

Article

Glocal Zen in Italy: A Preliminary Exploration of the Underlying Dynamics

Ugo Dessì 

Department of Religious Studies, University of Vienna, 1010 Wien, Austria; ugo.dessi@univie.ac.at

Abstract: This article focuses on three Zen meditation groups operating in Italy from the perspective of glocalization. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and practitioners' narratives, it explores the dynamics underlying the making of glocal Zen with reference to the internal structure of individual religious worlds and its reshaping through the creative incorporation of *zazen* or *zazen*-like meditation. My analysis also indicates that there are at least three main factors constraining these processes of glocalization: Availability, or the way in which Zen meditational techniques become accessible (or not) to individual practitioners through global religious exchanges; global consciousness, which relates to the way in which changes in collective consciousness encourage individuals to see themselves as global actors and their Zen practice as globally relevant; and resonance, which speaks of the way in which Zen meditation is selected by individual practitioners for their glocal practices based both on its perceived congruence with their preexisting religious worlds and its usefulness for the solution of specific problems.

Keywords: glocalization; East Asian Buddhism; Zen Buddhism; Zen meditation; religion in Italy



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1. Introduction

As the steadily expanding field of study on glocalization and culture shows, one of the distinctive characteristics of the contemporary phase of globalization is the unprecedented pace in which themes circulating worldwide are reworked and given new meanings by local actors (Roudometof and Dessì 2022). That the domain of religion makes no exception in this regard is also confirmed by the increasing number of contributions to the academic debate exploring religion from the perspective of glocalization. To these, one should add those relying on related conceptual frameworks such as hybridization, creolization, and bricolage, whenever they explore religious change resulting from the interplay of both 'global' and 'local' factors (Dessì 2022). The glocal dimension of Buddhism has received some scholarly attention at least since the publication of Cristina Rocha's study on Zen in Brazil, which employs the concept of creolization and Arjun Appadurai's theory of *-scapes* to illustrate the local reworking of Zen as a "marker of social distinction" (Rocha 2006, p. 152). In my previous work, I explored the glocalization of Buddhism in Japan through the issues of human rights and environmentalism, as well as in the Hawaiian context through the issue of meditation in Shin Buddhism. Contextually, I have elaborated a working theory framing the glocalization of Japanese Buddhism as a type of "global repositioning" (Dessì 2013, pp. 40–48; 2017, pp. 67–130, 162–89), on which this article builds upon. The glocal implications of the issue of meditation in Shin Buddhism have also been investigated in relation to Brazil (Matsue 2014), while other research has focused on topics such as the Jewish-Israeli adoption of Buddhism (Loss 2010), the adaptation of Sōka Gakkai in Cuba (Rodriguez Plasencia 2014), and Shinnyo-en in Hawai'i (Montrose 2014). To date, there are no dedicated scholarly contributions on the glocal dimension of Buddhism in Europe. With the aim to address this gap in knowledge, this paper focuses on three Zen meditation groups operating in Italy from the perspective of glocalization. In particular, based on the narratives of individual practitioners, it explores the dynamics underlying the making of glocal Zen with attention to the factors facilitating or potentially obstructing this process.

2. Glocalizing Zen in Sardinia

The practice of several strands of East Asian Buddhism has made inroads in Italy since the 1970s. To date, the largest presence is that of Soka Gakkai International's Nichiren Buddhism, whose local branch, the Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, claims a membership of little less than 100,000 (Macioti 1996; Barone and Molle 2006; Barone 2007; Di Marzio 2019; Introvigne 2019). Other traditional and modernized forms of Nichiren Buddhism are represented in the country by very small branches (e.g., Tempio Buddista della Nichiren Shū, Honmon Butsuryu Shu), as is Japanese esoteric Buddhism through the presence of the new religious movement Shinnyo-en (Zoccatelli 2002; Molle 2013). A relatively growing presence is that of Chinese Buddhism (Pure Land and Chan), especially through five branch temples related to Taiwanese (Zhongtaishan) and mainland Chinese (Shuilusi and Longquansi) organizations, all of which mostly serve the needs of Chinese immigrant communities (Zoccatelli 2010; Parbuono 2018; Cao et al. 2018; Bianchi 2020; Berti and Pedone 2021).

