BETWEEN TWO MYSTICAL TRADITIONS: A COMPARATIVE SURVEY OF TURKISH ISLAM AND SHINGON BUDDHISM

İKİ MİSTİK GELENEK ARASINDA: TÜRK İSLAMI İLE ŞİNGON BUDİZMİ ÜZERİNE BİR DERLEME

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a comparative examination of Turkish Islam, shaped through the secular reforms of the early Republican era, and the esoteric Shingon Buddhism rooted in tantric principles in Japan. It analyzes both traditions-across belief systems, ritual practices, metaphysical orientations, mystical experiences, symbolism, and social roles-within their historical and cultural contexts. Turkish Islam, following the abolition of the caliphate and the institutionalization of religion under the Directorate of Religious Affairs, took on a more normative and state-regulated form. In contrast, Shingon Buddhism preserved its ritual distinctiveness within temple-centered autonomous structures. Theologically, Turkish Islam emphasizes transcendence and revelation, whereas Shingon Buddhism privileges the intuitive and immanent realization of universal truth. Despite doctrinal and institutional differences, both traditions share mystical practices aimed at individual transformation and spiritual maturation. This study contends that religious experience, though culturally and historically situated, reveals a universal foundation in the quest for transcendence and meaning.

Keywords: Shingon Buddhism, Mysticism, Ritual, Secularization, Belief Systems.

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, erken Cumhuriyet döneminin seküler reformlarıyla şekillenen Türk İslam anlayışı ile tantrik temellere dayanan ezoterik bir gelenek olan Japon Şingon Budizmi'ni karşılaştırmalı bir perspektifle ele almaktadır. Her iki dini gelenek; inanç sistemleri, ritüel pratikler, metafizik yaklaşımlar, mistik deneyimler, sembolizm ve toplumsal roller açısından tarihsel ve kültürel bağlamları içinde incelenmiştir. Türk İslamı, hilafetin kaldırılması ve dinin Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı aracılığıyla kurumsallaştırılmasıyla birlikte daha normatif ve devlet denetimli bir yapıya bürünürken; Şingon Budizmi, tapınak merkezli özerk yapılar içinde ritüel özgünlüğünü korumuştur. Teolojik olarak Türk İslamı aşkınlık ve vahiy merkezli bir anlayışa dayanırken, Şingon Budizmi evrensel hakikatin sezgisel ve içkin olarak kavranmasını esas alır. Doktriner ve kurumsal farklılıklara rağmen, her iki gelenekte de mistik pratikler bireysel dönüşüm ve ruhsal olgunlaşmayı amaçlayan ortak yapılar ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, dini deneyimin kültürel ve tarihsel koşullara bağlı olarak farklı biçimlerde şekillense de, aşkınlık ve anlam arayışı bakımından evrensel bir ortak zemine sahip olduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Şingon Budizmi, Mistisizm, Ritüel, Sekülerleşme, İnanç Sistemleri.

1. Introduction

Following the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, Turkey experienced a fundamental transformation in relations between religion and the state (Eser, 2013). Theocratic legacies of the Ottoman Empire were replaced by a nation-state model founded upon secularism. Islamic practices were substantially removed from the public sphere and relegated to the realm of private belief. In 1924, the caliphate was abolished; in 1925, the tekkes and zawiyas were closed; and in 1928, constitutional reference to a state religion was eliminated. These reforms dismantled Islamic institutional structures and centralized religious administration under the newly established Directorate of Religious Affairs (Kara, 2003; Ocak, 1996). Consequently, religion became both a tool and an object constrained by modernization and nation-building agendas.

After World War II, Japan embarked on efforts to build a nation-state, culminating in the adoption of the Japanese Constitution in 1947 (Kadıoğlu, 2022). From this period onward, religion in Japan -particularly traditions such as Shintoism and Buddhism- was restructured in more flexible forms as part of the modernization process (Karataş, 2013). Shingon Buddhism (Shingon Buddhism, Shingon shū), founded in the 9th century by Kūkai (also known as Kōbō Daishi), constitutes a Japanese adaptation of Esoteric (Vajrayana) Buddhism originating from China (Onat, 2023). Shingon doctrine targets the practitioner's internal enlightenment through tantric practices including mantra, mudra, and mandala (Abé, 1999; Giebel ve Todaro, 2004). In this respect, Shingon is not merely doctrinal but inherently ritualistic and symbolic (Matsunaga ve Pruden, 1969).

