view of the doubts surrounding the person and true identity of "Geber" (18), it may be considered legitimate to speculate if he has not perhaps been a native Choresmian. Choresm belonged then to the Muslim world, and at the same time to Inner Asia. The Muslim world during those centuries was one of great geographic mobility. The famous Muslim traveller Ibn-Batuta (b. 1304 in Tangier/Morocco) met a fellow countryman from Ceuta in China, and later a brother of his China acquaintance in Timbaktu (19).

If Jabir should indeed have been a born Choresmian, he might easily have met initiates into Taoist alchemy in the adjoining parts of Inner Asia, like Bucharra or Turkestan. Such Taoist adepts would surely

have known the TSAN TUNG CHI, of which we already spoke above. According to Blofeld (20), the TSAN TUNG CHI describes the three "substances" or "energies" of Taoist alchemy as ching ("essence"), ch'i or Qi ("life force"), and shen ("spiritual energy").

However, as yet it has never reliable been investigated, at least to this writer's knowledge, in how far the three "substances" or "energies" of Taoist alchemy correspond with the three "substances" of the Arabic-Muslim and Western-Occidental alchemy traditions. This may have to do with the problem of the necessary competence, of which we have already spoken.

"Rasayana" influences on Chinese Taoist alchemy?

Such a scholarly comparative investigation would, however, be a prerequisite to any conclusion, in how far the Sufic alchemy tradition might have been influenced by Taoist alchemy. An integral part of such a study would have to be, on the other hand, to find out if possibly "Rasayana", the Indian alchemy tradition, might have influenced Taoist alchemy. Or perhaps vice versa.

THE PRESENT AUTHOR has yet to see a comparative investigation. Strangely enough Eliade, in his remarkable book from which we have already cited, doesn't say anything about the role of three such "substances" in Indian alchemy. And Klossowski de Rola (21) in his book on alchemy has only the following, more general passage:

"In spite of all the evidence, there are still those who deny that connections exist between alchemy and esoteric Eastern doctrines. There has indeed been misuse of the word 'Tantra' in this connection; and it would be misleading to speak of alchemy simply as 'Western Tantrism'. But Indian alchemy (Rasayana) does exist; furthermore, a number of Tibetan Tantric concepts are

closely related to esoteric Taoism, and Taoism in its turn is inseparable from Chinese alchemy. So, although one must proceed with caution, the open-minded will find a certain profit in the study of the analogies between alchemy and the Tantras (both Hindu and Buddhist)".

The three Gunas and the three "substances"

IT IS TRUE, there is a certain triad or trinity in Vedantic-Hinduistic doctrine, which is omnipresent in creation. One might call them modes of energy. These are the three "Gunas": Rajas, Tamas, and Sattva. And it has even been proposed that these three Gunas of Indian philosophy are identical with the three "substances" of Occidental alchemy as understood by Paracelsus (22).

To judge from what the present author knows about Eastern philosophical doctrines, he would rather be inclined to doubt that this identification could possibly be correct. Rajas stands for activity, Tamas for inertia and darkness, and Sattva for spiritual energy, which can reveal the true nature of consciousness. And one might indeed be tempted to identify Rajas with Sulfur, Tamas with Sal, and Sattva with Mercury. But I feel this may only be a quasi-identity or similarity. The same could be said with respect to the three Taoist "substances" ching, ch'i or Qi, and shen. Obviously the matter will need further study.

Provisional conclusions

The present author thinks he has shown, rather convincingly, that the spread of alchemy is indeed a most interesting and challenging example of cultural diffusion on a great scale. And he thinks he has also shown that the "independent invention" thesis is absolutely out of the question in the case of alchemy, because of the mutual affinities of the divers systems. Such complex philosophical-practical systems

simply cannot have developed independently in four civilizations which were in contact (directly, or indirectly via an intermediate culture) with one another.

I think I have also shown that in the Muslim world, the Sufis have been bearers of the alchemy tradition and that they, and they alone, have transmitted the alchemy tradition to the Occident. It may be that some Jewish cabbalists have helped them in this endeavour. But I have yet to see a comprehensive history of Jewish alchemy. Strangely enough in Ariel's monography on Jewish mysticism (23), neither alchemy nor the Sufis are mentioned at all, although the whole book is about "Hermetic" philosophies like pantheism and panentheism, and practices.

WE HAVE ALSO been able in this article to discuss, rather provisionally, the possible relatedness, interconnections and possible paths for such cultural diffusion between India, China, and Sufism. It seems certain that Sufism was on the receiving end of the diffusion of the alchemical "Weltbild". India and Chinese Taoism have been on the giving end. But with respect to the relatedness of Taoism and India we need further study.

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- 3) Claus Priesner & Karin Figala: *ALCHEMIE – LEXIKON EINER HERMETISCHEN WISSENSCHAFT*, Munich, 1998 (p.9).
- 4) Cf. e.g. Wong Kiew Kit: *DIE KUNST DES QI-GONG*, Munich, 1995, passim.
- 5) Eliade: op.cit., chapter "Die indische Alchemie" (pp.152-168).
- 6) Cf. the most enlightening work by Norbert Classen: *DAS WISSEN DER TOLTEKEN*, Frankfurt, 1994.
- 7) Michael Albrecht Nicolazzi: *MÖNCHE, GEISTER UND SCHAMANEN – DIE BÖN-RELIGION TIBETS*, Solothurn/Düsseldorf, 1995 (p.19).
- 8) Cf. e.g. Horst Friedrich: "A Diffusionists View on the Genesis of Civilizations", in: *MIGRATION & DIFFUSION*, Vol.1/No.2, 2000.
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- 11) Idries Shah: *DIE SUFIS*, Köln, 1984 (pp.172-181).
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Zusammenfassung

Die Ausbreitung der Alchemie stellt ein aufschlußreiches und herausforderndes Beispiel für Kulturdiffusionismus dar. Die These einer unabhängigen Erfindung, in vier verschiedenen Hochkulturen, einer so komplizierten Wissenschaft und Kunst, nebst philosophischen Überbau, scheidet im Falle der Alchemie gänzlich aus. Die Alchemie-Tradition wurde durch die Sufis in den Westen gebracht, und der Sufismus seinerseits empfing alles hauptsächlich aus Indien, aber auch vom Taoismus.