

1. Introduction

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Wandering religious poets – that is to say, poets for whom wandering is a way of life and whose poetry deals with religious themes – can be found in a variety of ancient and modern cultures. In India, Tibet, and Japan the ascetic or saint who travels from place to place has been the subject of both veneration and fear for hundreds, or even thousands, of years, as is evident in poetry by and about such persons. In oral cultures in particular, wandering poets have played important roles as custodians of myths, lore, and religious traditions, and as institutors of new ones. While for some poets travelling is a dire necessity, for others the journey functions as a spiritual quest towards a transcendent goal, or a pilgrimage involving an inner journey and spiritual transformation.¹

In their introduction to *Wandering Poets in Ancient Greek Culture* (2009), the editors Richard Hunter & Ian Rutherford provide an overview of the phenomenon of travelling poets and poetic itinerancy (from Latin *iter* ‘journey, road’) in ancient Hellas. The poet, singer or rhapsodist (*poiētēs, aoidós, rhapsōidós*) may have travelled to a city to get commissions, or to partake in a poetic contest, or perform in a festival at a sanctuary;² he could also accompany his patron on a journey. Like its author travels across the land, so too should his poetry and the fame it gave to both poet and patron spread far and wide.³ In the *Odyssey*, the singer is a figure worthy of respect, counted among the craftsmen

¹ Coleman & Elsner 1995:6.

² Hesiodos, *Works and Days* 654f.

³ Pindaros, *Nemean Odes* 5.1–6; West 2007:40–45, 403–404.

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(*dēmioergoi*) invited from abroad to do services to men.⁴ Among mythical travelling poets we find Arion,⁵ Thamyris,⁶ and Orpheus, founder of the Orphic mysteries.

The importance given to the poet in ancient Hellenic culture is partly to be derived from this culture's Indo-European heritage, as is evident when we compare it with the ancient Celtic, Germanic, and Indo-Iranian cultures. The Celtic bard (from Proto-Celtic **bardos* 'praise-maker') was a powerful figure, patronized by kings. The *skald* had a similar status and function in Old Norse culture.⁷ The Old English poem *Widsith* describes how the *scop*, corresponding to the *skald*, has travelled widely and been rewarded for his fame-spreading songs by generous patrons. Likewise, in ancient India there were itinerant bards or rhapsodes (*kuśīlavas*, *sūtas*, *māgadhas*). In the final book of Vālmīki's epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, the exiled princes Kuśa and Lava (eponyms of *kuśīlavas*) wander about among the people, reciting the epic that celebrates the *gesta* of their father, Rāma.⁸

If we turn to times closer to our own, we find that the wandering poet, and wandering in general, fascinated the German Romantics, who looked back to Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages for inspiration. For them, wandering could represent a spiritual journey, or freedom from prosaic *Alltagsleben*.⁹ We see this in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and Carl Gustav Carus: contemplative wanderers in sublime landscapes, which appear to mirror the wanderer's mind and soul. Some of these artworks are reminiscent of classical Chinese landscape-painting, which was influenced by Daoism and Chan Buddhism. The most powerful expression of this Romantic fascination, however, is perhaps found in Novalis' unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1799–1800), which deals with the educational journey of a medieval poet in search of a transcendental symbol: The Blue Flower. In his vision of the union of religion and

⁴ Homeros, *Odyssey* 17.375–390.

⁵ Herodotos, *Histories* 1.24; Ovidius, *Fasti* 2.79f.

⁶ Homeros, *Iliad* 2.591–600; Wilson 2009.

⁷ West 2007:ch. 1.

⁸ Pathak 2014:ch. 4.

⁹ Gish 1964; Reimers 1977.

poetry, Novalis presents the ideal poets as wandering sages, who can lead us back to a Golden Age, calling them “rare wandering men, who at times stroll through our dwellings”, “untrammelled visitors, whose golden feet make no sound and whose presence involuntarily unfolds wings in everyone.”¹⁰ In Novalis’ tale the function of the wandering poet’s spatial journey is merely that of a catalyst for his inner, spiritual development.¹¹ The relationship between the outer and the inner journey is a topic we will return to numerous times in this book.