As for Zen Buddhism, one of the earliest Italian communities was established in 1973 by Luigi Mario Engaku Taino (Scaramuccia) within the Rinzaï tradition. However, most of the Zen centers established in the country since the 1970s belong to the Sōtō tradition, with a significant number of masters being linked to the legacy of Deshimaru Taisen (1914–1982) and his Association Zen Internationale (AZI). Among them one finds well-known figures such as Ryusui Zensen (Centro Italiano Zen Sōtō), Fausto Taiten Guareschi (Fudenji), and the late Massimo Daido Strumia (Il Cerchio Vuoto). A significant section of the Italian masters has been trained within other Japanese Sōtō Zen lineages, such as the case of Carlo Tetsugen Serra (Enso-Ji Il Cerchio) and Anna Maria Shinnyo Marradi (Shinnyoji), or in North American temples, such as the case of Guglielmo Doryu Cappelli and Annamaria Gyoetsu Epifania (Centro Zen Anshin). There is also a small minority of Roman Catholic priests who have followed in the footsteps of the Jesuit Hugo Enomiya Lassalle's (1898–1990) pioneering Christian-Zen and established in the country some Zen meditation courses for lay people.

Contemporary Zen Buddhism in Italy has received very little coverage in academic research. In the following, I aim to provide a contribution to this subfield of studies by analyzing from the specific perspective of glocalization the three Zen meditation centers currently operating in Sardinia, Italy's second-largest island (after Sicily) and one of its twenty regions: The Corso di Meditazione Zen, the Dojo Zen nel Centro, and the Shinrin Zendo.¹

The Corso di Meditazione Zen was established in the mid-1990s within the larger Scuola di Meditazione (School of Meditation) founded in the early 1980s by the Sardinian Jesuit, Francesco Piras (1915–2014).² This group follows the teaching of Reinhard Neudecker (b. 1938), another Jesuit who studied Zen in Japan under Yamada Kōun (1907–1989) within Harada Daiun's (1871–1961) lineage, and operates in Cagliari City with a core membership of about thirty practitioners. The Dojo Zen nel Centro is a meditation center established in 2016 in a village near Oristano City by Davide Kyogen Colombu, a former disciple of Tetsugen Serra. It is currently affiliated with the La Montagne Sans Sommet community in France within Nishijima Gudō's (1919–2014) Sōtō Zen lineage, and until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic it had a membership of around fifteen. The Shinrin Zendo is another meditation center in the metropolitan area of Cagliari with a similar core membership, which currently operates as a branch of the Centro Zen Anshin in Rome (a member of the Sōtō Zen Europe Office) within the lineage of Sawaki Kōdō (1880–1965). Although it was established in 2017, its founder Massimo Loriga had previously trained for years within the AZI and coordinated other small meditation groups in Sardinia under its umbrella.

The fieldwork data show that at the institutional level these groups tend to conform to the 'orthodox' praxis (simplified, in some cases) of their respective lineages, with little signs of hybridization.³ In the case of the Corso di Meditazione Zen, although the interactions of core members with Father Neudecker almost stopped after his retirement and return to Germany in the mid-2000s, there are concerns voiced by the current coordinators that

the affiliation with another Zen master or lineage (which might imply changes in their practice) could lead them “astray” and somehow jeopardize the progress that they have made thus far. This attitude helps to understand why their Zen practice inherited from the Harada lineage through Father Neudecker has undergone only very minor changes over time. Their meditation sessions start with a fifteen-minute musical introduction (which is a feature of all courses in the Scuola di Meditazione) and a short presentation followed by the sound of wooden clappers and the hand bell. Since when they shifted to online modality after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, sessions consist of just a twenty-minute period of *zazen* (sitting meditation) with no *kinhin* (walking meditation), and end with the recitation of the four bodhisattva vows and a short final reading.

A relative disinterest for innovations is shared by the other two groups, probably also because they have been established quite recently and are passing through a consolidation phase. As put by the leader of the Shinrin Zendo, there would be at present “no need to introduce any changes” because there are no frictions between their Zen practice and local culture. Their sessions start with incense offering at the altar and twenty minutes of *zazen* announced by the sound of the wooden board and the bronze bell, which are followed by ten minutes of *kinhin* and another twenty minutes of *zazen*. The final part of the session features sutra chanting in Japanese (e.g., the *Robe verse*, the *Heart sutra*) and the recitation of the four bodhisattva vows followed by the three prostrations (*sanpai*).

