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Suffering and Deification: The Goddess in the Japanese Period Film

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Suffering is an important theme in Japanese religion; it is also an important theme in traditional narrative and, especially, in Japanese film.¹ This can be seen by comparing the structure of the rituals for spirit possession and the narrative structure in the period film.² Spirit possession (*kamigakari*) is still a contemporary feature of Japanese religion especially in the context of exorcisms to cure illness. Exorcisms are usually performed by a couple: a female medium is put into a trance; the malevolent spirit causing the illness in the patient is transferred to her; the medium voices the identity of the spirit. The male religious specialist is responsible for transferring the spirit to the medium, engaging in a dialogue with it (*mondō*), and meeting the demands of the spirit or sending it away.³

What characterizes the oldest recorded case of spirit possession and the founders of many of the New Religions of Japan is the deification of the medium through possession by a powerful deity. This is documented as far back as the *Kojiki* (712) in a chapter describing the possession of Empress Jingū by deities that promise her Korea (96-97); although the possession is induced by her husband by playing the lute (*koto*), the Prime Minister conducts the interrogation; he refers to the empress as "this deity."⁴

Deification is also achieved directly through great suffering. For example, in the Fujiwara Yoshiko, consort of

Emperor Kammu and mother of his son, was accused of cursing the emperor; she and her son were arrested and eventually forced to kill themselves in 807. Along with six men, in 863 she was pacified in a great ceremony at the palace and later enshrined as one of the deities at the Upper Angry Spirits Shrine (Kami Goryō Jinja) after years of demonstrating her power and anger.⁵

The fourteenth-century *Shintōshū* includes stories of humans transformed into deities after great suffering.⁶ Here we have the story of a pregnant consort of an Indian king: her head was cut off, yet she gave birth and suckled the baby while being protected by wild animals. Later, king, consort, and baby flew away to Japan to become the deities of the three Hachiman Shrines.

From the first half of the nineteenth century until about the 1970s, many New Religions arose in Japan in response to economic crises, modernization, and even the Emperor's renunciation of his divinity. What characterizes a sizable number of them is deification of their founders through spirit possession after periods of great suffering.⁷

The first example is Tenrikyō, founded by a woman. Nakayama Miki (1798-1887). Although she wanted to become a Buddhist nun, she was married off at thirteen. Her new family was well-to-do, but she was over-burdened by responsibilities at home and in the

business. Her husband's mistress tried to poison her. She failed to recover after the birth of her sixth child in 1837.

In 1838, she experienced her first possession. A mountain ascetic was called in to perform an exorcism on her son. When the medium failed to arrive, Miki took her place: but instead of the usual local and minor spirit suspected of causing his pain, she was possessed by "the true and original God." He demanded her for his shrine to carry out his work. From 1854, she was recognized for her ability to guaranteeing safe childbirth and to heal the sick. One day, she claimed her divinity and unique position by wearing red. She was recognized as the Shrine of the Sun/Moon, the cosmos: the god was "God the Parent" and she was "Worthy Parent." Even though withdrawn from the world, the Worthy Parent remains at the sect center, the Jiba, and, as the "Mother of all humanity," continues her work to save all humankind.⁸

The second sect is Ōmotokyō, founded by another woman, Deguchi Nao (1837-1919). Born into poverty during one of Japan's worst famines, she endured a series of miseries: an aunt who committed suicide to force her to marry and whose ghost attacked her with fevers; an alcoholic for a husband and his death after an accident; destitution; of eight surviving children, one attempted suicide and disappeared, another was killed in the Sino-Japanese War, and two went mad with puerperal psychosis.

Just afterward the last incident, in 1892 she had a series of initiatory dreams and shortly after fell into a series of violent trances in which she was bounced up and down and emitted deep roars. In a *mondō* between herself and the roaring voice, the spirit identified himself as Ushitora no Konjin, who demanded Nao as his shrine and to transform the world, which had been ruined by the government headed by the emperor; they would be replaced and a paradise on earth created. She continued to have these episodes until she was arrested and confined to her house, where she began the automatic writing that she would continue for twenty-seven years. Upon release, she demonstrated her power to heal the sick. Inevitably a cult rose around her, as she was recognized as a living god, whether in or out of trance.⁹

What connects these two female founders of early New Religions is their long initiation by suffering, unsolicited possession by a powerful, transcendent god, mission to transform a suffering world, and proof of divine status through healing and/or automatic writing. What connects the religious background of the times with the films is the structure of complaint against the ills of the world.