A cross-cultural study of wandering religious poets and poetry about religious wandering, which focuses on Indian, Tibetan, and Japanese traditions, has not – to our knowledge – been undertaken before. There are numerous studies of the phenomenon of pilgrimage in Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religious traditions, some of them with a cross-cultural perspective,¹² but none which focuses on the connection between itinerant lifestyles and religious poetry. Therefore, the aim of the present book, which is based on the workshop “Wandering Religious Poets” held at Stockholm University in 2017, is to highlight some aspects of the religious poet for whom wandering is a lifestyle, as well as the religious poetry which has wandering as its subject – in a variety of religious traditions, societies and different periods of time. Besides Indian, Tibetan, and Japanese, some Indo-European comparative material is included, but we have not been able to cover certain neighbouring areas, like China, where the phenomenon of wandering poets can be found as well. This book, though its scope is limited, offers a wide range of perspectives, each chapter concentrating on one or more of the following questions:

- What is the role of the wandering religious poet within a particular culture?

¹⁰ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* part I, ch. 6, translation by Hilty 1964:94.

¹¹ Frykenstedt 1966:91–92.

¹² See for example Coleman & Elsner 1995; Olivelle 2007; Eck 2012; Jacobsen 2013. See also Stasik & Trynkowska 2018.

- How does the wandering poet, as traveller and outsider, relate to local communities, sacred geography, and institutionalized religion?
- In what ways is itinerancy reflected in religious poetry?
- What type or genre of poetry does the religious wanderer compose or recite and what is the purpose of the poem/song?

The chapters are loosely structured according to the geographical location of the cultures they treat, beginning in the west and moving towards the east. Thus, we start off with Peter Jackson's contribution, **Chapter 2**, which goes furthest back in time and furthest to the west on the map – connecting, in a way, this book with the previously mentioned publication *Wandering Poets in Ancient Greek Culture*. The subject of investigation is the ritual-economic and mytho-poetic prerequisites for the itinerant sage-poet in ancient Hellas and in the earliest Indo-Iranian texts. There existed a mutual dependence between ritual specialists and patronizing warrior-elites in these cultures, which is reflected in the figures of Orpheus, the Vedic Ṛbhus, and Zaratuštra as wandering poets and ritual specialists in search of patrons.

As Jackson writes in an earlier piece, one can speak of a basic contrast between a “civic religiosity that celebrates and seeks to consolidate an existing community”, and a “sectarian religiosity that rather seeks emancipation from the civic community through voluntary ordeals of initiation and ascetism in a quest for truth, immortality, salvation, and so forth.”¹³ Orpheus' movement from city to city, is a feature he shared with the first philosophers, both those who wandered literally, like Xenophanes and Crates of Thebes, and those who did so metaphorically by challenging commonly held beliefs, like Socrates. The Cynics were among the earliest philosophers to extoll wandering as emancipation from civic life. Itinerancy was made easier in the Hellenic and Roman empires, thanks to the development of networks of roads and the incorporation of city-states within the huge empires. Soteriological and cosmopolitan doctrines were introduced by wandering sages and philosophers, who went beyond civic religion.¹⁴

¹³ Jackson 2016:87–88.

¹⁴ Montiglio 2000.

In India, the early ascetic groups are a good example of emancipation from the bonds of house, family, and local community.¹⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that Hellenes compared the ascetics they encountered in India with their own philosophers (*philosophoi*, *gymnosophistai*). Early on, wandering poets contributed to the development of the Pan-Hellenic identity and traditions, such as the Trojan Cycle and the Olympic Games.¹⁶ In India, likewise, wandering ascetics belonging to Jaina, Buddhist, Vedic-Brahmanic, and later Hindu orders have been crucial for the spread of religious traditions and texts. For example, the Buddhist ascetic poetry included in the Pali canon, such as the *Dhammapada* and the *Suttanipāta*, which is also found in Sanskrit and Gandhari. Among the ideals propagated in these texts we find that of “wandering alone like the rhinoceros”, which originates in the Indian ascetic (*śramaṇa*) milieu around the mid first millennium BCE and reappears in Tibetan texts many hundreds of years later – in an environment where, we can be sure, there were no rhinoceroses.¹⁷