The leader of the Dojo Zen nel Centro, too, is cautious about the opportunity of introducing innovations in religious practice, at least in the short run (“maybe in the future”). Here, too, sessions start with the customary sound of the wooden board and the bell as well as incense offering, and include three twenty-minute periods of *zazen* interspersed with two ten-minute periods of *kinhin*. At the time of the fieldwork, sutra chanting (the *Heart sutra*) had been introduced at the end of sessions. More recently, one can see some initial signs of hybridity in this center, such as the intermingling of *obon* rituals and Sardinian folklore in the floating lantern show organized in September 2022 in collaboration with a local cultural association.

The experiences of individual practitioners provide instead clear evidence of ongoing processes of glocalization. Many of their narratives, rather than pointing to the radical reshaping of religious identities along the lines of specific Zen Buddhist orthodoxies, present a meaningful range of creative adaptations of Zen elements. This dimension is vividly expressed by Enrica’s (SZ) words, “I feel that the spirit of my Zen practice is hybrid because I keep a sort of connection with Christian concepts”. She has been practicing Zen meditation for almost twenty years, together with yoga and (more recently) *taijiquan*, admittedly without mixing her *zazen* and *kinhin* with the other practices. However, she sees herself as “a bit syncretistic” because the Gospels, yoga, and Zen meditation all contribute (“without any of them becoming absolutized”) to her search for a transcendent sphere. Anna (DZC), who has encountered Zen Buddhism more recently, still considers herself as being a Catholic. Whereas she is currently interested in various alternative practices ranging from mindfulness to Sōka Gakkai’s *daimoku* (the repetition of *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*), the center of her spiritual world is represented by reiki. As Anna puts it, “I have my personalized practice”, in which her daily reiki self-treatment is introduced by a period of informal (“not dogmatic”) *zazen* meditation sitting on the bed while “trying to reach the all-embracing state of emptiness dear to Zen Buddhism”. An equally broad range of spiritual interests is that illustrated by Federica (DZC), a Catholic no longer interested in the institutional aspect of religion. She prefers practicing alone at home rather than with the group (“I find group practice distracting”), especially in the morning through a combination of background music, incense burning, yoga exercises, the recitation of her “personal mantra” and, finally, thirty minutes of *zazen*-like silent meditation. Federica broadly identifies herself as a “seeker” of “inner freedom”, and “partly a Buddhist” as a consequence of her encounter with Zen. Others, like Renato (CMZ), Viviana (SZ), and Sara (DZC), do not regularly practice meditation at home but try to apply a *zazen*-like attitude to their daily activities (sometimes in a rather structured way), from cooking to writing

and their professional work. For Danilo (CMZ), a militant Catholic, having practiced Zen meditation and other techniques for years is something that has helped him to strengthen his Christian faith. He likes the act of gathering in meditation and silent prayer, and when he attends to the mass, he tries to apply what he learned during years of training by sitting “with the back straight, with a correct posture, and closing the eyes at certain points”. Sergio (CMZ), too, believes that Zen meditation does not lead one astray from the Christian path, but can rather deepen one’s faith. His formal practice of *zazen* at home, which is not regular, is always introduced by a short reflection on “motivation”—something that he learned within other courses in the Scuola di Meditazione. Several other members of the Corso di Meditazione Zen have included aspects of their meditational experience in their pilgrimages to rural Catholic sanctuaries, a relatively recent spin-off from the Scuola di Meditazione known as the “Camminantes” project. During these pilgrimages a silent attitude is warmly encouraged, and the initial five-minute period of personal meditation on the arrival to sanctuaries has evolved into a ten-minute period repeated three times during the day (morning, lunch time, and evening). As noted by one of the senior members, Alessia (CMZ), this informal meditational activity proposed to pilgrims is rooted in the group experiences of the Corso di Meditazione Zen. This point is made more explicit by another of the organizers, Aldo (CMZ), who explains that their project is all about the “inculturation of Zen” in Sardinia with the aim to make it a “militant experience” capable of popularizing new ways of the sacred for lay people.

