

# Aspects of Medieval Japanese Religion

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**Abstract:** The focus of this Special Issue is on medieval Japanese religion. Although Kamakura “new” Buddhist schools are usually taken as unquestioned landmarks of the medieval religious landscape, it is necessary to add complexity to this static picture in order to grasp the dynamic and hybrid character of the religious practices and theories that were produced during this historical period. This Special Issue will shed light on the diversity of medieval Japanese religion by adopting a wide range of analytical approaches, encompassing various fields of knowledge such as history, philosophy, materiality, literature, medical studies, and body theories. Its purpose is to expand the interpretative boundaries of medieval Japanese religion beyond Buddhism by emphasizing the importance of mountain asceticism (Shugendō), Yin and Yang (Onmyōdō) rituals, medical and so-teriological practices, combinatory paradigms between local gods and Buddhist deities (medieval Shintō), hagiographies, religious cartography, conflations between performative arts and medieval Shintō mythologies, and material culture. This issue will foster scholarly comprehension of medieval Japanese religion as a growing network of heterogeneous religious traditions in permanent dialogue and reciprocal transformation. While there is a moderate amount of works that address some of the aspects described above, there is yet no publication attempting to embrace all these interrelated elements within a single volume. The present issue will attempt to make up for this lack. At the same time, it will provide a crucial contribution to the broad field of premodern Japanese religions, demonstrating the inadequacy of a rigid interpretative approach based on sectarian divisions and doctrinal separation. Our project underlines the hermeneutical importance of developing a polyphonic vision of the multifarious reality that lies at the core of medieval Japanese religion.

**Keywords:** medieval Japanese religion; Buddhism; Shugendō; Onmyōdō; Shintō; *kami*; buddhas; materiality; body theory; actor-network theory



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## 1. Flexible Taxonomies and Marine Networks

The multifaceted assemblage of religious phenomena, which began with a reconceptualization of the rituals for worshipping the *kami* after the insurrection of Taira no Masakado 平将門 (?–940) and extended until the first half of the seventeenth century, can be imagined as the *mare magnum* of medieval Japanese religion.<sup>1</sup> Within the fluidity of this cultural arena the fixity of the protagonists' names, i.e., Buddhism (*bukkyō* 仏教), Shintō 神道,<sup>2</sup> Onmyōdō 陰陽道, and Shugendō 修験道, hides more than it reveals.<sup>3</sup> A rigid taxonomical approach based on reassuring (although fictive) clear-cut divisions between different nomenclatures simply ends up wiping away all the “twilights zones”, “interception points”, and “hybrid terrains”, where medieval religious traditions mingled, mutually fertilized, and sprouted (or withered) new rhizomes of their constitutive networks. As a whole, medieval Japanese religion can be imagined as an immense fractal, the innumerable facets of which are charac-

terized by a diverse, fluid, and polysemic nature that prioritizes inclusion and hybridity over exclusion and sterilization (cf. Faure 2012, pp. 3–7; 2015a, pp. 10–16; 2015b, p. 7).

And yet, it may be worth asking if the only possible *modus operandi* of the porous network of Japanese medieval religion had to be invariably denoted by an inexorable fluidity and dissolution of one element into its opposite. The answer seems to be negative because the network, in order to survive, also needs moments of (apparent) crystallization. In these circumstances, certain gods, social actors, sectarian forms, and doctrinal discourses reach an equilibrium, which creates an illusion of stability. A case in point could be the diverse cultural forms associated with those gods, which Yamoto Hiroko defines as “strange” or “alien deities” (*ijin* 異神), such as Kōjin 荒神, Matarajin 摩多羅神, or Gozu Tennō 牛頭天王 (Yamamoto 2003). Sometimes the names of these gods whose presence has always informed a plurality of religious taxonomies give the impression of transforming into fixed stars, the attractive power of which freezes the possible combinations with other nodes of different networks in a sort of immobile perfection. Nevertheless, an active network of gods and human actors prospers only if a certain amount of noise freely circulates within the system. A perfectly stabilized religious network may survive for a few or many years but stagnation inevitably condemns it to death if noise does not intervene to shake the stasis, provoking unpredictable expansions (or contractions) of the system itself.

For instance, the Onmyōdō text *Hoki naiden* 篋籙内伝 (late fourteenth century) played a crucial role in solidifying certain distinctive functions of Gozu Tennō, whose identity of translocal pestilence deity (*ekijin* 疫神) active in India, China, and Japan was recast as a benevolent calendrical god (*rekijin* 曆神). Wearing this new mask, Gozu Tennō started to be worshiped under the cumulative name of “God of the Heavenly Way” (Tendōshin 天道神), an astral and directional god who incorporated the essence of all the other celestial bodies and bestowed good fortune to all his devotees. The *Onmyō ryakusho* 陰陽略書 (late Heian period) already mentioned the importance of Tendōshin in conjunction with Tentoku 天徳, another ambulatory deity (*yugyōjin* 遊行神) whose peregrinations through space determined auspicious directions. According to this text, the correct direction for the placenta disposal (*ena osame* 胞衣納め) always had to correspond to Tentoku’s direction but, in case of accidental transgressions of the regulations against impurity (*kinki* 禁忌), it could also be placed in the spatial sector of Tendōshin (Suzuki 2021, p. 165). The *Onmyō ryakusho* could have influenced the *Hoki naiden* reinterpretation of the myth of Gozu Tennō in which not only the Ox Head god is equated with Tendōshin, but also Somin Shōrai 蘇民将来, the humble peasant who gave hospitality to Gozu Tennō on his way to India to marry the *nāga* princess Harisaijo 波梨采女, is identified as Tentoku (Faure 2021, p. 118).

