Iyaric as a Western Cultural Matrix for the Translation of Sanskrit

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Abstract

In this paper, the liturgical jargon of Rastafarianism, known as Iyaric, is proposed as a source of new lexical items to aid the translation of Sanskrit religious terms in popular English usage into a natively intelligible English vocabulary. It is suggested that Iyaric offers a set of unique words that are able, etymologically and theologically, to effectively capture the essential meaning of such terms as nirvana, samsara, jiva, and atman not as they are used by specialists or academics, but as they are presently being employed by large numbers of Westerners. As the current use of these Sanskrit words in Western dialogue on spiritual issues—a dialogue that has become highly dependent on adopted (and transformed) Dharmic concepts and terms—lends itself to false equivocations with Western religious vocabulary and subtle distortions of meaning arising from the alienation engendered by the foreign cultural context of Sanskrit, the use of Iyaric as an indigenous Western cultural matrix for translation offers the opportunity to provide Western readers not only with a more emotionally powerful rendering of Sanskrit religious thought, but with a more intellectually faithful one as well.

Keywords: Sanskrit, English, translation, Buddhism, Hinduism, Rastafarianism, Iyaric, Dharmic religion, West, nirvana, samsara, jiva, atman

The academic study of the Dharmic religions has, over the course of the last 150 years, brought a large number of Sanskrit terms into the religious lexicon of Western languages. Imported words like *samsara*, *nirvana*, *jiva*, and *atman* have become absolutely indispensable for carrying on intelligent and accurate discourse on these topics. The borrowings were felt necessary because the scholars who initially brought the treasures of Sanskrit literature to a Western readership did not find sufficiently analogous terms in the Western languages. At the time that the work began in earnest, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were in fact none. What has gone unnoticed by the scholarly

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community at large, however, is that, at least in English, an indigenous Western vocabulary for these concepts has been emerging since the 1930s outside the standard language in the form of Iyaric.

Nor has it developed a moment too soon. The advantage of the retention of the original Sanskrit terms for scholars is obvious; they maintain the highly technical meanings of the Buddhist and Hindu authors and avoid distortion of both cultural and linguistic translation. The fact is, however, that there is a growing population of people in the West who are using these terms outside the context of scholarship. Converts to Buddhism, Hare Krishnas, Theosophists, Wiccans, practitioners of so-called "New Age" spirituality, and an uncountable number of sympathizers and fellow travelers with all of these movements are carrying on a lively discourse within the West in which these terms are being used devotionally. What is more, this discourse is often dissociated completely from original Sanskrit texts; increasingly, it is a discourse generated by Westerners in texts in Western languages (especially English), in which the technical definitions of the terms in Sanskrit are of secondary importance to expressing an emergent Western vision of the same concepts.

Among this population, the Sanskrit terminology often confuses more than it clarifies. Coming from entirely outside the linguistic and cultural context of this new great conversation's participants, the terms have to be rigorously defined and redefined and individuals have to be trained to use them. To the uninitiated, the terms are entirely meaningless. Within this process there is tremendous potential for misinterpretation and for those newly learning the vocabulary to attempt matches with what they believe to be cognates from standard English. In this way, for example, *nirvana* frequently becomes, in popular usage, a kind of Buddhist heaven that has no true parallel in actual Buddhist thought and is certainly closer to the idea of a Buddha realm than of *nirvana*. If not this, then it is often taken to be a kind of complete metaphysical extinguishment that is dependent on the dualistic thinking of Neoplatonism and is inconceivable from the standpoint of Mahayana or other major forms of Buddhism.

At present, when translations of the terminology are attempted, the result is often ungainly phrases and exceptionally subtle distinctions that are easily lost. *Jiva*, for example, is often rendered as "ego" or as "self". Both are functional enough renderings, but both have serious disadvantages. "Ego", of course, already has very technical definitions in Freudian psychology; it implies a separation from "id" that confuses the concept of *jiva* as well as implying, as

a corollary, that *atman* could be identified with "superego", which would be to lose the entire metaphysical import of systems like Advaita Vedanta. In colloquial usage "self" tends to be conceived as somewhat foundational or intrinsic, and thus seems to belie the notion of superficiality and ultimate falsity that is inherent to the concept of *jiva*. The correction to this is often to term the *atman* "true self" or "Self" with a capital "S". The distinction is subtle and easily missed, besides tending toward a certain kind solipsism in keeping with the colloquial understanding of the word as intimately tied to the Enlightenment concept of the "individual" as an utterly distinct and self-subsistent entity, where in fact the whole point of *atman* is the realization that no such entity exists.