3. Reshaping Religious Worlds

Diverse though as they may be, experiences such as those illustrated above share a common feature, namely, the process through which elements of Zen Buddhism have contributed to a globally oriented reshaping of individual religious identities. Building upon the global-repositioning model that I developed elsewhere (Dessi 2017, pp. 162–86), hereafter I will refer to these identities as *religious worlds* whose primary function is to contextualize and regulate individuals’ access to certain desired goods. Enrica, for example, explains that Zen Buddhism contributes, together with other practices, to make herself feel “centered and rooted”. Danilo expresses his spiritual goal in terms of the realization of “wholeness”, while Mauro (CMZ) emphasizes the quest for “inner freedom”. Viviana refers to various goods, including “relief from depression and anxiety”, a return to “essentiality”, and a deeper connection with herself and the world to be able to overcome a somewhat passive attitude toward life. Similarly, Renato expresses some of the main goals of his religious world in terms of a better management of his own “inner dialogue” and a return to “essentiality”, the latter being also prioritized by Sergio. Federica’s narrative reveals a religious world mostly oriented toward the realization of a generalized “respect for creation and human beings”, while among Sara’s desired goods one finds “psychological wellbeing”, “spiritual comfort”, and more clarity about the questions on the meaning and transience of life through “the acknowledgment of our mortality”. These examples show that such desired goods, which can jointly create a variety of personal constellations, are not necessarily other-worldly. They can have a this-worldly nature, too, or occupy a place in-between the two spheres. In principle, one could (and generally does) try to access many of them also through other ‘secular’ means—say, relief from depression by means of medical therapy, or the answer to the meaning of life by means of a materialistic approach. Thus, what makes them *religious* goods is not their inherent nature, but the way in which the access to them is regulated, that is, through reference to a super-empirical source of authority inspiring or guiding the spiritual path of individual practitioners.

In-depth interviews with practitioners show that this super-empirical dimension can be expressed in various terms, including “transcendence”, a “higher plane of reality”, “spiritual world”, “spiritual realities”, or, for some, the Christian “God”. Especially in the case of religious institutions, the link between super-empirical authority and religious goods is typically provided by a sort of structure of legitimation (a set of norms, scriptures, techniques, and ritual actions that also set apart more or less definitely what is ‘orthodox’

from what is not) with a class of religious professionals acting as its guardians. The more flexible this structure of legitimation becomes, and the more likely is a reshaping of religious worlds similar to those found among Sardinian practitioners. This is, of course, also dependent on a less meaningful role played by religious professionals, which emerges from the interviewees' disinterest for "institutional religion", their emphasis on the "rigidity" of the Church, and their dislike for conceptions of Roman Catholicism as "the absolute religion" as well as for "dogmatic approaches". For Federica, "respect for creation and human beings" can be pursued, among other things, through the incorporation of elements of *zazen* within a preexisting (and already 'hybrid') structure of legitimation—a creative reshaping sanctioned by a transcendent domain including the ultimate truths of Christianity and other 'world' religions. For Enrica, the quest for centeredness is inspired by a variously populated "higher sphere" and is pursued also through the inclusion of *zazen* within her own personal structure of religious legitimation. Just to mention another example, for Danilo the way to "wholeness" is God's path to which other forms of spirituality concur, thus allowing for the creative incorporation of Zen elements in his own baggage of meditational tools. It is apparent that for practitioners identifying themselves as being Catholics, Zen meditation can be acknowledged as a preparatory practice establishing a more experiential and genuine connection with God along the Christian path. As a whole, the narratives of Sardinian practitioners clearly indicate that the access to specific religious goods can be largely self-regulated based on personal interpretations or 'experiences' of the super-empirical domain and its scope. In this connection, one should probably resist the temptation to consider these religious worlds as necessarily coherent, and as something of which individuals are always or fully self-reflectively aware. Rather, there are indications that their function to regulate the access to selected religious goods is often implicit and can even be acknowledged and somehow formalized retrospectively.