This progressive neutering of the lethal nature of Gozu Tennō—who was transformed from a dangerous pestilence deity into an omnipotent astral god of the Onmyōdō pantheon—reduced his protean character, providing the illusion of what we have previously defined as a moment of crystallization or stasis of the network. On the contrary, even in this period Gozu Tennō never stopped transcending taxonomies and continued to expand his divine complexity, being alternatively associated with the Healing Buddha Yakushi Nyorai 薬師如来, the twelve *yakṣa* generals of Yakushi’s retinue (alias the twelve months or the twelve years of the sexagesimal circle), the Cosmic Buddha Dainichi Nyorai 大日如来, or the terrific deity Jadokkeshin 蛇毒気神. It is important to keep in mind that in all these moments of crystallization there was an original aspect of the god that always remained intact. Since his epiphany, Gozu Tennō has always been considered an allochthonous deity (*toraijin* 渡来神), which embodied a database of medico-religious knowledge about the etiology and cure of epidemics shared between Tenjiku 天竺 (India), Shintan 震旦 (China), and Japan (*honchō* 本朝). Even after becoming an Onmyōdō directional god, Gozu Tennō did not give up his connective function between the archipelago and continental Asia but simply recalibrated its focus on the common heritage of calendric and divinatory techniques for controlling time and space. In other words, this glocal theriomorphic god worked as a sort of Latourian mediator, which generated an epidemiological as well as calendrical fertile terrain where medieval Japan could negotiate its geographical marginality within the

paradigm of the Three Countries (*sangoku* 三国) staying connected with the broad religious culture of mainland Asia (cf. [Moerman 2021](#)).

If we pinpoint fluidity as the key feature of medieval Japanese religions, the ultimate zone of contact where all the knots of the religious networks interwove was not the inland part of the archipelago but rather its marine sectors (cf. [Simpson 2018](#)). In her recent study on the diffusion of the cult of Shinra Myōjin 新羅明神 in medieval Japan, Sujung Kim describes the sea inlet that unites and at the same time separates Japan from China and Korea as the East Asian “Mediterranean”, stressing its centrality as the watery conduit of religious ideas and practices ([Kim 2020](#), p. 2). Likewise, Fabio Rambelli speculates about the marine influence on medieval Japanese religions, defining the sea as a “huge semiotic shifter”, which did not simply transport meanings from one shore to the other but also turned upside down the significance of the entities it mobilized, transforming, for instance, purity into impurity and vice versa ([Rambelli 2018](#), p. xvii).

It is not a coincidence that since the twelfth century the port of Hakata in northern Kyūshū became one of the most relevant international hub for religious as well as commercial exchanges between Japan and what Andrew Goble calls the sphere of “East Asian macro-culture” ([Goble 2011](#), p. xiv). Medieval Hakata hosted sparkling communities of Chinese merchants and monks who also worked as proxies in organizing trading/cultural missions on behalf of the Kamakura shogunate (the Hōjō 北条, in particular) or powerful temples such as the Tōfukuji 東福寺 in Kyoto. A center of this international marine network was the Munakata Shrine 宗像神社. The male members of its priestly lineages were often married to Chinese women who descended from powerful trading families in Hakata. For instance, in 1235 the Rinzai monk Enni Ben'en 円爾弁円 (1202–1280) was able to realize his project to travel to Song China thanks to the logistical support of Xieguoming 謝國明, a very much respected expatriate from Huangzhou province married to a Japanese woman from Hakata ([Goble 2011](#), p. 10). Seven years later, in 1241, Enni returned to Kyoto again via Hakata, bringing with him not only commentaries on Buddhist scriptures and ritual manuals but also a precious collection of Song medical texts, which constituted part of the Tōfukuji's library. In this temple, his disciple Dōshō 道生 (1262–1331) completed his first cycle of medical studies before going to China for perfecting his background as a monastic physiatrist. Later on, Dōshō provided an oral transmission (*kuden* 口伝) about medical treatments to Mujū Ichien 無住一円 (1226–1312), author of the famous medieval collection of Buddhist tales *Shasekishū* 沙石集 (1283). Mujū in turn orally initiated his Dharma-brother Jisshō 實照 (d.u.) who finally transmitted these teachings to the Ritsu monk Kajiwara Shōzen 梶原性全 (1266–1337). The latter composed two of the most relevant medical treatises of medieval Japan, the *Ton'ishō* 頓医抄 (1304) and the *Man'anjō* 万安方 (1327), which were not only intellectually influenced but also logistically connected with the exuberant transmarine culture that had penetrated Japan via Hakata during the Kamakura period (1185–1333) (cf. [Macomber 2020](#)).

The medieval Yellow Sea can be conceived as a heterotopic place, i.e., a physical site perennially connected with other real sites through “direct or inverted analogies” ([Foucault 1986](#), p. 3). China ships (*karabune* 唐舟) were paradigmatic self-propelled heterotopic machines, which shuttled between the geographical nodes of this maritime network after being stuffed with human bodies and goods. In 1323 one of these China ships sank off the southwestern coast of Korea on its route toward Hakata, in what became known as the tragic Shin'an wreck. Among the gargantuan number of commercial items, which constituted the cargo of the *karabune*, there were more than eight million Chinese and Vietnamese coins weighing about twenty-eight tons. The Kamakura shogunate did not simply plan to use these coins as currency for trading but also as a metallurgic reserve for coating Buddhist statues ([Kim 2016](#), p. 73).<sup>4</sup> Notably, some sections of the cargo were provided with packing notes in the guise of wooden tablets (*mokkan* 木簡) reporting the names of religious solicitors (*kanjin hijiri* 勧進聖) connected with the Hakozaki Shrine 筥崎神社 in Fukuoka and the Tōfukuji ([Amino 2012](#), p. 90). This detail shows that medieval Buddhist monks were often at the center of such international business enterprises as exponents of a religious and

cultural *koinè*, which overcame the geopolitical divisions and could be fully exploited for sustaining trading activities abroad as well as domestically. For instance, the *kanjin hijiri* who were supposed to be among the recipients of the lost cargo of this China ship planned on using some of the less luxurious imported Chinese goods as exotic merchandizing for attracting lay devotees during their itinerant preaching activities in fundraising campaigns on behalf of important temples (cf. Andrei 2018). These examples demonstrate that medieval social actors probably categorized as “religion” certain practices and logic that do not necessarily belong to that conceptual frame according to our contemporary mindscape. On the contrary, medieval actants went through apparently unrelated semantic fields of reality such as sailing or trading to negotiate their conceptualizations of religion. Trying to understand the complex networks of medieval religion requires us to deactivate, at least partially, our contingent *forma mentis* about what is and what is not a religion in order to include within the framework all those phenomena, which are usually left outside the picture (cf. Iyanaga 2021, pp. 389–92).