It is this type of poetry that Kristoffer af Edholm delineates in **Chapter 3**: more precisely, the ideal of the solitary wandering renouncer in early Jaina, Buddhist, and Brahmanic aphoristic verses or songs (*gāthās*). This type of poetry reflects the practices of renunciates prior to the construction of monasteries (*vihāras*, *maṭhas*) and the ideal of constant wandering, except during the monsoon, a practise which is still alive in India today. In these ascetic milieus, wandering is not so much a journey as a *way of life*. Voluntary and self-centred at its core, ascetic wandering is equivalent to permanently leaving society and, ideally, to do so in solitude. This reflects the wanderer’s ultimate goal: individual emancipation from *saṃsāra*. Yet, many ascetics throughout history have not lived as hermits permanently, but altered between periods of solitude and periods of interactions with society and other ascetics.

¹⁵ One should not speak of “civic religion” *sensu stricto*, since direct parallels to the Hellenic and Roman concepts of city-state (*polis*, *civitas*) and citizen are not found in ancient India.

¹⁶ Cf. Hunter & Rutherford 2009:19–20.

¹⁷ See Chapters 3 and 4.

Ascetic *gāthā*-poetry forbids the itinerant renouncer to engage in various crafts associated with a vagabond-lifestyle: artistic (aesthetic, ornate or enigmatic) poetry and poetry of praise, as well as medicine and divination. Instead of seeking to form a relationship with a wealthy patron to supplicate with verses in return for economic support, the wandering renouncer composes or recites his verses for himself or his peers. In other words, ascetic poetry functions as *self-instruction and encouragement* for a life on the move. One might even say that the renunciant ideal integrates, and goes beyond, the duality of patron-and-poet, since the renouncer is a kind of spiritual world-conqueror, superior to the ordinary king/patron. At the same time the renouncer takes over, in a sense, some of the traditional functions of bard or priest as “word-master” and source of spoken wisdom – in the form of ascetic poetry.

The itinerant lifestyle of Buddhist ascetics outside the monastery also forms the background of the Tibetan material analyzed by Stefan Larsson in **Chapter 4**. The very type of song (*mgur*) composed and performed by the wandering Tibetan *yogins* in the 15th and 16th centuries, which the chapter describes, is clearly akin to that of the Indian *gāthā* in Chapter 3. Both types stand closer to the simple ballad, folk-song or lyrical poem than to the artistic poem, which emphasizes the aesthetic experience, and to the magico-ritual verse or chant (*mantra*, *ṛc*, *sāman*). The eremitical lifestyle of these Tibetan hermits, outlined in a specific genre of literature called “mountain-*dharmā*” (*ri chos*), is comparable with the Theravādic ideal of forest-dweller (*vanavāsin*), as a recurring ascetic reaction against institutionalized monastic religion among some South Asian monks. The 12th century *yogin* Milarepa epitomizes this ideal in Tibet and the wandering *yogins*, described in Chapter 4, contributed in making both Milarepa and his message widely known.

Larsson describes how these Tibetan charismatic *yogins* attempted to reform Buddhism in Tibet by means of composing and printing songs and hagiographies attributed to both themselves and their forebears. A type of songs called ‘songs with parting instructions’ was taught to monks and *yogins* who were about to embark on long journeys, often travelling alone in remote

wilderness for years. Uncertain if they would ever meet again, their teacher (*lama*) sang a song containing practical instructions and advice for the wandering *yogin*. Whereas Indian renouncers were forbidden to use their poetic skills or poems as a form of livelihood, in Tibet songs could actually function as a kind of “currency” for the travelling poet.