4. Constraints and Incentives in the Making of Glocal Zen

Based on the analysis above, the glocalization of Zen among Sardinian practitioners can be defined as a process consisting of the adoption and creative incorporation of *zazen* (or *zazen*-like) meditation in a specific part of individual religious worlds, that is, the structure of legitimation through which the nexus between super-empirical sources of authority and desired goods is envisioned, narrated, and performed.⁴ One may ask then what kind of factors can facilitate, or otherwise delay and hinder, the making of this glocal Zen. In this connection, among the potentially broad range of constraints and incentives underlying this process and related to features such as the local and global environment, shifts in individual and collective conscience, and strategies for survival and empowerment used by religious actors, especially three emerge consistently from the fieldwork data thus allowing for another set of generalizations. In the following, these constraints/incentives will be approached in terms of availability, global consciousness, and resonance with the aim of integrating the analysis on the glocalization of Zen in Sardinia and add to its explanatory potential.

4.1. Availability

At the most basic level, one can hardly overlook the fact that the preliminary condition for any process of glocalization is that specific cultural objects circulating worldwide become available to local actors. The narratives of Sardinian Zen practitioners show that many of them had an initial contact with Zen Buddhism through books, typically Italian translations of iconic authors such as Suzuki Daisetsu (1870–1966), the aforementioned Deshimaru Taisen, and Anthony De Mello (1931–1987) that became popular nationwide especially since the 1970–1980s. The work of Deshimaru played an important role also in another, more direct way in which Zen meditation has become available to Italian and Sardinian practitioners. In fact, his proselytizing activities in Europe since the late 1960s and the creation of the AZI were also instrumental in the training of a considerable number of Italian Zen teachers and the popularization of Zen practice in the country. The founder

of the Shinrin Zendo, for example, initially practiced Zen Buddhism within the AZI, and only recently received another ordination by Doryu Cappelli (who in turn received formal dharma transmission in the United States). As for the leader of the Dojo Zen nel Centro, his training took place initially under the Italian master Tetsugen Serra (who received dharma transmission in Japan), and later within the context of a French-based Zen community. Members of the Corso di Meditazione Zen were able to access the practice of *zazen* mostly through the teaching of Father Neudecker (who had studied Zen in Japan like several other Catholic priests).

In a nutshell, the practice of Zen has become accessible to many Sardinian practitioners through the complex working of the global cultural network, which has been influenced by global phenomena such as the emergence and consolidation of orientalist (and reverse-orientalist) views about Japan (Borup 2004), the successful branding of things Japanese and Zen as symbols of ‘style’ for a new class of mass consumers started in the 1950s in the United States (Iwamura 2011, pp. 23–62), and the emergence of the category of global ‘spiritual seekers’ following the path of a holistic worldview beyond the rigidity of institutional religion through the creative use of globally circulating sources and techniques (cf. Heelas and Woodhead 2005). As such, the availability of Zen practices in Sardinia (as elsewhere) shows to be dependent on various global variables including those related to the marketing of religion and its mediatization, missionary work, and trends toward spirituality.

The very case studies and the narratives of several practitioners are also a reminder that local factors, too, can affect the global flow of Zen and its glocalization. Sardinia’s peripheral position (e.g., geographically, demographically, and economically speaking) within the Italian State, for example, has posed some limitations to the local spread of Zen practice, especially because of the longtime absence of authorized Zen teachers locally and the consequent need for interested students of Zen to commute for their training to the main centers in Northern/Central Italy or in other European countries. From another perspective pointing to the conservatism of local culture, Gaia (SZ) acknowledges that in her hometown (a village in the countryside) the practice of Zen meditation would have been more problematic, since many people are “narrow-minded”, and similarly Federica (who lives in a village) narrates that she has long been criticized within the family because of her spiritual interests and meditational practices (“They say about me: ‘She is weird!’”).

4.2. Global Consciousness

Another factor emerging from the interviews that contributes to the global-local interplay in the making of glocal Zen is the awareness of the world as a ‘single place.’ The role of such growing “global consciousness” within the overall process of globalization has long been acknowledged by Roland Robertson and other scholars and aptly related to phenomena such as the introduction of world time, world exhibitions/competitions, global panics, and the like (Robertson 1992, pp. 8–9, 58–60; cf. Appadurai 1996; Scholte 2005). In the field of religious studies, too, there have been some attempts to incorporate global consciousness (or some equivalents) among the conceptual tools for the analysis of religious change under conditions of globalization (e.g., Warburg 1999; Vásquez and Marquardt 2000; Srinivas 2010, pp. 331–33). As I have shown in the case of various Japanese religions at home and abroad, global consciousness can actually play an important role in the global repositioning of both religious institutions and individual practitioners at different levels of analysis, including inter-religious and inter-systemic interactions, as well as interactions with globally circulating ideas and practices (Dessi 2017, pp. 162–89).