Although bilateral relations between Turkey and Japan can be considered relatively recent (Kadıoğlu, 2024), there are also significant differences between the religious traditions of the two countries. These two mystical traditions differ significantly in their historical contexts, relationships to the state, mystical orientation, and metaphysical frameworks. During the Republican era, Turkish Islam assumed a more normative, state-controlled character (Akduman ve Arı, 2024), whereas Shingon Buddhism retained a ritual-based and esoteric orientation within both popular religiosity and monastic settings in Japan (Şenavcu, 2016).

This article compares Turkish Islam and Shingon Buddhism across belief systems, ritual practices, metaphysical orientations, mystical traditions, symbolism, and social functions. It examines how religious experience is shaped by cultural and historical forms, and analyzes the relationship between religious thought and modernity.

Belief Structures: Transcendence and Immanence

Within Turkish Islam, core faith elements derive from the Qur'an and Hadith: belief in God, angels, holy scriptures, prophets, the Day of Judgment, and divine predestination- traditionally referred to as the "six articles of faith" (Terzioğlu, 2012). Central to this structure is *tawḥīd* (the oneness of God) (Orman, 2012). God is conceived as the omnipotent, omniscient creator, and human existence is understood in terms of submission (*'ubūdiyyah*) to divine will (Kara, 2003). A clear ontological distinction is maintained between God and creation. Human access to the divine is possible only through obedience to revelation.

Conversely, Shingon Buddhism venerates Mahāvairocana (in Japanese, Dainichi Nyorai) as the absolute cosmic truth and ultimate reality (Proffitt, 2022). According to the *hongaku* doctrine, every being inherently possesses the potential for enlightenment, as the cosmos itself is regarded as a manifestation (ḍharmakāya) of ultimate truth- a perspective

encapsulated in the doctrine of "immediate buddhahood" (*sokushin jōbutsu*) (Abé, 1999; Giebel ve Todaro, 2004). Unlike the transcendental monotheism of Islam, Shingon emphasizes immanence and a universal, cosmic sacrality.

In both systems, fidelity to sacred texts is essential: the Qur'an and Sunnah in Islam, and the Mahāvairocana-sūtra and various tantric texts in Shingon (Giebel ve Todaro, 2004). However, while Islamic attachment fosters legal and normative structures, Shingon loyalty to scriptures serves to align the individual with the mystical cosmos.

Ritual Practices: Forms and Meanings of Worship

Islamic ritual life is structured around the Five Pillars: prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving, and the testimony of faith. These practices are fundamental points of submission to God. Congregational worship -particularly Friday prayers and festival ceremonies- embeds religion within collective life, while personal devotions such as *dhikr* (remembrance) and *du'ā'* (supplication) reinforce individual spirituality. In Sufi traditions, practices such as liturgical remembrance, ritual dance (*sama'*), and spiritual bonding (*rabita*) impart depth to devotional acts (Öner ve Erol, 2025).

Shingon ritual is framed within the doctrine of the *three mysteries* (*sanmitsu*): *mudra*, *mantra*, and *mandala* (Gardiner, 2018). These ritual components are used to harmonize body and mind with the cosmic Buddha. Rituals often occur before sacred images of Buddhas, united with elaborate hand gestures and repeated recitations, aiming to enact "berthed buddhahood in body"- *sokushin jōbutsu* (Winfield, 2019; Yamasaki, 1988; Giebel ve Todaro, 2004).

Although both traditions emphasize rituals as a means of internal transformation, they diverge significantly in structure, form, language, ritual tools, and underlying doctrines. Islamic worship is oriented around divine command and compliance, whereas Shingon rituals emphasize symbolic engagement with universal truth.