Now, let us look at two films scripted by Hashimoto Shinobu (1918-), who first gained fame for his collaborations with Kurosawa Akira on the 1950 *Rashomon*.¹⁰ The first film is *Night*

Drum (1958), directed by Imai Tadashi (1912-1991)¹¹ and based on a play by Chikamatsu Monzaemon.¹² The year is 1706. A samurai, after a year or more on duty in the capital, returns to his home province to find that his wife has committed adultery. He forgives her, but family members demand her death. Then, four of them go to the imperial capital Kyoto and take their revenge on the guilty party, a visiting drum teacher.

The film tells the story in a series of flashbacks. The flashback works like the *monogatari*, the angry spirit's tale told during the *mondō*. Telling the story are four characters: the elder and younger sisters of the husband; the husband's best friend; and finally, the wife. As it turns out, she was betrayed by her husband's friend, who tried to rape her; she feared being betrayed by a visiting drum teacher, who knew about it. So, she seduced him to keep him quiet by implicating him in a crime punishable by crucifixion. Thus, the content of the flashbacks is the story of the wife's suffering and execution by her husband. Various sources of the suffering can be identified: her husband's position, which requires his absence and leaves her vulnerable; the men who take advantage of her; the family, who force her death; and their fear of the lord, who, in order to reduce his expenses, would readily dismiss the entire family from his service because it could not keep its house in order. The wife's suffering—and the husband's role in it—lead to his

painful enlightenment about his world. When he has killed the drum teacher, he pries his fingers off his sword and drops it. He then turns and stares blankly at the crowd of commoners: the world of the hereditary soldier, the samurai, is a source of infinite suffering and his attitude has changed.

Another film scripted by Hashimoto is the famous 1962 *Harakiri*, directed by Kobayashi Masaki.¹³ An unemployed soldier arrives at the mansion of a powerful vassal of the military dictator (*shogun*) to request permission to commit suicide there; he also asks specifically for three men to act as seconds. As they wait, he takes the opportunity to tell the story of his life. It is grim: his lord forced to commit suicide; his best friend forced to commit suicide; grinding poverty with his daughter and son of his best friend; their marriage and the birth of his grandson; the child's illness and his father's desperate attempts to find work; then his horrific suicide in that same mansion; the deaths of the old soldier's daughter and grandson; and his revenge on those three awaited seconds. All this is told in a series of flashbacks. What is clear, however, is that he has caused his own suffering: he was too proud a samurai to allow his daughter to become a concubine in a rich house; he was too proud a samurai to sell his sword for money to get a doctor and medicine for his grandson. It is only when his son-in-law's body is brought home that he realizes that the code,

the basis of his samurai pride, is the same that had legitimated the cruelty of forcing his son-in-law to commit suicide with the bamboo sword that he was carrying.

Our hero then represents the angry spirit of the dead because he is the only one capable of taking revenge: he humiliates the three seconds and attacks the shrine of the founding ancestor of the house. However, it is the suffering of his daughter that he embodies: she loses her husband, loses her son, and loses her life to tuberculosis. The lesson is that women must suffer to teach men that their world is a world of suffering and in dire need of renovation.

This rejection of the world of suffering created by political leaders, feudal and modern, is the very core of the message of the female (and male) founders of the New Religions. It placed them in direct confrontation and competition with the Emperor for political and religious authority; after all, the great renovation was supposed to have occurred with the Meiji Restoration of 1867.¹⁴ Ōmotokyō was suppressed twice by the government before the second World War even though Ōmoto coped with the changes by changing itself.¹⁵

Spirit possession is a form of "sacred theater": sacred because of the "descent of divinity into humans...[theater because of the] cultural interaction between 'performers' and 'audience.'"¹⁶ The films with their structure of spirit

possession, statement of grievances, and implied call for world renovation also challenge the legitimacy of the political order that supervises the world of suffering. But where is the medium in the film? Where is the goddess? In the New Religions, control of the organization is often passed on to a male. In film, the director and the script writer are usually if not exclusively male. The female carries the burden of victimization by the world to emphasize the suffering of the world. Indeed, the only thing that is left of the medium is the message.

Endnotes

¹For example, see Jolyon Baraka Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012); Yoshiko Okuyama, "Shinto and Buddhist Metaphors in *Departures*," *Journal of Religion and Film* 17 no. 1 (April 2013), online journal retrieved February 17, 2015 from <<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/39>>; and S.A. Thornton, *The Japanese Period Film: A Critical Analysis* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2008).