In the specific case of Zen in Sardinia, the narratives of practitioners indicate that processes of glocalization are always accompanied by a meaningful presence of such global consciousness. This aspect is immediately evident in the way in which individual Zen practitioners relate themselves to a variety of religious traditions. Anna, for example, confesses that since her youth she has been very curious about other forms of spirituality, and that now she aims to “adopt what is best in each religion”. For Federica, there is an

intimate connection between different religions and philosophies, since “all roads lead to the same place”. Enrica has no doubt that “all religions have a common source”, while Viviana specifies that this only applies to “spirituality”, and not to “institutional religion”. Analogously, Danilo feels that the world of spirituality is “one single whole”, and that nowadays “we are more and more closely linked to one another”. A similar attitude can also find expression through reference to figures/teachers from different traditions or parts of the world (e.g., Thich Nhat Hahn, John Kabat-Zinn), who are acknowledged by several interviewees as “masters” along their own spiritual paths. What emerges from these narratives is the attempt to locate individual religious worlds within a sort of global map of the sacred, in which various ‘spiritual points’ are interconnected as expressions of a single core. Other practitioners show a more reflexive awareness of these global dynamics. Aldo, for instance, thinks that at present a new range of experiences of the sacred is made possible by the fact that “at the global level we have moved to a higher level of spiritual energies”, and Gaia acknowledges that the rich variety of options available for her spiritual search is actually “the effect of globalization”. Explicit mention of the process of “globalization” is also made by Viviana, but she characterizes it as something that “drives our minds toward distant worlds”, while meditation can help us to focus on the local sphere and on dynamics/problems that are closer to our daily experience. The latter case also indicates that global consciousness does not necessarily imply empathy with all aspects of globalization.

Such attitudes of Sardinian practitioners toward the world at large are effectively captured by [Mansilla and Gardner’s](#) (2007, p. 58) definition of global consciousness as “the capacity and the inclination to place our self and the people, objects, and situations with which we come into contact within the broader matrix of our contemporary world”. Based on [Mansilla and Gardner’s](#) (2007, pp. 59–62) discussion of the three cognitive-affective capacities (“global sensitivity”, “global understanding”, and “global self”) underlying global consciousness,⁵ it can be argued that the latter contributes to the glocalization of Zen in Sardinia in different guises. By acknowledging the dependence of their individual religious worlds on cultural elements coming from different parts of the planet, Sardinian practitioners display what Mansilla and Gardner characterize as “global sensitivity”. Practitioners’ reflection on the threat posed to humanity by excessive individualism, rationality, and materialism can instead be understood as an exercise in “global understanding”. Furthermore, lastly, by framing their own meditational practice as something that can contribute to overcoming these problems by recovering a sense of ‘wholeness’ for themselves and, by extension, for the world, these practitioners seem to position themselves as global actors displaying what Mansilla and Gardner identify as “global self”. In all these ways, global consciousness appears to provide a meaningful framework for the interplay of the global with the local, which is a necessary condition for these processes aimed to the reshaping of religious worlds.

4.3. Resonance

The analysis of the factors underlying the making of glocal Zen can hardly avoid the question of why certain globally circulating religious elements seem to resonate better than others with individual religious worlds and end up being selected for specific glocal practices. With regard to the religious field, this problem has been briefly thematized in a limited number of studies, notably in connection with “cultural resonance” in the process of Sathya Sai’s cultural translation ([Srinivas 2010](#), pp. 337–38), and the working of “master frames” in Islamism ([Karagiannis 2018](#), pp. 22–23). Elsewhere I illustrated the “resonance factor” at work in the global repositioning of several Japanese religions in various areas, including ecology and the adoption of meditation in a non-meditational Buddhist traditions such as Shin Buddhism ([Dessi 2017](#), pp. 67–130; cf. [2013](#), pp. 40–82), and analyzed these dynamics from a pragmatist perspective ([Dessi 2020](#)) indebted to the work of [McDonnell et al. \(2017\)](#).