The international currents that rippled the water of the sea of medieval religion, were also represented by the substantial trilingualism that characterized most of the written or oral productions of this period. For instance, in the *Myōgishingyōshū* 明義進行集 Shinzui 信瑞 (?–1279), the disciple of the Pure Land master Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), noted that the latter was accustomed to reciting the three sections of the *Amidakyō* 阿彌陀經 every day while alternating the Tang reading of the characters (*to'on* 唐音), the Wu reading (*go'on* 呉音), and the Japanese paraphrase of the Chinese sentences (*kundoku* 訓読). In addition to this linguistic base, which was made of classical Chinese (*kanbun* 漢文) with all its phonetic renderings, there was also Sanskrit (*bongo* 梵語), the “seed letters” (*shuji* 種子) of which functioned as graphic and aural embodiments of buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as magic graphemes and sounds for mantras (*shingon* 真言) and *dhāraṇī* (*darani* 陀羅尼). These two Chinese and Indian scriptural codes were often interwoven within a third autochthonous one. This last written system, in turn, included a multiplicity of other hybrid writing styles, some of which were based on the combination of Chinese characters and phonetic signs (*kanji kana majiri* 漢字假名混じり), a writing style often used in the collections of Buddhist tales (*setsuwa* 説話), while some others show a prevalence of Japanese words (*wago* 和語). For example, Japanese poems (*waka* 和歌) lexically prioritized Japanese terms were expressed through phonetic signs rather than Chinese characters. In various ritual contexts such as, for instance, the Ise consecration ceremonies (Ise *kanjō* 伊勢灌頂), certain *wago* contained in *waka* anthologies were conceived as a sort of Japanese mantra especially suitable for summoning the *kami* that inhabited the body-mind (*kokoro* 心) of the humans and were particularly receptive when exposed to the sonic vibrations of specific Japanese words (cf. Uejima 2021, pp. 24–25; Rambelli and Porath 2022). Not only the logic and practices of medieval religion were intimately related to trans-Asian discourses, but also the language through which transmission and reception took place was intrinsically hybrid and multicultural (Dolce 2022, pp. 22–23).

## 2. Swinging Kami

The expression “amalgamation between *kami* and buddhas” (*shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合) defines the combinatory paradigms, which informed the relationships between these two different groups of deities from the mid-sixth century to April 1868 when the Meiji government issued the *kami*-buddha clarification edicts (*shinbutsu hanzenrei* 神仏判然令) and forcefully put an end to this companionship. The term *shinbutsu shūgō* appeared for the first time in 1901 in the title of a book by Adachi Ritsuen 足立栗園 (d.u.) called *Kinsei shinbutsu shūgō ben* 近世神仏習合弁 (Suzuki 2020, pp. 39, 233). A few years later in the article “Honji suijaku setsu no kigen ni tsuite” 本地垂迹説の起源について (1907) the famous scholar of Japanese religion, Tsuji Zennosuke 辻善之助 (1877–1955), reused Adachi’s expression *shinbutsu shūgō* as a heuristic term for describing the medieval theories concerning buddhas as “original grounds/forms” (*honji butsu* 本地仏) of the *kami*, which were, in turn, conceived as their local “traces” (*suijaku jin* 垂迹神). From that moment

on the expression *shinbutsu shūgō* spread among scholars in Japan as well as abroad. It is interesting to note that scholars were able to develop a scientific terminology such as *shinbutsu shūgō* for describing the ubiquitous combinatory paradigms between *kami* and buddhas only in reaction to the official disentanglement of *kami* from buddhas (*shinbutsu bunri* 神仏分離) at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868–1911). In other words, the technical term “*shinbutsu shūgō*” can be taken as an intellectual creation, which was directly triggered by its opposite, i.e., the “*shibutsu bunri*” phase.

And yet, Adachi Ritsuen did not invent the compound *shinbutsu shūgō* by himself but borrowed it from an expression used by Yoshida Kanetomo in the *Yuiitsu shintō myōhō yōshū* 唯一神道妙法要集 (late fifteenth century). In this text, Kanetomo theorized three types of Shintō: a lower Shintō in which *kami* played the role of avatars of Buddhist deities (*honjaku engi shintō* 本迹縁起神道), a median Shintō where the *kami* of Ise, namely Amaterasu Ōmikami 天照大神, was associated with the Dainichi Nyorai of the Womb and Diamond Realms (*ryōbu shūgō shintō* 両部習合神道), and the highest Shintō, alias Yuiitsu Shintō, where *kami* embodied the original beginning and ancestral source of everything (*genpon sōgen shintō* 元本宗源神道) (Itō 2021, p. 649). For Kanetomo both *honjaku engi shintō* and *ryōbu shūgō shintō* portrayed spurious *kami* whose perfection was oversimplified through the fictionalization of Buddhist narratives as in the first type, or clouded by the esoteric theories of Saichō 最澄 (767–822), Kūkai 空海 (774–835), Ennin 円仁 (794–864), and Enchin 円珍 (814–891) as in the second type. Kanetomo considered the *kami* who mixed (*shūgō*) with buddhas and became their avatars as inferior to those local gods who behaved as independent matrixes (*genpon*) of everything, buddhas and bodhisattvas included. In other words, Kanetomo theorized a non-Buddhist Shintō where the usual assembling paradigm was turned upside down and the *kami* functioned as origin while buddhas functioned as traces (*shinpon butsujaku* 神本仏迹).

It goes without saying that since the moment of its creation toward the end of the Muromachi period (1392–1573), the compound *shūgō* was associated with a critical nuance toward those *kami* who fell under this category. Moreover, from its rediscovery in the late Meiji period until the end of the Second World War many Japanese scholars kept applying the expression *shinbutsu shūgō* to stigmatize a sort of deterioration in the rituals and logic dedicated to the local gods, which in that historical moment had to be mandatorily conceived as independent autochthonous deities in opposition to the foreign Buddhist ones. After 1945, with the dismantling of the ideological structure of the so-called “state Shintō” (*kokka shintō* 国家神道), the term *shinbutsu shūgō* progressively lost its negative nuance. Nevertheless, until very recently Japanese scholars had been using the term *shinbutsu shūgō* for referring to amalgamation paradigms between Buddhist deities and local gods as if this was a unique religious phenomenon limited to premodern, and especially medieval, Japan. On the contrary, Yoshida Kazuhiko has demonstrated how combinatory processes between *kami* and buddhas in premodern Japan were often synchronous with other similar socio-religious phenomena that happened in a vast geo-cultural sphere extending from Central to South-East Asia. For this reason, Yoshida proposes dismissing the problematic term *shūgō* and adopting the less deprecatative, less Japan-centric, and more translocal term “merger” (*yūgō* 融合) when referring to the mingling models between Buddhist and local deities in premodern Japan as elsewhere (Yoshida 2021, pp. 11–12). Especially for what concerns medieval Japan, it is possible to say that the hybrid networks between *kami* and buddhas can be properly appreciated only when local aspects are reconnected to their larger translocal and pan-asiatic dimension.