As mentioned above, wandering can be seen as involving both an outer and an inner journey. Life on the road, as itinerant ascetic or pilgrim (from Latin *peregrīnus* ‘foreign’, *peregrinatio* ‘wandering around away from one’s place of origin’¹⁸), can be seen as an expression of liminality. Patrick Olivelle (2007) writes about the religious significance of walking in India in the form of itinerant asceticism and pilgrimage, which can entail extreme toil and pain. He argues that it is the walk itself, not the destination, that is the real transformative part of pilgrimage. Although the phenomenon of pilgrimage did not exist in Vedic religion, already Vedic texts praise the toil of journeying (as ascetic practice or as part of raiding/warfare). Descriptions of *tīrthas* (‘fords’), pilgrimage-sites located at rivers, are given in the *Mahābhārata*. This text praises the visiting of pilgrimage-sites, but also includes a passage, spoken by the wise Tulādhāra, which warns against spending one’s time as a pilgrim, since “all rivers are as sacred as Sarasvatī, and all mountains are sacred”: the true spiritual journey takes place in the soul.¹⁹

The latter idea, within the later *nirguṇa-bhakti* tradition of medieval and modern India, is dealt with by Heinz Werner Wessler in **Chapter 5**. He shows that there is a long tradition within Hinduism, still alive today, of criticizing pilgrimage, as is expressed in poetry and other forms of literature. Since the deity is delocalized – *id est* not confined to a particular geographical place – some argue that there is no real need to travel there. The 16th century *bhakta* and pilgrim Mīrābāī went in all directions of space in search of Kṛṣṇa, imagining him as a wandering *yogin*, but it was in vain: Kṛṣṇa was nowhere to be found, according to poems attributed to her:

¹⁸ Webb 1999:7.

¹⁹ *Mahābhārata* 12.255.39.

For you [= Kṛṣṇa], I'll make myself a *yoginī*,
 wandering town to town looking for you,
 looking in every grove. [...]
 I have still not found my indestructible Rām, my friend,
 so I'll wander forest to forest, shrieking,
 crying all the time.²⁰

Examples of *bhakti*-poetry in the Śaiva tradition can be found in the Tamil *Tēvāram*, a collection of songs attributed to South Indian wandering poet-saints, later known as *nāyaṅār* ('leaders'), who lived between the 6th and 8th centuries, which reflects the journeys they undertook.²¹ The sacred sites visited by these poet-saints are as much praised as is Śiva, who in his immanent form is thought to manifest himself at the sites. The commemoration of a particular location in the Tamil landscape becomes a metaphor for the experience of the deity. However, there is also the transcendent, non-localized aspect of Śiva – as expressed in this verse by Appar, which echoes the critique of pilgrimage in other Indian traditions:

Why bathe in the Ganges or the Kaveri?
 Why make a pilgrimage to Kumari's cool, fragrant beach?
 Why bathe in the ocean's swelling waves?
 All this is in vain, if you do not think:
 The Lord is everywhere.²²

There are hundreds of sacred places spread across the Tamil land. The songs and visits of wandering poet-saints spread the fame of certain sites, which were thought to become sacred (*tiru-*) and thus attracted more visitors.²³

Some wandering poets are best characterized as *antinomian* figures, standing outside or opposed to institutionalized forms of religious belief and behaviours. This is found in Tibetan traditions about "crazy *yogins*" related in Chapter 4, but even more so in the Buddhist Tantric poetry discussed by Per Kværne in **Chapter 6**: the *Caryāgīti* or songs composed by peripatetic poets and *yogins* towards the end of the 1st millennium CE. The songs are usually

²⁰ Translation by Hawley 1998:304.

²¹ Cf. Peterson 1983; 1989:162f.

²² Translation by Peterson 1989:261.