Endnotes

²See, for example, Benito Otolani, *The Japanese Theatre* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 1990); Irit Averbuch, "Shamanic Dance in Japan: The Choreography of Possession in Kagura Performance," *Asian Folklore Studies* 57 no. 2 (1998), pp. 293-329; and Terence Lancashire, "From Spirit Possession to Ritual Theater: A Potential Scenario for the Development of Japanese Kagura," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 36 (2004):, pp. 90-108. Not everyone is agreed; for example, on the creation of the myth of the origins of *nō* as a post-war "invented tradition," see Eric C. Rath, *The Ethos of Noh: Actors and Their Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012).

³Hori Ichiro, *Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change*, ed. by Joseph Ma. Kitagawa and Alan L. Miller (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 77-80. For spirit possession, see Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975) and Birgit Staemmer, *Chinkon Kishin: Mediated Spirit Possession in Japanese New Religions*, BUNKA - WENHUA. Tübinger Ostasiatische Forschungen. Tuebingen East Asian Studies (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2009), retrieved February 18, 2015 from <http://books.google.com/books/about/Chinkon_Kishin.html?id=hrfQY55DihUC>.

⁴For a complete discussion, see Staemmler, pp. 51-55. The sections of the *Kojiki* quoted can be found in Basil Chamberlain, trans., *Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters* (Tokyo: Asiatic Society of Japan, 1919), pp. 284-287, retrieved February 18, 2015 from <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/kj/kj103.htm>> and <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/shi/kj/kj104.htm>>. This is a

solicited possession. For solicited versus unsolicited possession, see Staemmler, pp. 22-24.

⁵For the background and ceremony, see Neil McMullin, "On Placating the Gods and Pacifying the Populace: The Case of the Gion "Goryō" Cult," *History of Religions* 27 no. 3, Shintō as Religion and as Ideology: Perspectives from the History of Religions (Feb., 1988), pp. 288-290 (270-293), retrieved February 18, 2015 from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062279>>; Kuroda Toshio, "The World of Spirit Pacification: Issues of State and Religion," translated by Allan Grappard, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 23 nos. 3-4 (1996), pp. 321-351, retrieved February 18, 2015 from <<http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/nfile/2607>>; and Hori, op. cit. Staemmler covers the modern period of spirit possession and pacification.

⁶For a discussion and study of the "The Avatars of Kumano," see Haruo Shirane, ed. *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 886-099.

⁷The first is the Kurozumikyō, founded by a male Shintō priest, Kurozumi Munetada (1780-1850). After years of devotion to his and was bedridden for three years until it occurred to him that death was not what his parents would have wanted for him and that he might be healed if he changed his attitude and lived a life of gratitude to the gods. On the morning of the winter solstice of 1814, he rose early, prayed to the rising sun, and experienced the Sun Goddess entering his body. He then took up preaching and healing. However, not until 1846 were the teachings systematized and published: gratitude, popular morality, and taking part in the divinity of the Sun Goddess. In 1876, it was recognized as Sect Shintō.

⁸ See, for example, Peter B. Clarke, "Tenrikyō," in *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2006), retrieved February 19 2015 from <<https://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://literati.credoreference.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/content/entry/routnrm/tenrikyo/0>>.

⁹ Susumu Shimazono, "The Living Kami Idea in the New Religions of Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6 no. 3 (September 1979), p. 396 (389-412).

¹⁰ *Rashomon*, directed by Kurosawa Akira, Homevision (2001), 88 minutes, VHS.

¹¹ *Yoru no tsuzumi (Night Drum)*, The Criterion Collection, directed by Imai Tadashi, Japan: Shōchiku Eiga (1958), 95 minutes, retrieved January 23, 2015 from at www.hulu.com.

¹² "The Drum of the Waves of Horikawa (Horikawa Nami no Tsuzumi)," in *Major Plays of Chikamatsu*, translated by Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), pp. 57-90.

¹³ *Seppuku (Harakiri)*, The Criterion Collection, directed by Kobayashi Masaki, Japan: Shōchiku Eiga (1962), retrieved January 25, 2015 from www.hulu.com.

¹⁴ Staemmler, p. 95.

¹⁵ Changes included incorporated official Shintō doctrine to create "Kodo Omoto" or "Omoto of the Royal Way." Peter B. Clarke, "Omoto (great origin)," in *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge), retrieved February 19 2015 from <https://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://literati.edoreference.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/content/entry/routnrm/omoto_great_origin/0>.

¹⁶ Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Old World to the New World: Origins of the Shakers* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 5.