As mentioned above, the medieval encounter between *kami* and buddhas was a gradual phenomenon with numerous paradigm shifts taking place in different historical periods. Modifications in the architectural elements of sacred sites provide valuable examples for comprehending the nature of such phases. Already before the tenth century, the shrine-temple multiplexes (*jingūji* 神宮寺) showed a high level of proximity between buildings for the veneration of the *kami* and those for worshipping the buddhas. Nevertheless, the latter were built close to the main shrine (*shatō* 社頭) but still outside its external precinct.

Since the beginning of the tenth-century, prefabricated Buddhist buildings started to be temporary, transported and assembled within the shrine's precinct for occasions of special rituals, at the end of which they were dismantled and returned once again to their original external location. It was only in the eleventh century that Buddhist architecture succeeded in creating a stable hybridization of the worshiping spaces dedicated to the *kami*. For example, the *Shōyūki* 小右記 (1032) reports that in 1020 Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966–1027) offered a copy of the Human Kings Wisdom Sūtra (Nin'ō hannya kyō *kuyō* 人王般若經供養) for the *kami* of the Kamo Shrine 賀茂神社 in Kyoto. Michinaga also patronized a Dharma assembly (*hōe* 法会), which was performed by Buddhist monks in the central space between the lower hall for ritual dances (*mai dono* 舞殿) and the bridge building (*hashi dono* 橋殿) of the upper hall. This passage of the *Shōyūki* testifies to the permanent presence of Buddhist buildings such as, for instance, the *sūtra* repository (*kyōzō* 經藏) inside the inner space of the shrine and the fervent ritual activities performed by Buddhist monks within the same architectural frame (Uejima 2021, p. 583).

In the twelfth century, there was a further transformation in the nature of the Buddhist buildings included within the shrine's territory. Not only *sūtra* repositories but also *stūpa* (*buttō* 仏塔) were built in front of the main halls for the *kami*. *Buttō* belonged to an upper class of Buddhist buildings because their internal space enshrined the main statue of a buddha (*honzon* 本尊), which required Buddhist monks to perform constant rituals on its behalf. During these ritual activities, the architectonic and ceremonial center of the *jingūji* was materially represented by the *buttō* and the *honzon* within it. Because the *buttō* was built in front of the *shatō* it ended up being surrounded by other background secondary shrines the *kami* of which became architectonically and doctrinally reconfigured as Dharma-protectors (*gohōjin* 護法神). In other words, the *stūpa* was protected by a crown of shrines as much as the Buddha was guarded by the *kami* all around. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that medieval *kami* never completely gave up their terrific pre-Buddhist nature of jealous and violent guardians of the land (*chinju* 鎮守). At the end of the day *kami* always remained the ultimate owners of the territory (*jinushigami* 地主神) on which the *buttō* was erected. Mingling with Buddhist deities, medieval *kami* simply added a hitherto unknown ethical dimension to their authority, channeling a portion of their herculean power for shielding the buddhas and the Dharma against external menaces. The relevance of such a reconceptualization of *kami* from *chinju* to *gohōjin* marked the turning point between the ancient and medieval periods. In fact, before the ninth-century, Buddhist monks not only considered local gods to be unable to actively foster the Dharma, but also in need of being passively exposed to the Buddha's teachings in order to escape the suffering rooted in their status of unenlightened *samsāric* deities (*shinjin ridatsu* 神身離脱) (cf. Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, pp. 9–13).

During the Dharma assemblies, there was a ritual moment called "invitation of the Dharma-protector deities" (*gohōjin kanjō* 護法神勧請) during which Buddhist monks recited invocatory formulas in *kundoku* style for summoning the *kami* to the ceremonial arena. The guest gods were divided into two categories: the group of heavenly beings (*tenshu* 天衆) and the earthly crowd (*jirui* 地類). *Tenshu* presided over the upper realms (*jōkai* 上界), i.e., the form realm (*shikikai* 色界) and the formless realm (*mushikikai* 無色界), while *jirui* governed the lower realm (*gekai* 下界), alias the realm of desire (*yokukai* 欲界), which was also inhabited by the humans. *Tenshu* included powerful Indian gods such as Brahmā, Indra, the Four Heavenly Kings, *nāga* Kings, or influent Chinese astral deities such as "the star of fundamental destiny" (Honmyōshō 本令星), which was another name for Shukujin 宿神 or the "birth star" that watches over each person from birth to death. Within the *tenshu*, there were also Chinese astrological deities such as Zokushō 孺星, which represents the annual star in charge of regulating the life (and death) of all the individuals born during that year. In opposition to this Indo-Chinese group of non-Buddhist deities who provided their services for the sake of the Dharma since long ago, there was the *jirui* crowd to which Japanese gods (Daimyōjin 大明神) also belonged, together with a multitude of other chthonian and demonic deities. Unlike the *tenshu*, the *jirui* had been

included in the Dharma-protectors' category only in recent times and were still perceived as potentially subversive. Once shielded by this curtain of ex-natural-born killers, now hired as bodyguards of the Dharma, monks could finally start exposing the teachings of the Buddha.