Conceptions of Truth: Between Revelation and Intuition

In Islamic metaphysics, knowledge is primarily attained through revelation (*wahy*) and reason (*ʿaql*). Revelation refers to the divine message communicated by God to humanity through prophets, while reason functions as a complementary tool that facilitates the correct understanding of this message. On an epistemological level, revelation is regarded as the bearer of absolute and immutable truth, and thus occupies the highest position in the hierarchy of knowledge. Reason serves as an instrument for comprehending, interpreting, and actualizing this revealed truth. Within this framework, truth is transmitted from an external, transcendent source -namely, God- to the human being, whose epistemological duty is to approach this truth through obedience and submission (Nasr, 2001).

In contrast, Shingon Buddhism bases its epistemology on intuition, direct experience, and esoteric knowledge (*mikkyō*). Truth is perceived intuitively through the symbolic manifestations of *Mahāvairocana*, understood as a universal and immanent consciousness. Knowledge, in this context, emerges through *prajñā* -a direct and intuitive form of cognition- unfolded via ritual practice and meditative experience. Symbolic instruments such as *mandalas*, *mantras*, and *mudras* function as epistemological tools aimed at awakening the dormant wisdom within the practitioner. Rather than being externally revealed, knowledge is seen as inherently present within the individual and made manifest through mystical exercises

(Giebel ve Todaro, 2004). Accordingly, Shingon epistemology emphasizes symbolic intuition over rational deliberation.

In Islamic thought, the human being is described as the *khalīfa* (vicegerent) of God on Earth and is thus endowed with a distinctive existential status. The human is created as a moral and rational agent, equipped with free will and responsibility. Human nature (*fiṭra*) is considered innately inclined toward God, yet maintaining this orientation requires faith, worship, and ethical action. Salvation is achieved not through self-realization, but through submission to divine will and adherence to divine commandments. Therefore, Islamic anthropology is structured around the concepts of obedience, moral accountability, and free will.

In Shingon Buddhism, the human being is regarded as a manifestation of cosmic truth and thus ontologically possesses a sacred nature. Every individual inherently contains the wisdom and compassion of *Mahāvairocana*. In this worldview, there is no vertical hierarchy between human and cosmos; rather, a horizontal identification prevails. Enlightenment is not the result of submitting to an external authority but of realizing one's inner nature and actualizing this immanent truth. Shingon anthropology, therefore, centers on concepts such as the true self, immanence, and the potential for innate enlightenment (Yamasaki, 1988).

Mystical Paths: In Search of Inner Transformation

Although the Sufi tradition was officially banned during the secularization process in the Republican era of Turkey, orders such as the Mevlevi, Naqshbandi, and Bektashi continued to exist among the populace as cultural identities (Kaygusuz, 2019). In these traditions, the relationship between the spiritual guide (murshid) and the disciple (murid) constitutes the foundational framework, and practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *sema* (whirling ceremony), and *khalwa* (spiritual retreat) aim to facilitate the individual's closeness to the Divine. In the Sufi understanding, the ultimate goal is the annihilation of the ego in the presence of divine truth (*fana fi'llah*), thereby achieving a form of spiritual union with God (Trimingham, 1999; Algar, 1992).

In contrast, mystical practices in Shingon Buddhism are carried out within a structured and hierarchical educational process, typically within monastic settings. Based on the teachings of the monk Kūkai, practitioners undergo intense ritual training involving *ajikan* meditation, fire rituals (*goma*), sutra recitation, and mantra practice (Snodgrass, 1987). Esoteric knowledge is transmitted directly through a spiritual teacher (guru), forming the basis of mystical understanding (Yamasaki, 1988). These mystical experiences occur in highly ritualized contexts where mental and bodily transformation are experienced simultaneously.

Both traditions place significant emphasis on transcendent experience. However, whereas Islamic mysticism manifests as an inward journey based on love, surrender, and moral purification, mystical experience in Shingon Buddhism is realized through the integration of body and mind and the symbolic density of ritual practice.

