

From Religious Civilization to *Nonsense*: The *Kāma Sūtra* between Buddhism and Erotic Grotesque in 1920s Japan

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In the 1920s, the *Kāma Sūtra* and other works of Sanskrit sexual literature were translated into Japanese and their knowledge was spread through publications which bridged Buddhist scholarship with periodicals of the Erotic-Grotesque Nonsense movement (*eroguro nansensu* エログロナンセンス), also incurring censorship. This essay analyzes this reception of ancient Indian knowledge to shed light on the role of Buddhism in informing debates on sexuality and modern civilization in Japan, as well as on the potentially subversive interpretations that religion gained once these ideas circulated through sensational media and subculture. By pointing out the transnational nature of this circulation, the essay also questions the claim of recuperating an ancient “Oriental” tradition of harmonizing nature and religion, often attached to the interpretation of Sanskrit sexual literature in modern colonial contexts.

In a book on India published in 1931, the Buddhist priest Izumi Hōkei 泉芳環 (1884–1947) lamented how his translation of the *Kāma Sūtra* had incurred censorship because of “dishonest merchants” who sold it to a broad, unprepared readership (Izumi 1931, 224–227).¹ Izumi argued that Sanskrit sexual literature must not be seen as promoting unrestrained pleasure, but as part of the original knowledge produced by ancient Indian civilization, which prefigured many of the achievements of modern Western science but subsumed them within a religious purpose (Izumi 1931, 211–214). Contrary to this interpretation, the publishers that helped Izumi spread his scholarship on sexual literature also appropriated these ideas for their own interests, specifically to challenge mainstream sexual morality. How did the *Kāma Sūtra* circulate between Buddhist scholarship and subversive publications?

Izumi’s efforts to publish a Japanese translation of the *Kāma Sūtra* must be understood within the modern Japanese Buddhist exploration of India in both textual and geographical sense. The intellectual construction of modern Buddhism in Japan was not simply the product of the encounter with Western ideas, but also reflected exchanges with intellectuals and religious reformers from South Asia (Jaffe 2019, Ogawara 2010). Izumi was one of those young Buddhists from temple families that were sent to Europe by their sects to study Sanskrit and Pāli. The knowledge of Indic sources was meant to respond to Western

1 For an analysis of Izumi’s scholarship on the *Kāma Sūtra*, see also Kanazawa 2005 and Nishimura 2021, 95–101.

criticism of East Asian Buddhism and retrieve a connection between the Chinese canonical tradition and its Indian sources. Many of these young Japanese also went on pilgrimages to the Buddhist sites of India, and established collaborations with local intellectuals and religious leaders.

Izumi studied Indology at Oxford (1918–1920), where his mentor, Arthur MacDonnell (1854–1930), encouraged his interest in Sanskrit literature beyond the Buddhist canon. This informed Izumi's approach to Indology, as he conceived early Buddhism within an idea of ancient Indian civilization where the higher purpose of religious liberation inspired a broad and deep exploration of nature and the human body. According to this view, ancient Indian knowledge not only anticipated many of the accomplishments of modern science, but it also provided an alternative model to the separation between science and religion which informed modernity in Western civilization (Izumi 1931, 211–214). It is within this perspective that Izumi stressed the value of spreading ancient Indian knowledge of sexuality.

Izumi published the first Japanese translation of the *Kāma Sūtra* from Sanskrit in 1923, then in 1926 published anonymously the translation of another classic of Sanskrit sexual literature, the *Ratirahasya*, and in 1928 a commentary on *kāma* literature (Indo gakkai 1923, Indo bungaku kenkyūkai 1926, Izumi 1928). The publication history was not easy: the translation of the *Kāma Sūtra* narrowly escaped censorship due to the confusion of the Great Kantō Earthquake, but it later got a seal of disapproval by the Home Ministry (Dankitō henshūbu 1931). The translation of the *Ratirahasya*, a sexual manual which also discusses methods of contraception, was published anonymously. Izumi's commentary on sexual literature was not published with the Indological association, but with the research group Bungei shiryō 文藝資料 as part of a book series on *hentai* 変態 literature (literature on abnormal sexuality). While Izumi was worried about the commercial use of such texts, he also used the same *eroguro* magazines to publish his commentary, as well as six articles on Buddhism and Indian literature. These articles shed light on Izumi's conception of Indian civilization, and on the ambiguous ways he dealt with the potentially subversive use of Indian sexology in modern society.

The articles appeared between 1926 and 1928 in two *eroguro* magazines: *Bungei shijō* 文藝市場 and *Hentai shiryō* 變態資料. Both magazines were edited by Umehara Hokumei 梅原北明 (1901–1946), one of the leaders of the movement, and often published from Shanghai to avoid censorship. They translated erotic literature, often criticized state control, censorship, bodily punishments, and the repression of sexual life by traditional religious institutions. In his articles, Izumi treated sex in an ambiguous way: at times stressing its importance in social relations and positive treatment in ancient Indian civilization and religion, and at times arguing for the importance of controlling sexual habits, in accordance with Meiji morality.

