

## **ANTONIO DE MONTSERRAT - THE SILK ROAD AND THE SECRET PATHS OF TANTRA**

ANTONIO DE MONTSERRAT – LA RUTA DE LA SEDA Y LOS CAMINOS SECRETOS DEL TANTRA

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### **Abstract**

This article presents the biography of Antonio de Montserrat with the aim of situating him within Buddhist critical thought as the first Westerner initiated into tantric philosophy and a key figure in its introduction to the West through the Society of Jesus. To this end, a historical overview is first provided, focusing on how Buddhism was displaced from India and found refuge among the peoples of Central Asia, such as the Uyghurs in present-day Turkestan, and how it was adopted by Chinese emperors and spread along the Silk Road. The fusion of Indian Buddhism with Western influences (Greco-Buddhism) gave rise to various Buddhist schools in Central Asia and China. The esoteric form of Buddhism (tantra) is then briefly characterised, which consolidated as Vajrayana (tantric) Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century. This is the form of Buddhism adopted by rulers, promoting full social and gender equality, the idea of the subject as a cultural construct, and the notion of metaphorical deities—useful for modelling character but entirely non-existent—alongside the Buddhist principle of relative truth. This non-theistic—or transtheistic, as Gómez prefers to call it—vision was reflected in the absolute religious tolerance of the Chinese, Uyghur, and Mongol empires, which ensured safety and free exchange along the Silk Road. It is this vision of subjects not divided by caste or bloodline that amazed de Montserrat when he noted that Tibetans "have no kings among themselves" and inspired those who, based on his writings, travelled specifically to receive initiation into Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, such as the Jesuits Antonio de

Andrade and John de Brito. The third section is dedicated entirely to the biography of Antonio de Montserrat and his connection with tantra.

### **Resumen**

En este artículo se presenta la biografía de Antonio de Monserrat con el objeto de insertar en el pensamiento crítico budista a quien se considera el primer occidental iniciado en la filosofía tántrica e impulsor de ésta en Occidente a través de la Compañía de Jesús. Para ello, primero se hace un recorrido histórico que pone en foco cómo el budismo es desplazado de la India y se refugia entre las poblaciones de Asia central como la etnia Uigur en la actual Turquestán, cómo es adoptado por los emperadores chinos y se expande a lo largo de toda la Ruta de la Seda. La combinación del budismo indio con influencias occidentales (grecobudismo) dio origen a diversas escuelas budistas en Asia Central y en China. Luego se caracteriza en forma sintética la versión esotérica que adquiere el budismo (el tantra) y que se consolida en el siglo VIII en el Tíbet como budismo vajrayana (tántrico). Ésta es la forma de budismo que toman los gobernantes, que promueve la igualdad completa de personas y género, la idea del sujeto como una construcción de la cultura y la noción de deidades metafóricas —útiles para modelar el carácter de las personas pero de absoluta inexistencia— además del postulado budista de verdad relativa. Esta visión no teísta —o transteísta, como Gómez la prefiere llamar— se reflejaba en la total tolerancia religiosa del imperio Chino, Uigur y Mongol, que garantizaba la seguridad y el libre intercambio por la Ruta de la Seda. Es esta visión de sujetos no divididos en castas ni diferenciados por sangre lo que maravilla a de Montserrat al decir que los tibetanos “no tienen reyes entre sí” e inflama la avidez de quienes viajaron especialmente (a partir de los escritos de éste) a iniciarse en el budismo tántrico tibetano como los jesuitas Antonio de Andrade y Juan de Brito. El tercer apartado se dedica de lleno a la biografía de Antonio de Monserrat y a precisar su contacto con el tantra.

**Keywords:** Tantra; Tantrism; Buddhism; Sociology; Anthropology; Religion; Tantric Studies

**Palabras Claves:** Tantra; Tantrismo; Budismo; Sociología; Antropología; Religión; estudios tántricos

## **Buddhism in Central Asia<sup>1</sup>**

Many people are convinced that light comes from the East, and Western society largely believes this too. In this belief, the East seems to be India, to the extent that, since the New Age movements, numerous techniques have been introduced from there to achieve a supposed enlightenment that involves immersing consciousness in dreamlike states (Urban, 1999).