Symbols: The Visual and Narrative Language of Religion

In Turkish-Islamic culture, symbols play a crucial role in representing sacred texts and in constructing collective religious consciousness. The crescent moon (*hilal*), for instance, is

widely regarded as a symbol of the cosmic cycle and the oneness of God within the Islamic world. Minarets signify the spatial relationship between the divine call to prayer and the earthly realm. Arabic calligraphy is not merely an aesthetic expression but also functions as a theological medium. Particularly, the calligraphic panels found in monuments such as Hagia Sophia, Süleymaniye, and Selimiye mosques convey symbolic power through non-figurative representations of sacred names like Allah (الله), Muhammad (محمد), and the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs (Necipoğlu, 2005).

By contrast, in Shingon Buddhism, symbolism is largely constructed through cosmic diagrams and esoteric figures. One of the most prominent symbolic forms is the mandala, which represents the structure of the universe in symmetrical design. The *Garbhadhātu* (womb realm) and *Vajradhātu* (diamond realm) mandalas, for instance, symbolize compassion and wisdom respectively, with *Mahāvairocana* (Jp. *Dainichi Nyorai*) positioned at their center (Abé, 1999; Yamasaki, 1988). In addition to mandalas, *bīja* (seed syllables), tantric scripts, and ritual implements such as the *vajra* (diamond scepter) are also regarded as symbols of enlightened power (Gablankowska-Kukucz, 2015). The ritual repetition of these symbols contributes to processes of mental purification and mystical integration (Giebel ve Todaro, 2004; Sanford, 1997).

Social Roles: Religion, Authority, and Institutionalization

Following the proclamation of the Republic, the relationship between religion and the state in Turkey was fundamentally restructured. In this context, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) was established in 1924 (Toprak, 2017). Through this institution, imams, muftis, and preachers were granted civil servant status, thereby institutionalizing Islam under state control (Kara, 2003). In 1925, Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) and shrines (*zawiyas*) were closed, and religious education was limited exclusively to state-supervised *imam-hatip* schools (Dokuyan, 2021). These reforms led to a model in which Islam was represented within a centralized, state-oriented framework at both the individual and societal levels (Özdalga, 1996).

In Japan, by contrast, Shingon Buddhism has maintained its presence through temple-centered civil structures rather than integration with state institutions. Buddhist monks do not hold official positions within the state bureaucracy; instead, they operate in monasteries such as Kōyasan and Daigoji, where they provide ritual and social services (Nicoloff, 2007). These monks engage directly with the public through funeral rites, seasonal festivals, and spiritual counseling (Faure, 1996). The relationship between religion and state in Japan is characterized by a more flexible model, in which religious figures are perceived as integral components of cultural life. Shingon monks do not constitute a privileged clerical class; however, their ritual authority is widely respected by the general populace (Reader ve Tanabe, 1998).

Common Ground: Converging Spiritual Experiences

Despite substantial formal and doctrinal differences between Islamic Sufism and Shingon Buddhism, certain structural similarities in mystical practice can be observed. In both traditions, spiritual authority plays a central role. In the Islamic tradition, this role is fulfilled by scholars, *shaykhs*, and spiritual guides (*murshids*), while in Shingon Buddhism, it is

assumed by monks and initiated teachers (*gurus*). Communal rituals that intensify individual experience within a collective framework are important in both systems of belief. In Islam, *dhikr* gatherings and collective *sema* ceremonies, and in Shingon, *mantra* rituals and fire ceremonies (*goma*), create experiential spaces that transcend ordinary states of consciousness. Both traditions employ repetition (*dhikr/mantra*) as a method of mental purification and disciplined spiritual focus (Nasr, 2001; Yamasaki, 1988).

Moreover, *sema* in Sufism, characterized by bodily movement and music leading to ecstatic states, finds a functional parallel in Shingon's fire rituals (*goma*) and *mudra* practices. These rituals are not merely symbolic but are intended to facilitate the participant's inner transformation. In both traditions, overcoming worldly suffering is framed as a process of inner transformation and spiritual maturation.