What is needed, then, is a unique, indigenous Western vocabulary in which these concepts can be rendered—one that will make them more immediately accessible in the cultural and linguistic context of the West and avoid the tendency to leap to false identifications. This is exactly what Iyaric provides.

Iyaric is the liturgical jargon of Rastafarianism, a sect of Christianity that developed in Jamaica in the 1930s around the belief that the then-Emperor of Ethiopia, Hailie Selassie I (known before his coronation as Ras Tafari), was the Second Coming of Christ. As Rastafarian theology developed, it became necessary for adherents of the movement to make certain subtle distinctions not normally made in English but evident throughout Sanskrit religious terminology, and there developed organically among speakers of Jamaican English and Jamaican Patois a new set of terms to express the concepts and sentiments of their rapidly evolving understanding of God in His relationship to man. Besides the wholly new vocabulary introduced, Rastafarians also reappropriated and repopularized great quantities of Jewish terminology and symbolic tradition, owing to the close links between Ethiopian Orthodoxy and the Solomonic tradition. Thus Iyaric, rather than becoming merely provincial to the Rastafarian movement, successfully related itself to the fundamental religious concepts of the Abrahamic faiths and made itself intelligible far outside its native Jamaican context.

Returning to the first example taken above—of the difficulty of rendering or preventing misinterpretation of *nirvana*—Iyaric offers a ready solution by the use of the term "Zion", which was originally the name of a fortress outside Jerusalem that came to refer symbolically in Jewish literature to the whole environment of the city, and which Rastafarians first repurposed to refer to Ethiopia, then to Africa as a whole, and finally to the condition of spiritual

rectitude and atonement with God. Etymologically, *nirvana* means "blown out"; it is associated in Buddhist literature with the stillness of the mind after the extinguishing of the fires of desire, aversion, and delusion made so famous by the Buddha's Fire Sermon. In a state of *nirvana*, having attained this stillness, it is said that one is no longer "coming" or "going".[1] Similarly, the Jewish heritage on which Rastafarianism draws looks to an end of exilic wandering, prefigured by the arrival of the Israelites in the promised land after forty years of wandering in Sinai. To return to Zion, in the Holy Land, is thus precisely to achieve stillness—never again to come or to go. This essential aspect of the term, rooted in Biblical stories and motifs that are commonplace in the Western world, is immediately intelligible to Western audiences in the word "Zion" in a way that it cannot be in *nirvana*.

This translation also preemptively counters the tendency of Westerners, whose religious experience usually consists entirely of a relatively superficial Christianity, to identify *nirvana* with heaven. *Nirvana*, unlike popular concepts of heaven, is attained in life because it is fundamentally a radical alteration of consciousness.[2] Likewise, the return to Zion is always depicted as an act of the living. This stems logically from the metaphor employed, but also emerges naturally from the common Rastafarian use of the term to refer to the condition of peace and liberation achieved by the practice of Rastafari. It is here that the use of the term "Zion" catches also the associations between *nirvana* and its near synonym *moksha*, commonly rendered as "liberation". The specific associations of Zion with release from captivity and the return to the central point where the ultimate reality dwells (the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple) matches very well with the *brahma-nirvana* of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Naturally, then, "Babylon" presents itself as the cognate translation of *samsara*. *Samsara* literally means "she flows into herself" and is rendered in Tibetan by the term *'khor ba*, meaning "continuous flow". Both reference the notion of flowing or wandering through various states of existence in the ever-changing, ever created and destroyed world through repeated incarnations. The analogy with the "River of Babylon", on the shores of which the exiled Israelites refused to sing, is obvious. In accord with popular usage of *samsara*, "Babylon" is used by Rastafarians to refer to the "worldly" order in opposition to the

1 *Majjhima Nikaya* 2-Att. 4.68; Thomas Byrom, *The Heart of Awareness: A Translation of the Ashtavakra Gita* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1990), 8.