²³ Spencer 1970:240.

seen as exemplifying the absurd, paradoxical “twilight-speech” (*sandhābhāṣā*) that continues in the “upside-down language” (*ulaṭbāṃsī*) of the 15th century poet Kabīr.²⁴ Instead of trying to detect a “secret language” or undercover the meaning of the songs, Kværne argues that one should see their form as “surrealistic”, conveying the idea of identity of opposites: the secular and the spiritual. Not only were many of these poet-*yogins* living on the road, they were also “wanderers” in the sense of social outsiders, Kværne writes. This is reminiscent of some Cynic philosophers, mentioned above, who voluntarily became social outsiders and adopted antinomian behaviours.²⁵

The final chapter of this book, **Chapter 7** by Lars Vargö, goes furthest east, to Japan. Here we recognize themes from Indian and Chinese cultures, next to indigenous Japanese ones. A direct, Buddhist influence from India, via China, is discernible in the hermit-sage living on a mountain or by a river, which was a highly praised ideal in Japan, just as it was India, Tibet, and China. During the latter half of the 15th century and most of the 16th century, Japan was suffering from continuous civil wars. The roads became full of monks and poets in search of more peaceful places. The unrest also had the effect that many realized the ephemeral nature of life itself, which inspired them to write poetry. Further, the urge to wander could be a quest for experiencing the beauty of nature and the need to go through religious training. To that can be added a Zen Buddhist tradition according to which the monk had to travel on foot to various temples and Zen masters in order to have his first awakening (*kenshō*) or enlightenment (*satori*) confirmed by a master. It was common for both the novice and the head priest of a temple to express their yearning for wisdom in poems. A poet who had not wandered extensively was not as respected as one who had, and a priest who did not wander between temples and spend time on his own in remote places was considered less experienced and thus less trustworthy as a

²⁴ Hess 1983.

²⁵ One can also mention the Bāuls, travelling singers from the lower ranks of Bengal society, who can be traced back at least to the 17th century and still exist today. In passionate songs they express a view of life that is opposed to institutionalized religion.

religious teacher. Wandering was facilitated during the Tokugawa period (1603–1867) due to the building of roads and places to stay at overnight, all over Japan. Among those who frequented the roads were itinerant monks, beggars who performed ceremonies for payment, and poets who travelled to meet new adepts or masters and to take part in poetic sessions.²⁶

Vargö gives an account of the life of the famous 17th century poet Matsuo Bashô, who lived most of his life alone in a hut by the Sumida river, but also undertook long and arduous travels to various temples, which he recorded in his journals and poems. Bashô was influenced by Zen Buddhism.²⁷ Nature has always played a large role in Japanese poetry, figuring even in poems describing relations between humans or political problems. The poets translate their experiences and aspirations in terms that resemble poetry about nature. This is seen in Bashô's verses. Take, for example, the following verse (*hokku*), which was composed during a travel in 1694, the same year that the poet died. It might at first appear to be simply an expression of melancholy and Bashô's feeling of physical solitude, but Robert Aitken argues that it reflects the Zen experience of *total* solitude – autumn being the season of loneliness (*sabishisa*):

This road!
 With no one going –
 Autumn evening
*Kono michi ya yuku hito nashi ni aki no kure*²⁸

According to David Barnhill, Bashô's journeying exemplifies "outsiderhood". It is a form of religious wayfaring, without beginning or end, and thus different from pilgrimage.²⁹ Bashô's journey does not go to a specific place and is not a stage or temporary break from normal life, but is a constant state, a life "on the edge

²⁶ Adapted from Lars Vargö's presentation for the workshop at Stockholm University in 2017.

²⁷ Bashô studied for Zen masters and practised *zazen*. On Zen in Bashô's poems see Aitken 1978.

²⁸ Translation by Aitken 1978:80.

²⁹ Coleman & Elsner 1995:187–188.

of death”.³⁰ Like the Indian and Tibetan ascetics dealt with in Chapters 3 and 4, Bashô departs from home and chooses a solitary life on the road, rather than a life in the monastery.

With this general understanding, we are ready to look at the following six chapters of the book, of which the aim is to reflect some of the importance, richness, and variety of the phenomenon of itinerancy in Asian religious traditions – leading the reader along roads travelled by many, as well as along paths tread by few.

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³⁰ Barnhill 1990.

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