In-depth interviews with Sardinian practitioners were also designed to test this approach. Their narratives indicate that the choice for Zen meditation can be significantly and specifically related to previous experiences. Anna recalls that soon after she started to practice reiki, she was rather confused because of recurrent dreams related to Japan and the experience of past-life regressions; after a serendipitous encounter with a Zen teacher who interpreted her problem in terms of karma, she then decided to join Zen meditation classes. Federica confesses that she has always been fascinated by the Orient, and especially by the detachment from worldly things illustrated in the life of the Buddha, something that resonated with her aspiration for inner freedom. For Enrica, the encounter with Zen meditation took place within the context of a personal search for something fully alternative to institutional Catholicism; however, as she specifies, it was also dependent on a preexisting fascination with Japan and a perceived resonance between Zen and her longing for silence, cleanliness/orderliness, and essentiality. Similarly, Danilo speaks of the affinity that he feels with Eastern spirituality as a whole, and particularly with the aspects of essentiality and silence. For Viviana, too, who originally joined her Zen meditation group with the aim to better control her anxiety, the experience with Zen is narrated in terms of a “return to essentiality”. Analogous considerations are made by Alessia, who narrates that her encounter with Zen meditation was the result of a quest for a “space for the cultivation of silence” in a world characterized by a “sick way of life” and lack of spirituality. Essentiality is also identified by Renato as the element that brought him to Zen, although he admits that he realized all this only after many years. In a different vein, Aldo says that for him the practice of Zen meditation is related to the recovery of spiritual dimensions that have normally been ignored and depreciated by Christianity. And Gaia, while acknowledging that the practice of Zen is something very different from all her previous experiences as a ‘spiritual seeker,’ is keen to specify that for her the encounter with Zen Buddhism has been a “homecoming”.

These narratives indicate that the choice for Zen meditation can be meaningfully related to the shape of individual religious worlds, and to its perceived resonance with specific preexisting elements (e.g., a certain fascination with Japan or the ‘East,’ a longing for silence or essentiality). However, they also suggest that the congruence alone of ideas and practices circulating in the global cultural network with local religious worlds would not be sufficient to enable these processes of glocalization. The reshaping of religious worlds rather seems to require a fair amount of creative work. This aspect clearly emerges from the way in which practitioners establish a connection between Zen Buddhism and the solution of specific problems that they have encountered in life. For Anna, for example, realizing the resonance of her ‘Japanese’ dreams and past-life regressions with Buddhist views of rebirth opened the way to the adoption of Zen meditation techniques with the aim to overcome a period of “spiritual confusion”. Alessia saw in Zen a longed-for “space for the cultivation of silence” and simultaneously a way out of our modern “sick way of life”. For Viviana, the return to the familiar dimension of “essentiality” perceived in Zen Buddhism was initially intertwined with a strategy to manage anxiety. And in Renato’s words, the perceived resonance with the theme of “essentiality” contributed instead to the adoption of Zen meditation as a tool to manage more effectively his own “inner dialogue”. These and other narratives show that resonance, rather than being an inherent quality of cultural objects, can be understood as a process through which global ideas and practices (in this case Zen meditation) congruent with aspects of the local experience come to be related by individuals to the sphere of problem solving, thus opening the way to the reshaping of religious worlds (Dessi 2020; cf. McDonnell et al. 2017). It is worth noting that a pragmatist approach to resonance carries implications also for the understanding of the power relations underlying the process of religious glocalization. This is especially evident for those practitioners whose glocal Zen has been functional to the solution of problems such as anxiety, spiritual and emotional confusion, or to the achievement of some degree of inner freedom—all of which are easily understandable in terms of self-empowerment. Finally, there are also indications that individuals can become aware of such resonances

retrospectively, as in the case of Renato, who confesses that at the beginning he did not realize at all that his own quest for essentiality was what primarily made Zen practice so familiar to him.

5. Conclusions

Against the backdrop of East Asian Buddhism's increasing presence in Italy, this paper has illustrated the case studies of the three Zen meditation centers operating in Sardinia, which have (or have had) ties with mainstream Italian Zen Buddhism (Shinrin Zendo, Dojo Zen nel Centro), and with the Christian Zen popularized by sectors of the Jesuits (Corso di Meditazione Zen), respectively. Whereas the institutional activities and practices of these groups show little signs of hybridization, the narratives of individual practitioners reveal instead various interesting cases of glocalization. My analysis indicates that their glocal Zen results from the creative incorporation of *zazen* or *zazen*-like meditation within a specific part of their religious worlds (which I identified as the *structure of legitimation*) providing the link between the super-empirical domain and their personal constellation of desired goods.