At this point, a fundamental question may concern the level of external diffusion of these Buddhist taxonomies about local deities in standard medieval society beyond monastic circles. A possible answer is provided by an oath wooden tablet (*kishō mokkan* 起請木簡), which was excavated in the Shiotsukō 塩津港 archeological site on the northern side of Biwa Lake in 2006. This oath wooden tablet was composed in 1137 by a business agent, a certain Kusabe no Yukimoto 草部行元, who was in charge of making fluvial transportation of commercial goods on behalf of the governors of the Ōmi domain (present-day Shiga prefecture). In the upper part of the tablet, Yukimoto wrote a list of names of powerful Indian deities specifying their connection with the upper realms. In the mid part, the agent copied the names of those local deities who belonged to the lower realm mentioning Hachiman Daibosatsu, Kamo shimo kami 賀茂下上, all the countless Daimyōjin, Sannō shichisha 山王七社 who protected the Ōmi domain, and the four guardian deities of Shiotsukō: Gosho Daimyōjin 五所大明神, Inakakehafuriyama 稲懸祝山, Tsu Myōjin 津明神, and Wakamiya Sansho 若宮三所. Finally, in the lower part of the tablet, Yukimoto wrote that he had sworn in front of all the great and small *kami* (*daishō no kami* 大小神) of Japan not to lose even one single piece of baggage, or else “may the punishment of (all the above mentioned) *kami* penetrate the eighty-four thousands pores (of my body)” (*goshinbachi wo hachiman shisen ke-kuchi-ana goto kaburubeku to mōsu* 御神罰ヲ八万四千毛孔如かふるへくと申) (Uejima 2021, pp. 602–3). This oath wooden tablet demonstrates that already in the first half of the twelfth century lay members of subaltern classes adopted Buddhist taxonomies for displaying hierarchical relationships between different classes of local deities. In the specific case of the Shiotsukō *kishō mokkan* the usual list of Indian and Japanese eminent gods was further customized in order to also include the names of the four *kami* who ruled over the village. It is also interesting to consider that all these non-Buddhist translocal, as well as local deities, were not invoked by Yukimoto as benevolent protectors but rather as sharp-eyed threatening guarantors of his honesty who were ready to immediately disintegrate his body in case of transgression. In short, the hieratic aura of medieval *kami* derived from the fact of being conceptualized, at the same time, as moralized guardians of the Dharma and, if needed, ruthless killers of humans.

The second half of the Insei period (1086–1192) was the moment when the original grounds (*honji*)/traces (*suijaku*) system stabilized and started laying the doctrinal foundations for creative interpenetrations between buddhas and *kami*. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that these combinatory trends were already implemented by Buddhist monks since the early eleventh century. For instance, in the *Kanjō goganki* 灌頂御願記 (1039) Ningai 仁海 (951–1046) writes that when he was employed at the court as Shingon monk for the protection of the emperor's body (*gojisō* 護持僧) every night he stood in front of the twenty-one shrines dedicated to the emperor-protecting *kami* performing invitation ceremonies for these gods (*Kanjō goganki* 1978, p. 494). During this delicate operation, Ningai mobilized the *kami* by reciting the “magic formula of the original ground” (*honji ju* 本地呪), i.e., the mantra of the original buddha or bodhisattva associated with each individual *kami* venerated in the twenty-one shrines (Uejima 2021, p. 601). This means that by the early eleventh century Buddhist deities played a pivotal role in allowing human actors to handle extremely powerful *kami* who were willing to act as *suijaku jin* of a fixed array of *honji butsu*.

Now, it is worth asking if the *honji suijaku* paradigm was just a simple binary system based on the dyadic union of buddhas and *kami*. Of course, it was not. Each combinatory pattern was similar to a sexual intercourse between two different deities who gave birth to a third god who was, at the same time, *equal to* and *different from* the archetypal parental copula. Once plunged into the *honji suijaku* system, both buddhas and *kami* experienced a partial loss of their original identity and a partial gain of a new personality. The hybrid

god generated by the interweaving of a buddha with a *kami* should be considered an independent deity, namely neither a complete buddha nor a complete *kami* but a continuous mixage between the two original poles. Yet, are we sure that the generating gametes had always to be limited to two? To embrace each other, medieval buddhas and *kami* often needed external intermediaries such as rocks, ritual tools, paintings, clothes, human bodies, stars, equinoxes, animals, which did not limit themselves to passively fostering monogamous intercourses between Buddhist deities and local gods but actively interfered with the original dyad transforming a stable binary grid into a multi-nodal fluid network. Therefore, as we have already seen in the case of Gozu Tennō, medieval combinatory deities can be conceived as “interstitial gods” or “swing-geometry gods” (*divinità a geometria variabile*). These hybrid gods never perfectly overlapped with, but always attracted, a multitude of heterogeneous elements such as other gods, natural elements, or even human actors, which contributed to transforming these interstitial deities into something such as elusive gravitational centers continuously percolating toward the margins (cf. [Rappo 2017](#)).

Between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, another crucial phenomenon started taking place in the medieval religious landscape. Classical mythological narratives about the *kami* reported in the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (720) went through an extremely creative process of exegesis. This is what Fabio Rambelli defines as a moment of “decontextualization” and “reconfiguration” of the *kami* of the ancient period, which were employed as moldable casts for forging new highly hybridized medieval *kami* (cf. [Rambelli 2017](#), p. 238). The technical term “medieval myth” (*chūsei shinwa* 中世神話) specifically points out the removal of certain *kami* from the historical context of the ancient period and their semantic re-qualification within the medieval legitimizing discourses, most of which were explicitly linked to new models of imperial authority. It goes without saying that Buddhist deities and, in certain cases, even Hindu gods such as Viṣṇu (known via Buddhist texts) played a pivotal role in re-shaping the semantic values of medieval *kami* (cf. [Iyanaga 2009](#), pp. 264–68).

Toward the thirteenth century, further developments of medieval mythology led to the creation of teaching groups (*kyōdan* 教団) or doctrinal currents (*ryūha*) between *kami* ritualists who started producing theories (*shintō setsu* 神道説) about specific *kami* and their cultic sites such as Amaterasu and Ise Shrine (Ise Shintō 伊勢神道, Ryōbu Shintō 兩部神道), the *kami* of Mt. Miwa (Miwa-ryū Shintō 三輪流神道) (cf. [Andreeva 2017](#)), or those of Mt. Hiei (Sannō Shintō 山王神道). These *ryūha* reached their apogee in the fifteenth century when Yoshida Kanetomo created the Yuiitsu Shintō, assembling together heterogeneous theories and practices borrowed from esoteric Buddhism (Mikkyō 密教), Daoism, Onmyōdō, and even Confucianism. A bird’s eye view of all these devotional streams, which focused on extreme theoretical and ritual customizations of certain *kami* and their worshiping spaces, reveals that medieval Shintō was fundamentally an acephalous structure. Namely, it lacked a centralized doctrinal headquarters regulating the cultural productions of all the other religious centers scattered on the archipelago. In spite of the contemporary highly politicized narratives about Amaterasu and Ise Shrine as guardians of an elusive Shintō orthodoxy since the dim and distant past, the ultimate characteristic of medieval Shintō is exactly its infinite fragmentation and decentralized proliferation of heterodoxies (in the etymological sense of *eterodoxéo* or “think different”) about the *kami*.