That is, seeing the "reality" that the Hindu system used to subject its inhabitants to the most merciless slavery and servility. A special kind of ideological "opium" that allows outcasts to smile in the indignity to which they are subjected and accept it as a consequence of their past lives, karma.

However, light certainly does come from the East. Not only because the sun rises from that point but also because intellectual light entered through the Silk Road.

This route is the result of the curiosity of the Chinese Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, who ruled from 141 to 87 BC, about the civilised peoples beyond the barbarian tribes to the West (Bellec, 2003).

This dynasty, which spoke Sino-Tibetan languages, extended its reach to the Western nomadic tribes and from there to the Hungarian plains and the Carpathian Mountains.

In 138 BC, Emperor Wu sent an embassy with the aim of securing a military alliance with Indo-European populations (including the Uyghur ethnic group) to curb the power and aggression of the Xiongnu—nomadic

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<sup>1</sup> In this work, the use of a phonetic system for terms of Sanskrit, Mongol, or Tibetan origin has been avoided, as I consider that the pronunciation of the words themselves is meaningless if the speaker is unaware of their significance. Such knowledge may be useful for historical scholars or erudites, but this biography is intended solely to vindicate who I consider to be the first Westerner initiated into Tantric philosophy and the one who propelled it in the West.

tribes settled in present-day Mongolia—who constantly threatened China's security.

This embassy, which failed to secure any military alliance, reported the existence of many kingdoms. Some of these kingdoms were true military powers, such as Persia, Chaldea, and the Roman Empire, with which the embassy established relations, leading to an exchange of goods and knowledge.

Thus, this mission began to trace the Silk Road and also facilitated the introduction of tantric Buddhism to China (Ann Heirman, 2007).

Trade continued almost uninterrupted until the 9th century under the Uyghur Empire. During this time, China exchanged vast quantities of silk for horses.

This trade enabled significant religious and cultural exchange, as the Uyghur people included Buddhists, Nestorians, and Manichaeans until their conversion to Islam began in 742 AD (World Uyghur Congress, 2004).

With the fall of the Uyghur Empire, Islam began to spread with the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in Central Asia, and by the 10th century, conflicts arose that disrupted this route and nearly led to the disappearance of Buddhism (Foltz, 2010).

At the beginning of the 13th century, the Mongol Empire began to expand across the Asian continent, achieving political stability, security for travellers, and, by ending the Islamic Caliphate's monopoly on world trade, the Silk Road was restored.

After the death of Genghis Khan (1227), the Silk Road fell into the hands of his daughters, and he was succeeded by his son Ögedei (Genghis Khan thus established meritocracy by removing privileges of

bloodline or birth order from his eldest sons, as Ögedei was his youngest son) (Veisaga, 2011).

Ögedei continued the empire's expansion by conquering Poland and Hungary, reaching the gates of Vienna in 1242, and consolidating the authority of the Great Khan over the various Mongol kingdoms (Götting, 2015).

In 1287, the Mongols sent Rabban Bar Sauma as an ambassador to European courts. From then until the late 14th century, intense commercial, cultural, and religious traffic began.

During this period, numerous Christian missionaries arrived in the East via this route, such as William of Rubruck, Benedict of Poland, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, and André de Longjumeau (who, on his first journey, brought letters from Pope Innocent IV and, on his second, gifts and letters from Louis IX of France to Güyük Khan).

Upon their return, these missionaries brought with them the worldview of tantric Buddhism that inspired Genghis Khan and his successors, which they disseminated in Europe. This vision fuelled the thirst for knowledge of Marco Polo—during the time of Kublai Khan—(Polo, 2011) and other missionaries such as Odoric of Pordenone, Giovanni de' Marignolli, John of Montecorvino, and Niccolò de' Conti.