2 Peter Harvey, "Consciousness mysticism in the discourses of the Buddha" in Karel Werner, *The Yogi and the Mystic: Studies in Indian and Comparative Mysticism* (Routledge, 1995), 82.

spiritual reality of Jah (God). The usage is strengthened by their particular identification, stemming from the history of Black slavery in Jamaica, with the Israelites who were “carried… away captive” (Psalm 137:3) to Babylon. In more technical usage, Rastafarians consider any corruption of the Word of God or any lie or perversion of truth about the nature of Jah as “Babylon”, mirroring closely the ideas of confusion and deception carried by the related Sanskrit term *maya*—the delusion by which we come to perceive the samsaric world of flux as real.

The power of translating the terms into Iyaric may be seen by a demonstration. It is a common Mahayana teaching, often repeated in the West, that “*samsara* is *nirvana*”. Stated in Sanskrit, however, the term becomes an item from a phrasebook to be memorized. The listener simply accepts it as an abstract doctrine of a foreign school and the force of the jarring identification of two seemingly viscerally opposed concepts, about which the Sanskrit listener has strong feelings, is lost entirely. The gut-punching and even somewhat offensive (to the uninitiated) impact of the assertion comes to the English listener only when rendered in Iyaric: “Babylon is Zion”. In this form alone does the Wester-educated anglophone truly comprehend that what the Mahayana teachers propose is not merely the discovery that one element of the formula is unreal compared to the other, but rather the identification of that which is held to be most profane with that which is held to be most sacred, and by that identification the total transcendence of all human ideas about what is and is not of God.

Turning to our next example, of the difficulty of adequately distinguishing *jiva* and *atman* in English, we must dive deeper into exclusively Iyaric vocabulary. Rastafarianism, without having any apparently direct line of descent, is Christendom's sole organized heir to the monistic and semi-monistic conceptions of many medieval Catholic mystics. The fourteenth century German preacher, Meister Eckhart, was tried (though later acquitted) for heresy in part for statements like, “The eye with which I see God is the eye with which God sees me.” While this metaphysical identification of creature and creator, realized by “giv[ing] birth to the Christ within”, was highly suspicious to John XXII, a Rastafarian would have no difficulty in affirming the statement, perhaps with a slight play of homophones (a particular delight of Iyaric speakers) and the usual Iyaric substitution of “I” for “me” (“The I with which I see God is the I with which God sees I.”).

The centrality of the first person singular pronoun to Rastafarian thought

cannot be overemphasized. Rastafarians invariably pronounce the ordinal numeral of Hailie Selassie I as the pronoun in order to make clear that Selassie, as the Second Coming, was absolutely identical in a trinitarian sense with Jah (and, in this connection, they make much of the fact that the name Hailie Selassie is Ge'ez for "the power of the Trinity"). However, the phrase "you and I" and the word "we" are both also commonly replaced with "I and I", extending this identification beyond Selassie into an absolute identity of all people in and with Jah, a belief standing also behind the use of the term "idren" to refer to one's co-religionists and peers. "Unity" is transformed into "inity" in the same spirit, eliminating the sound of the rejected second person and making clear that all true unity occurs in the one true perceiving subject. In this sense, Shankara's *brahman* could easily be translated by "Jah", with the consequent benefit of avoiding the confusion common among many Westerners between *brahman* and the deity Brahma. The radical denial of objects in deference to the ultimate reality of the perceiving subject that lies at the core of Advaita Vedanta and related schools is repeated in Iyaric (a name that was, itself, formed by replacing the first two letters of the name of the Ethiopian liturgical language Amharic with the pronoun "I") on the microcosmic level by the elimination of the object pronoun "me" and its replacement with the subject pronoun "I".