If we want to stigmatize a trend in the thirteenth-century conceptualizations concerning the local deities, it is impossible to overlook the influence wielded by the theories on the Dharma-nature body (*hosshōshin* 法性身) of the buddhas.<sup>5</sup> According to these discourses, the imperceptible physicality of the *kami*, Amaterasu *in primis*, was described as perfectly coincident with the Dharma-nature body, which constitutes the most elevated type among the three buddha’s bodies. Such a convergence between local deities and the buddhas’ Dharma-nature body triggered a process of universalization of the *kami* who expanded their classical role of undisputed guardians of localized areas, becoming matrixes and masters of the entire cosmos. In other words, *kami* ritualists (the majority of whom were Buddhist monks) exploited the archetypal aspect of the Dharma as transcendental origin of everything for upgrading the local dimension of the *kami* and elevating them to the rank



of omnipresent cosmogonic forces. For example, the *Nakatomi no harae kunge* 中臣祓訓解 (late twelfth century), which is considered the first text of Ryōbu Shintō, reports that a *kami* (specifically Amaterasu) is the same as the Dharma-nature body and, therefore, should be referred to as “august *kami* of the great origin” (*daigen sonshin* 大元尊神) (Itō 2021, p. 649).

It is interesting to compare this statement of the *Nakatomi no harae kunge* with a passage of the *Sōshobun* 惣廋分 (1280) in which Kujō Michiie 九条道家 (1193–1252) describes the preparatory procedures for making a human-size wooden statue of Dainichi Nyorai, which had to be enshrined in the main hall of the Kōmyōbuji 光明峯寺, his funerary temple, at Higashiyama in Kyoto.<sup>6</sup> Michiie nominated Enni as religious supervisor of the project while the sculptor Kōkei 康慶 (d.u.) was asked to carve the statue of Dainichi Nyorai, the wooden materiality (literally, “wooden garment” or *misogi* 御衣木), of which came from the “pivot post” (*shin no mihashira* 心御柱) hidden under the floor of the Inner Shrine (Naikū 内宮) at Ise.<sup>7</sup> Once removed from its original chthonian dimension the pivot post was sealed against external sight with protective curtains and placed in front of the Aramatsuri Shrine (Aramatsuri no miya 荒祭宮) for receiving pacificatory rituals, which took place during the night at the Hells-valley (Jigokudani 地獄谷) (Teeuwen and Breen 2017, pp. 40–47). These precautions were necessary because the *shin no mihashira* embodied the powerful rough spirit (*ara mitama* 荒御靈) of Amaterasu (Ogawa 2014, pp. 189, 203–4). Creating a statue of Dainichi Nyorai out of the wooden pillar in which resided the *ara mitama* of Amaterasu did not simply produce a sense-able conflation between the Dharma-body (*hosshin*) of the *honji butsu* and the original enlightenment (*hongaku*) of the *suijaku jin* but also pushed this material symbiosis a step further. Being a *kami* of the lower realm (*gekai*) Amaterasu shared with humans a profound understanding of the three poisons (*sandoku* 三毒) that affected the existence of all the sentient beings in the six samsāric paths of rebirth.<sup>8</sup> Becoming one with the violent aspect (*ara mitama*) of Amaterasu, the cosmic buddha Dainichi Nyorai could channel the aggressive power of the *kami* against those spiritual obstacles that prevented the human body-mind to reach salvation. Michiie probably wanted to enshrine this highly customized statue of Dainichi Nyorai in his funerary temple for its ability to rely on a double soteriology. One salvific discourse was based on the universal and perfect enlightenment of a cosmic buddha, while the other one focused on the eschatological help provided by the wrathful spirit of a *kami* interpreted as a great expert of human things and, therefore, an ideal savior of dead.

Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Dharma assemblies declined and a different combinatory pattern appeared on the scene. According to this new model, buddhas and bodhisattvas could voluntarily “dim their radiance and become identical to the dust” (*wakō dōjin* 和光同塵), namely downgrading themselves to the level of *kami*, for saving those sentient beings who were born in the age of degeneration of the Dharma (*mappō* 末法). As a result of the *wakō dōjin* theory, *kami* faced an intense process of internalization. That is to say, *kami* were not simply conceived as universal entities due to their correspondence with the Dharma-body of the buddhas but also as internal rulers of the body-mind (*kokoro*) of the humans. Inhabiting the body-mind, *kami* were able to freely orient it toward positive (as well as negative) actions. For example, in the Noh play *Miwa* 三輪 (1465) Konparu Zenchiku 金春禪竹 (1405–1470) depicts Miwa Myōjin 三輪明神 not only as a spiritual guardian of human morality but also as a compassionate mediator who voluntarily chose to descend into a female body for taking over the five hindrances (*goshō* 五障) associated with this specific type of human rebirth (Uejima 2021, p. 621).<sup>9</sup> Zenchiku’s play marked the ultimate detachment of the medieval *kami* from the old *shinjin ridatsu* paradigm, which characterized the Buddhist approach toward local deities during the ancient period. This Noh play shows how by the fifteenth-century *kami* were not merely transformed into universal and ethically internalized entities but also became able to absorb within their bodies the psychophysical suffering of the humans for guiding them toward the final liberation. From the ancient to the medieval period, the body of the *kami* was radically reinterpreted from a site of sorrow into a site of enlightenment.