By the mid-14th century, the Black Death weakened the political power established by Genghis Khan and his transtheistic vision, which protected all beliefs and ways of life (Hays J, 2005).

This transtheistic (tantric) vision found refuge in the lands of Bothan, on the roof of the world (Tibet).

The Mongols gradually converted to Islam starting in 1323 with the establishment of sultanates, and the political and cultural unity, as well

as the security of the Silk Road, were lost, making it an unviable economic route.

Finally, by the mid-15th century, the disappearance of the Silk Road prompted European powers to seek new routes to the flourishing Chinese Empire—especially maritime ones.

Thus, Portuguese explorations of the Indian Ocean, including the South China Sea, led to the arrival of the first European merchant ship on the coast of China in 1513.

In this way, the Portuguese consolidated fortifications in Macao and Goa, where Antonio de Montserrat would arrive as an ambassador in 1574.

### **Tantra: The Esoteric Vision of Buddhism**

With the expansion of Hinduism, Buddhism was displaced from India and found refuge among the peoples of Central Asia, such as the Uyghurs in present-day Turkestan, and spread along the Silk Road.

The fusion of Indian Buddhism with Western influences (Greco-Buddhism) gave rise to various Buddhist schools in Central Asia and China.

By the late 7th century, the esoteric form of Buddhism (tantra) entered and consolidated in Tibet in the 8th century as Vajrayana Buddhism.

This is the form of Buddhism adopted by rulers (hence the designation of Royal Tantra or transtheism), which promotes full equality of persons and gender, the idea of the subject as a cultural construct (i.e., without a pre-existing essence at birth that would condition their social status or caste privileges), and the notion of metaphorical deities—useful for modelling character but entirely non-existent—alongside the Buddhist

principle of relative truth, i.e., truth is what each person's eyes see; absolute truth does not exist (Capra, 2000).

Thus, with the successive consolidation of the Uyghur, Chinese, and Mongol empires, this non-theistic or, more accurately, transtheistic tantric worldview, reflecting its pillars of social equality, the non-existence of the soul (a priori human essence), and relative truth, ensured the security and free exchange of goods and knowledge along the Silk Road between China and Europe.

It is this vision of subjects not divided by caste or bloodline that amazed de Montserrat when he noted that Tibetans "*have no kings among themselves*" (Gómez, 2013) and inspired those who, based on his writings, travelled specifically to receive initiation into Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, such as the Jesuits Antonio de Andrade and John de Brito.

From this fruitful cultural and religious exchange (mentioned earlier) between Catholic missionaries and the vision of tantric Buddhism facilitated by the security of the Silk Road, the Alumbrados movement emerged in Castile (O'Malley, 1995) as one of the protean forms of tantrism (de Mora Vaquerizo, 1988), eventually spreading throughout Hispanic America (Jiménez Rueda, 1945).

This movement became incorporated into the Society of Jesus, and from there, we inherit the legacy received in the West, which justifies why this biography, though encyclopaedic, deserves to be included in this first article as a tribute and starting point.

### **Antonio de Montserrat**

Born in Vic, Barcelona, in 1536, and died in Goa, India, in 1600, he was a Catalan Jesuit trained in Portugal who, in 1574, was assigned to the mission in the Portuguese colony of Goa, India, from where he would

travel through much of Central Asia and the Arabian Peninsula (Spanish Geographical Society, 1998).

This traveller and scholar left records of his journeys in four manuscripts, of which only two survive: the “*Mongolicae Legationis Commentarius*”, in Latin, and “*Relaçam do Equebar, rei dos mogores*”, in Portuguese, referring to his stay at the court of the Great Khan Akbar (Spanish Geographical Society, 1998).

Born into a noble family from Osona, he studied in Barcelona, where he came into contact with Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

Fascinated by the life of missionaries, he joined the Society of Jesus in 1558 and was sent to Portugal—where he was ordained a priest—in 1561.

He studied at the University of Coimbra, Lisbon, where he served as prefect of San Roque, vice-rector of the College of San Antonio, and tutor to King Sebastian I of Portugal.