This can be seen as Izumi's effort to control the Sanskrit sexual knowledge he had spread, being aware of the potential dangers of its appropriation by a broad readership. For example, he tried to prevent the use of *Ratirahasya* for contraception, stating that the advanced medical knowledge contained in it was meant to prevent the spread of diseases through hygiene (Izumi 1927c), and stressing that the ultimate purpose of sex for ancient India was reproduction, not pleasure (Izumi 1927b). In another article in which he described conceptualizations of sex in Buddhist scriptures (Izumi 1927a), Izumi seems open to a more liberal view, stating that sexual abstinence is not necessarily a foundation in Buddhism and giving canonical examples where even lustful women reached enlightenment. However, he condemns

the excesses of tantric sexual practices. In my interpretation, Izumi showed the breadth of knowledge of the Brahmanical caste in ancient India in order to argue for the importance of religion beyond the borders imposed by modern secularism, and to assert the social role of the modern heirs of this ancient knowledge: Japanese Buddhist priests.

However, the authors of the *eroguro* magazines did not necessarily follow Izumi's views on the restraining value of Sanskrit sexual literature. One of them, Sakai Kiyoshi 酒井潔 (1895–1952) published a series of articles on “the sex manuals of the Ancient East” (Sakai 1926–1927), in which he complained that Izumi's *Kāma Sūtra* had left untranslated the most interesting sections: those on sexual intercourse and esoteric erotic practices. Sakai defended the value of reading the whole *Kāma Sūtra*, and solved the problem for the *eroguro* readers by translating those sections from the French edition. However, this does not mean that the editors of the *eroguro* magazines always redeployed ancient India to support progressive views: for example, Sakai used the model of refined women in Sanskrit literature to criticize the blurring of gender roles in the Modern Girl (*modan gāru* モダンガール) movement, which was spreading at that time and challenged the “Good wife and wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母) ideal (Sakai 1926, part 3, 16–23). Ancient Indian civilization provided thus a cultural repertoire to pursue different and contrasting agendas concerning state and religious control over sexual life and gender roles.

The reception of Indology within the *eroguro* movement shows how the intellectual construction of modern Buddhism provided ideas to rethink society. However, religious elites did not have control over these ideas, especially when they circulated within subcultural movements and mass publications. While Izumi envisioned the use of Sanskrit sexual literature as a way to educate modern readers to the value of religious control over all aspects of life, including sex and gender roles, the *eroguro* authors appropriated the *Kāma Sūtra* to celebrate their love of life and criticize censorship and state control. This echoes Elizabeth Tinsley's analysis of the modern use of Buddhist images of decaying corpses (*kusōzu* 九相図) in the same *eroguro* context: rather than being used for the monastic practice of meditating over the impermanence of the body, the *kusōzu* in *eroguro* subculture became a tool to subvert imposed morality (Tinsley 2017).



Figure 1. Seal of the *Kāmasūtra* カーマシヤストラ series in the magazine *Bungei Shijō* 文藝市場, 1927–28.

Tinsley's considerations on the non-natural and non-traditional recuperation of *kusōzu* practice in modern *eroguro* also applies to the case of *kāma* literature. While Izumi claimed the authority of tradition in his view of the ancient Indian knowledge opposed to the materialism of modern Western science, the reception of Sanskrit sexual literature in Japan was part of a transnational circulation of ideas, where both European and Asian intellectuals redeployed ancient texts to rethink modernity. For example, a series of *Bungei Shijō* took inspiration for its title *Kāma Shiyasutora* カーマシヤストラ not only from the Sanskrit genre of scholarship on *kāma* (Figure 1), but also from the "Society of Kama Shastra" founded by Sir Richard Burton (1821–1890), the first translator of the *Kāma Sūtra* into English (1883). While Burton spread an orientalist image of the association between religion and sexuality in Asia, he also built on that to criticize the sexual repression of Victorian society, in a similar way in which the *eroguro* interpretation of Sanskrit sexual literature had a subversive function against Meiji morality. In addition, we find the same stress on the scientific value of the *Kāma Sūtra* expressed by Izumi in the translation published in 1921 by the Indian journalist Rangaswami Iyengar (1877–1934) (Hardgrove 2009), whom Izumi met during his stay in India. Placing the modern Japanese reception of Sanskrit sexual literature in both a transnational context and one in which Buddhist scholarship encountered subversive cultural movements reveals not only the active role of religious ideas in modern Japan, but also their complex and often contrasting interpretations to redefine modernity itself. It also allows us to avoid essentialized and orientalist narratives on the recuperation of traditions, which were instead reinvented in the encounter of ideas coming from both Asia and Europe and in response to the challenges of modernity.

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