And yet, it is crucial to keep in mind that the linearity of the above-described transformation processes concerning medieval local gods is more fictive than real. Namely, there were myriad *kami* who furiously refused to be paired with buddhas or to undergo universalizing, internalizing, and moralizing metamorphosis. These die-hard “real gods” (*jissha* 実者) embodied the intrinsic resilience of the *kami* against the Buddhist combinatory paradigms of the *honji suijaku*. *Jissha* were not just a thorn in the flesh of the assembling networks between buddhas and *kami* but also constituted a precious “noise” thanks to which the system was perennially bound to reorganize its ultimate structure. The *jissha* category also included a lot of the so-called “moot” or “transversal deities”, i.e., powerful entities inhabiting the area of undecidability between buddhas and *kami*, such as vengeful spirits (*onryō* 怨霊), possessing spirits (*mono no ke* 物の怪), animal spirits of foxes, snakes, crows, rats, scolopendras, long-nosed goblins (*tengu* 天狗), or water goblins (*kappa* 河童) (cf. Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003, pp. 24–25; Castiglioni 2021). These numinous actants too encroached sometimes peacefully, some other times pugnaciously, with *kami* and buddhas, demanding for themselves appropriate ritual procedures and devotional protocols.

If we keep focusing on the issues where the assemblage between buddhas and *kami* struggled to maintain its apparent unity, death turns out to be another extremely revealing terrain. For buddhas, the human corpse was a sort of organic stage on which to perform the ideal of compassion (*jīhi* 慈悲); on the contrary, for the *kami*, the cadaver was a polluted element against which they manifested their resentment against impurities. Some *kami* never abandoned their repulsion for death defilement and pretended to be treated differently from the buddhas on such matters. Nevertheless, other *kami* were more prone to adopt a Buddhist approach even toward death. For instance, the *Hosshinshū* 発心集 (1215) reports a tale where the *kami* of Hie 日吉 tells a monk who is afraid to continue his pilgrimage, because he had to bury the corpse of a woman along the way, not to fear its course (*tatari* 祟り). The *kami* of Hie explained that the ritual protocols against impurity before visiting shrines were simply “provisional skillful means” (*kari no hōben* 仮の方便) to help humans understand the importance of purity, which ultimately coincided with sympathy (*awaremi* 憐れみ). In a later spurious version of the same text, the *kami* adds that the anti-pollution behavior of the gods actually works as a trigger for infusing into human beings the sentiment of “disgust for the contaminated world of the present and desire for the Pure Land” (*enri edo gongu jōdo* 厭離穢土欣求浄土). Another striking example of a *kami* who agreed to manifest himself in close proximity to death pollution is reported in the *Byakugōji issaikyō engi* 白毫寺一切経縁起 (1335). The Byakugōji was a Ritsu temple built on the old sacred site (*chinza chi* 鎮座地) dedicated to the cult of Kasuga Myōjin 春日明神 before the deity was ritually transferred to Kasuga Shrine 春日神社 due to the incineration of his ancient pavilion because of a thunderstorm. The *Byakugōji engi* reports that upon visiting this site Kūkai expressed the intention of transforming this territory into a burial ground for making ritual offerings on behalf of the dead (*bōkon kuyō* 亡魂供養). At that moment Kasuga Myōjin not only granted Kūkai the privilege of turning his sacred place into a cemetery but also assured an active collaboration in guiding the spirits of the dead toward the final liberation. Once a year during the section for inviting the deity (*jinbun kanjō* 神分勧請) to assist the monastic assembly for the Buddhist canon (*issaikyōe* 一切経会) the Byakugōji monks invoked Kasuga Myōjin. On this occasion, they re-staged the original gift of the land from the *kami* to Kūkai and again asked Kasuga Myōjin to keep interceding for saving the spirits of the dead. This sacred representation implied that Kasuga Myōjin was ritually invited to descend directly onto Byakugōji’s burial ground (*shidarin* 尸陀林) among the corpses (*shikabane* 尸) for marking the semantic shift of a polluted site into a field of merit (*shōchi* 勝地) and the overcoming of death in favor of salvation (*saido* 济度) (Funada 2018, pp. 324–26, 331–34).

### 3. Symbiosis, Transversality, and Rivalry: Shugendō and Onmyōdō

If we prioritize a holistic approach toward Japanese medieval religious traditions, it is impossible not to take into account Onmyōdō and Shugendō, which were among the

privileged interlocutors of the exoteric Buddhist (*kengyō* 顯教) schools in general, and the esoteric ones, i.e. Shingon and Tendai, in particular.

Onmyōdō encompasses a vast arrangement of techniques for divinatory (*senjutsu* 占術), geomantic (*sōchi* 相地), incantatory (*jujutsu* 呪術), calendrical (*reki* 曆), and astrologic (*tenmon* 天文) purposes, which were transmitted from China via Korea to Japan since at least the seventh century. In the ninth century, the imperial court established the Yin-Yang Bureau (Onmyōryō 陰陽寮) where Yin-Yang masters (*onmyōji* 陰陽師) served as officials (*kannin* 官人), together with Buddhist monks who were allowed to suspend their monastic duties to temporarily hold this position. Akazawa Haruhiko defines this sort of ministerial Onmyōdō as “narrow Onmyōdō” because it was limited to the cultural environment of the imperial court. Nevertheless, since the tenth century, literary sources such as the *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 (completed in the twelfth century) highlight the presence of what could be defined as a “diffused Onmyōdō” (Akazawa 2021, p. 50). In this enlarged cultic environment, *onmyōji* cooperated with mountain ascetics (*yamabushi* 山伏), esoteric masters (*ajari* 阿闍梨), blind monks (*mōsō* 盲僧), holy men (*hijiri* 聖), and itinerant specialists of folk performing arts such as the so-called “auditors” (*shōmonji* 唱門師) for providing divinatory practices to extra-court groups such as the urban mid-low-rank aristocracy, provincial warrior aristocracy, and even members of subaltern classes.