### **Ambassador to the Court of the Great Mughal**

In 1574, at the age of 38, his dream of becoming a missionary was fulfilled when he was sent, along with 39 other Jesuits, to the mission in the Portuguese colony of Goa, India.

Five years later, he was entrusted with the mission of joining the embassy to present itself at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, with the specific task of recording everything that happened during the journey.

The presence of the priests had been expressly requested by the emperor himself.

The Portuguese Jesuits interpreted this as Akbar's willingness to embrace the Christian faith, which was not the case.

Thus, on 13 December 1579, Antonio de Montserrat, along with the Jesuits Rodolfo Acquaviva and Francisco Henríquez—a Persian convert who acted as interpreter—as well as an ambassador from Akbar, departed from the Portuguese colony of Daman to the capital of the Mughal Empire.

The group arrived in Fatehpur Sikri, the new capital founded by Akbar, on 4 March 1580, where they remained for a year engaged in interreligious dialogues and debates promoted by Emperor Akbar with representatives of other religions, such as Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity, and Tibetan Tantric Buddhism (Casa Asia Barcelona, 2005).

Montserrat took advantage of his stay to learn Persian and eventually gained Akbar's trust, as evidenced by his appointment as tutor to Akbar's son Murad (Gómez, 2008).

After a year, a revolt broke out in the north, led by a half-brother of the king who had the support of some Afghan chieftains.

### **Military Expedition**

At Akbar's request, Montserrat joined the military expedition and accompanied him throughout the campaign, which lasted until 1581.

This journey allowed the Jesuit to come into contact with much of the empire's territories. He visited Delhi, the Himalayas, Himachal Pradesh, Kashmir, Punjab, and the foothills of Tibet up to Afghanistan.

The end of the conflict coincided with the return to the embassy in Goa, once the Jesuits confirmed the emperor's lack of interest in converting to Christianity.

In September 1582, they arrived in the Portuguese colony, where, for six years, Montserrat worked on his notes with the intention of producing a more complex and detailed work.

### **Captivity in Yemen**

In 1588, Antonio de Montserrat received direct orders from the Spanish King Philip II to travel to Ethiopia to support the missionaries stationed there and explore the possibility of bringing Coptic Christianity closer to the Church of Rome.

On 2 February 1589, Montserrat and his companion Pedro Páez set sail from Goa disguised as Armenian merchants.

The journey was interrupted when, in Dhufar (Yemen), they were betrayed by the commander who was supposed to take them to Ethiopia, who handed them over to the city's chief, who, in turn, sent them to Haymes, an inland city where the Sultan of Hadhramaut resided.

After four months in prison in this city, they were sent to Sanaa, the seat of the Turkish governor of Yemen, where they remained until 1595, when they were transferred to the port of Mocha on the Red Sea, where they were forced to serve as oarsmen on Turkish galleys for several months until Montserrat fell seriously ill and was confined to the city's prison.

Finally, a year later, these two Jesuits were returned to Goa after a ransom was paid.

Both were in very poor health after nearly seven years of captivity, and while Páez recovered, Antonio de Montserrat died in Salcete, near Goa, where there was a famous Jesuit convent, in March 1600.

## **His Work and the Influence of Tantrism on Him**

In the same year of his death, the definitive version of his work «*Mongolicae Legationis Commentarius*» was completed, along with his map of the Himalayas, a true cartographic gem that covers much of India and vast areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The map features over two hundred place names, geographical features highlighted in different shades, and geographical coordinates, marked with surprising precision, using the equator as a reference and accurately depicting the Tropic of Cancer. In addition to the Himalayan range, other mountain ranges are distinguishable in the northern part, seemingly corresponding to the Karakoram, the Hindu Kush, and the Pamir.

The map's accuracy and the precision of its descriptions are such that it remained relevant until relatively recently. In 2002, Josep Lluís Alay, while researching Antonio de Montserrat as a missionary and explorer, discovered that people involved in mountaineering already knew of him, as he was credited with creating the first map of the Himalayas.