Key Differences: Belief, Ritual, and Worldview

While functional parallels exist, the ontological and theological foundations of these mystical traditions differ markedly. The Turkish-Islamic tradition is based on a strict monotheistic worldview. Within the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, God is defined as a transcendent, absolute, and creator being entirely distinct from creation. This transcendence shapes the orientation of worship and the consciousness of servanthood. In contrast, Shingon Buddhism sees the universe as a manifestation of *Mahāvairocana*, the cosmic Buddha, who embodies a sacred immanence in all things. Rather than positing a transcendent God, Shingon promotes a view of universal consciousness that manifests throughout all existence (Abé, 1999).

Forms of worship also differ in line with these metaphysical foundations. In Islam, acts of worship are structured around time, physical purification, and orientation toward the *qibla*; ritual integrity is grounded in the Qur'an and *sunna*. By contrast, Shingon Buddhist worship involves a multilayered ritual structure composed of symbolic visual forms (*mandala*), sonic vibrations (*mantra*), and bodily gestures (*mudra*), aiming to align the practitioner with cosmic truth on both mental and physical levels.

There are also significant institutional differences. In Turkey, especially since the establishment of the Republic, the religious sphere has been placed under direct state control. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) functions as the central institutional authority governing the public expression of Islam. This structure determines the status of religious personnel and organizes spaces of worship (Toprak, 2017; Kara, 2003). In contrast, Shingon Buddhism in Japan has maintained an autonomous, temple-based organization. Monks are not civil servants; rather, they are responsible for the cultural, ritual, and financial administration of their own temples (Reader ve Tanabe, 1998). In Japanese society, religious figures are generally regarded as cultural guides and ritual facilitators rather than state-appointed officials.

CONCLUSION

Although Turkish Islam and Japanese Shingon Buddhism are rooted in divergent historical, cultural, and theological contexts, they exhibit specific parallels in mystical practices and the pursuit of inner spiritual transformation. In the Turkish-Islamic context, especially after the foundation of the Republic, secularization policies brought religious institutions under centralized state control, and Islamic rituals were shaped within normative

frameworks. In contrast, Shingon Buddhism in Japan retained its ritualistic and symbolic character despite modernization, sustaining an autonomous structure centered on personal enlightenment and immanent sacredness.

In terms of belief systems, Turkish Islamic thought is grounded in a notion of a transcendent God, whereas Shingon Buddhism presents a model of immanent sacredness and universal consciousness. In Islam, worship revolves around obedience to and servitude before God, while Shingon rituals consist of symbolic and esoteric practices aimed at unifying the individual with cosmic truth. Accordingly, the purpose of ritual in Islam is to attain divine favor, whereas in Shingon Buddhism it is to achieve enlightenment and resonance with universal consciousness.

Metaphysically and epistemologically, the two traditions occupy opposite poles. Islam promotes an external, revelation-based conception of truth, while Shingon Buddhism privileges intuition and inner knowledge. Anthropologically, Islam views the human being as God's vicegerent on Earth, endowed with responsibility, whereas Shingon regards the human as a manifestation of universal truth.

Historically, the exchange of ideas between Islamic and Buddhist traditions was facilitated by the Silk Road, which served as a vital conduit for intercultural and religious transmission. In particular, Sufism had been prominent in what is today known as Xi'an (formerly Chang'an), and played a significant role in the fusion of ideas that influenced the development of Shingon Buddhism. The multicultural environment of Chang'an enabled intellectual encounters and spiritual cross-fertilization between Buddhist and Muslim thinkers. This historical interplay underscores the importance of transregional interaction in shaping mystical traditions across Eurasia.

Within the context of mystical traditions, both belief systems emphasize spiritual maturation and liberation from worldly constraints. However, their means of achieving these goals, the concepts they deploy, their ritual instruments, and institutional structures differ significantly. In Turkey, mystical traditions have been subsumed under state supervision, while in Japan, they have been preserved within autonomous, monastery-centered frameworks.

In sum, despite being grounded in fundamentally different ontological and epistemological assumptions, both Turkish Islam and Shingon Buddhism conceptualize the human relationship with the sacred through ritual experiences and symbolic engagement. This comparative perspective underscores how religious thought and practice can take diverse forms depending on historical and social contexts, revealing the multifaceted nature of religious modernity.

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