It is in keeping with this integrated restructuring of the language that Iyaric has developed a resource for distinguishing clearly what, in standard English, we bumblingly have to render as the distinction between the "self" and the "true Self". Iyaric would translate *jiva*—the limited, false self associated with particular memories, occupations, preferences, and other such objects—by the simple standard noun "man". This usage draws on the Hebrew Bible's use of *Adam*, the word for earth or ground, for the first man in order to indicate the otherness of man from God, in a way that is perfectly in accord with the conception of the *jiva* as the socially-constructed man who is but a false front on the natural man, who is an integral part of God's creation and design. The word "man", thus connected with the Hebrew *adam*, also implies the inanimacy of man outside of God's action, which a thinker like Shankara might describe as his lack of self-subsistence. In both ways, a "man" as we usually consider him is an object to God's ultimate subjectivity.

When, however, a mere "man", by dedication to attaining "iya" (an adaptation of English "higher") understanding (or, as Iyaric renders it to emphasize the aspect of higher knowledge, "overstanding"), comes to realize

that he and Jah are I and I, he realizes his “I man”—that is to say, the part of man that is non-different from Jah, the great I AM (see Exodus 3:14), and in this non-difference is itself the only and ultimate subject. Thus we have in plain English a term that conveys, with the immediacy that only plain English can to English speakers, the essential content of the term *atman*, which refers to that reality of man that is non-different from the absolute reality of *brahman*, and which is realized when one has withdrawn the mind from the illusory characteristics of *jiva*, just as, in Rastafarian thought, one must turn aside from the things that are earthly (or adamic) in order to see clearly the heavenly reality of all Being, including one's own.

Of course, none of these terms are adequately exact from the standpoint of the sanskritist or the specialist in Dharmic religions, but it is not for these that the use of new terminology is proposed. Rather, we are concerned here with improving the ability of Westerners to adequately grasp and communicate Dharmic concepts within their own cultural and linguistic framework. To this end, it is worth mentioning another Iyaric term that, while translating no Sanskrit word directly, is of tremendous use in drawing distinction between Dharmic and Western concepts.

It is entirely appropriate to ascribe the epithet “the Creator” to Brahma, as his function is ultimately subsidiary (not to say demiurgical) in the order of existence. When going behind him to understand the existence of the universe in *brahman*, however, the word “creator” becomes radically inappropriate. At worst, it carries the connotation of superficial readings of the creation of Genesis or the work of the deists' watchmaker, wherein the god in question remains absolutely distinct from all other things. At best, it associates *brahman* with Platonic forms in some kind of process of emanation, carrying over the Platonic idea of hierarchies of being and the despising of the lower orders that does not adequately capture the spirit of a *jivanmukti*—one who has learned to be liberated while living in the world.

Iyaric offers as a Dharmically appropriate substitute for “creator” its own word “irator” (with the corresponding substitution of “iration” for the act of “creation”). While preserving some analogue between the ideas—an analogue perhaps necessary to the human mind accustomed to thinking temporally and in terms of cause and effect—“irator” and “iration” root the being of things once more in the ultimately subjective “I”, far more clearly defining the manifestation of reality from *brahman* itself and avoiding any sense of dissociation between “creator” and “created”. Even the latter could be, at most, “irated”, and thereby

still, ultimately, at one with the great I (AM).

Rudolf Steiner famously warned of the dangers in taking over wholesale the concepts and symbols of foreign cultures, these being inevitably subject to distortion in transmission and always lacking the visceral emotional force of the homegrown mythos. Today, however, in what Nietzsche termed the “age of comparison”, the West finds itself desperately in need of the wisdom offered by the Dharmic faiths and compelled to turn to them for an understanding of reality that, though historically present in the West, has never had the chance here to form as carefully elucidated and subtly expressed a body of thought as it has in Asia. Steiner's warning remains prudent, however, and it behooves us to take every opportunity to translate the terms and symbols of Asia into our own religious idioms, just as the peoples of Asia have done historically with the heritages they have received from Europe. Iyaric offers us an elegant and vital tool to do this with Sanskrit concepts that are rapidly becoming indispensable to global spiritual discourse, and thus to bring many who are presently alienated by the seemingly impenetrable structure of that ancient and majestic language to an “iya overstanding” in their own tongue.

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