In his written chronicles, his texts faithfully reflect all the significant details observed through the eyes of a Westerner, such as the geography, history, culture, and religion of the various communities he came to know. They also reveal one of the great obsessions that drove Christian missionaries to venture into the vast expanses of Asia.

In his chronicles, we can read:

*“In the interior of these mountains dwell a people called Botthant. They never wash their hands, reasoning that something as clear and beautiful as water should not be dirtied. They are white and stout, not very tall, **fight on foot, and have no king among them.** They make a living by producing felt and come to sell it in a city on this side called*

*Negarcot: they descend in June, July, August, and September; outside these months, they cannot come due to the snow...<sup>2</sup>*

From this note, we can infer the astonishment he must have felt upon encountering a culture where men are equal among themselves. That is, devoid of a preexisting soul that would differentiate them into kings and subjects or Brahmins and outcasts, which is the first principle of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism (Gómez, 2009).

The obsession driving the Jesuits was the search for lost ancient Christian communities and tracing the spread of Christianity toward Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and the Far East, encouraged by the accounts of medieval travelers who discovered various communities, as well as the existence of the Coptic, Abyssinian, Armenian, and Maronite churches.

Rome was desperately seeking evidence of the existence of an empire straddling history and legend, an empire led by a powerful priest-king, defender of the Christian faith against the Muslim advance: the kingdom of Prester John in Ethiopia.

This king, in my view, would be none other than Akbar himself.

A year after Antonio de Montserrat's death, in January 1601, the Jesuit Antonio de Andrade arrived in Goa with the aim of establishing a mission and seeking knowledge in that mysterious, isolated kingdom called Botton or Tebat (Tibet), suggesting that Montserrat's chronicle was taken into account by the leaders of the Society of Jesus to incorporate Tantrism—in its protean form as the Alumbrados first and later Liberation Theology—into their teachings and practices.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the first description that the West has of the land of Botthant, the mythical Tibet. (Gómez, 2008)

## Conclusions

It is dizzying to think that the Great Mughal Khan Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar never even suspected that the Jesuit's journey and his writings would hold such profound significance for the West.

In some way, the emperor's invitation to the religious figures opened the door to the discovery of one of the last spaces to be conquered by the champions of the Christian faith, but it also changed the worldview of the travelers from that incipient Renaissance Europe, undoubtedly influencing their way of understanding the world and humanity (Gómez, 2013).

This Tantric philosophy, which has transmuted its name over the years<sup>3</sup>, is the paradigm we are currently navigating in the West.

And this Tantric or existentialist paradigmatic model is what gives rise to the construction of a subject, bound to a particular way of experiencing the world, relating to it, and acting. In other words: Tantric philosophy, without our conscious awareness, is what may be shaping the moral values and interests of recent generations.

However, after that initial impact, Montserrat's work remained in obscurity for several centuries.

In 1906, Henry Hosten, a Jesuit from British India specializing in the history of Christianity in India, rediscovered the «Mongolicae Legationis Commentarius» and published it in 1914.

The work sparked great interest among the Indologists of the time.

Today, in the 21st century, the Jesuit's work is finally gaining the recognition it deserves, thanks to the popular edition of his works

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<sup>3</sup> In the same way that in the East, due to various circumstances, it took on different names such as Taoism, Sufism, and Kabbalah (Buber, 2007) and finally cultural revolution in China (Chhaya, 2009), Tantrism in the West adopted the denominations of Alumbrados, Illuminism, Existentialism, Phenomenology, Liberation Theology, Surrealism (Foljambe, 2008), and Postmodernity.

translated from Latin into Spanish and Catalan by the orientalist Josep Lluís Alay.

Nevertheless, there are still other manuscripts written by Montserrat, referencing the customs and geography of India and Central Asia, whose whereabouts remain unknown.

The mystery of his vast work endures to this day, and I hope this article serves to rescue them and bring them into the known historical record.

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