Moreover, practitioners' experiences show that these processes of glocalization leading to the reshaping of individual religious worlds are underlain by at least three main factors, which I have characterized in terms of availability, global consciousness, and resonance. The first factor refers to the way in which Zen meditational techniques can become accessible to individual practitioners through the global cultural network and the global and local constraints/incentives inherent in its working. The second refers instead to ongoing changes in collective consciousness encouraging individuals to feel and understand their Zen practice as something globally meaningful, and themselves as global actors. And by exploring the issue of resonance, I have shown that Zen meditation has come to be selected by individual practitioners for their glocal practices both because of a certain congruence with the preexisting shape of their religious worlds and its adaptability for the solution of specific psychological or spiritual problems.

Finally, it is also worthy of mention that not all of these three factors are intrinsically related to the dynamics of globalization. Among them, the only one that can be characterized as global per se is certainly global consciousness, which allows individuals to place their own religious worlds within an all-encompassing global narrative, thus providing the indispensable framework for processes of glocalization. As for availability, it could also refer as such to the way in which *local* contents can become accessible to religious actors, although, strictly speaking, any cultural formations are the result of previous waves of globalization and glocalization. As aptly put by Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2009, p. 109), "all cultures are hybrid all along". Resonance, too, can be in principle (and in practice) also about congruence with *local* contents and their selection for a sort of 'ordinary' (i.e., not globally oriented) reshaping of individual religious worlds. This indicates that, at a more general level, the exploration of factors such as availability and resonance can also be useful for a more nuanced understanding of various other kinds of religious change in contemporary societies.

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed exploration of these three meditation groups encompassing a wider range of dynamics, as well as a more articulated overview of the Italian and Sardinian religious (and Buddhist) context, see Dessì (forthcoming a).
- ² For an analysis of the Scuola di Meditazione, see Dessì (forthcoming b).
- ³ Qualitative research for this article was conducted in Sardinia from August 2021 to March 2022 as part of the project “The Globalization of East Asian Religions in Comparative Perspective” supported by a grant of the Oesterreichischen Nationalbank at the University of Vienna (2020–2022). It included participant observation during meditation sessions and other gatherings, informal and in-depth interviews with members, and document search focused on the materials produced/published by these groups either in hard copy or online. In-depth interviews were semi-structured and conducted with eighteen members (8 female and 10 male) including both leaders and ordinary practitioners, starting with a first sample of interviewees identified through existing networks and then enlarged through the snowball effect. All names of interviewees have been anonymized (except for those of the leaders), and given the very small size of these groups any details that might indirectly lead to their identification have been omitted. Fictitious names of practitioners are followed at their first occurrence by the initials of their respective groups: Corso di Meditazione Zen (CMZ), Dojo Zen nel Centro (DZC), and Shinrin Zendo (SZ). Unless otherwise specified, quotes refer hereafter to the contents of interviews with them. This research would not have been possible without the most precious help of Carla Siciliano, Father Davide Magni, Massimo Loriga, Angela Defalchi, Davide Kyogen Colombu, and still others whom I would like to thank collectively here. My sincere thanks also go to Lukas Pokorny, Elisabetta Porcu and three anonymous reviewers for useful comments.
- ⁴ For most of these Sardinian practitioners the encounter with Zen has not led to a radical reshaping of their religious identities following Buddhist orthodoxy. However, this is not to deny that the experiences of ‘converts,’ too, can be explored (through an in-depth approach admittedly beyond the scope of this article) from the perspective of glocalization—unless, of course, one thinks that their conversion is necessarily the result of a total overwriting of their religious worlds without any interplay between the global level (represented here by Zen Buddhism) and the local level (represented by the various facets of their individual identities).
- ⁵ By “global sensitivity” Mansilla and Gardner mean “our awareness of local experience as a manifestation of broader developments in the planet;” by “global understanding,” “our capacity to think in flexible and informed ways about contemporary worldwide developments;” and by “global self,” “a perception of ourselves as global actors, a sense of planetary belonging and membership in humanity that guides our actions and prompts our civic commitments” (Mansilla and Gardner 2007, p. 59).

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