During the Insei period, the symbiosis between Onmyōdō and esoteric Buddhism became so intense that it is almost impossible, and even counterproductive, to try to disentangle one from the other (cf. Kanagawa Kenritsu Kanazawa Bunko 2007; Kotyk 2018). Buddhist monks were used to define Onmyōdō procedures as “external rituals” (*gehō* 外法) underlining the fact the Buddhist canon did not include Onmyōdō protocols because they did not originally refer to Buddhist deities. Nevertheless, this was simply a constative judgment, not a qualitative one, and the fruitful interaction between these two traditions can be analyzed, for instance, in the esoteric rituals based on the divinatory board (*shikiban* 式盤). These types of rituals were collectively known as “board rituals” (*banpō* 盤法) and were particularly performed by the esoteric masters of the Ono lineage (Ono-ryū 小野流) of the Shingon school. During the *banpō*, the material structure of the divinatory board symbolized the universe as well as the human body. The spheric upper part of the *shikiban* was specifically associated with the vault of heaven (*tenban* 天盤) and the human head, while the square part beneath represented the earth (*jiban* 地盤) and the lower part of the body. *Ajari* applied these board rituals to deal with special classes of esoteric deities such as Kangiten 歡喜天, Godai Kokūzō 五大虚空蔵, Godai Myōō 五大明王, Nyoirin Kannon 如意輪觀音, or Shinko-ō Bosatsu 辰狐王菩薩 (alias Dakiniten 荼枳尼天). In the lower part of the *shikiban*, there were the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac (*jūni shi* 十二支), the twenty-eight celestial mansions (*nijūhasshuku* 二十八宿), and the thirty-six birds (*sanjūroku kin* 三十六禽) associated with the twelve animals, which preside over the diurnal and nocturnal sections of the day. For instance, a board ritual dedicated to Shinko-ō Bosatsu was known as the “ritual for the sudden obtainment of supernatural powers” (*tonjōshicchi hō* 頓成悉地法) and was performed for the immediate realization of any desire as well as for creating insurmountable obstacles against enemies. In other rituals, Shinko-ō Bosatsu/Dakiniten was supposed to transform into a jewel (*hōju* 宝珠) and, by extension, into a relic of the Buddha (*busshari* 仏舍利). The presence of the jewel/relic was materially evoked, enshrining in the central space of the *shikiban* a manufactured relic or a paper talisman (*fu* 付) showing the written characters for relic. The ritual manual *Ban kenritsu saigoku hisohiso chūsho betsuden* 盤建立最極秘々中書別伝 (extant copy of the fourteenth century) specifies that since the wooden part of the *shikiban* represents the bones of the human body, the insertion of a relic within it corresponds to the installation of the “spiritual bone” (*reikotsu* 靈骨) within the body. In other words, the *shikiban* was conceptualized as a living object, the materiality of which overlapped with the human physicality and the living body (*shōjin* 生身) of the Buddha (Iyanaga 2018; Takahashi 2020, p. 193).

Moreover, the association between Dakiniten and the jewel/relic derived from the fact that Dakiniten could manifest herself as a scavenger for devouring the heart of corpses.

The heart stores the “vital energy” (literally, the “human yellow” *ninnō* 人黃), by the eating of which Dakiniten is able to discern the good or bad karmic load of the dead and the consequent reward or punishment. The shape of this mysterious “human-yellow” was said to resemble a jewel or a relic. These two objects, in turn, were interpreted as the constitutive elements of the human as well as the cosmic body (Trenson 2012, p. 113; Iyanaga 2016).

Nevertheless, the relationship between Onmyōdō and esoteric Buddhism was not merely characterized by a smooth symbiosis but also creative tension. For example, at the court Yin-Yang masters had to compete with “destiny-star masters” (*sukuyōshi* 宿曜師) who were a special type of Buddhist monk specializing in Indian divinatory techniques focused on the cult of the “birth-star deity” (Honmyōshō) as well as other stars, the moon, and the spirits of eclipses. Such astrological knowledge was formally included in the teachings of the Buddhist canon. Aristocrats gave *sukuyōshi* great consideration because they were supposed to be able to predict and influence the destiny of a person. For these reasons *sukuyōshi* were often consulted before making important decisions and each noble often developed an intense relationship with his own destiny-star master. In the Insei period the competition between *onmyōji* and *sukuyōshi* reached its climax and in 1038 *sukuyōshi* were prevented from participating in calendrical activities, which became a prerogative of those *onmyōji* who belonged to the Kamo 賀茂 family. Although they lost this battle, *sukuyōshi* remained the undisputed authority for rituals concerning the Ursa Major or Northern Dipper (*hokuto* 北斗) and the elimination of inauspicious influences due to the changes in the transit of Jupiter (*saisei ku* 歳星供) and Saturn (*chinsei ku* 鎮星供). It is beyond doubt that many Onmyōdō rituals were directly influenced by the theories and practices of the Sukuyōdō 宿曜道. For the *onmyōji*, the possibility to import Sukuyōdō techniques into their ritual protocols also meant to be able to add a Buddhist ultra-mundane touch to a doctrinal system, which was, otherwise, prevalently focused on the mundane dimension.

During the thirteenth century, *onmyōji* started providing geomantic practices in conjunction with practical suggestions concerning agricultural techniques for maximizing the productivity of the fields. This aspect shows how in the medieval period religious and techno-scientific discourses invariably proceeded hand in hand without epistemic breaks. The thirteenth century also marked a substantial expansion of the *onmyōji* presence in every sector of society including the Kamakura *bakufu* where a spurious branch of the Abe 阿倍 family monopolized most of the divinatory activities besides the calendric ones, which were exclusively administered by the Kamo at the imperial court of Kyoto. In the fourteenth century, this situation pushed some popular *onmyōji* of the Kantō region to start a cooperation with esoteric monks and Shugendō practitioners (*shugenja* 修験者) for producing calendars independently from the court. These semi-clandestine Onmyōdō calendars of the Kantō region were not only extremely accurate but also included information on lunar phases for the sowing period, the occurrence of bissextile months, and divinatory protocols for supporting warfare strategies (*heihō* 兵法) (Akazawa 2021, p. 56). The fact that the countryside *onmyōji* could bypass the court of Kyoto and even the Kamakura *bakufu* in putting autonomous calendars into circulation highlights their pervasiveness in the urban as well as rural society.

The Onmyōdō influence also had a deep impact on *kami*-related practices such as the ritual for the “great purification” (*ōharae* 大祓). In the medieval period, this ceremony took place close to the Shujakumon 朱雀門 Gate in the outskirts of Kyoto during the last day of the sixth and twelfth month. The ritualists of the Ministry for the Gods (Jingikan 神祇官) recited invocatory formulas, namely the *Nakatomi no harae* 中臣祓, on behalf of the *kami* for eliminating every sort of defilement and producing an ideal condition of permanent purity. After this initial phase of the ritual, *onmyōji* performed other incantatory and apotropaic formulas such as the “water-facing ritual” (*karin no harae* 河臨祓), which was subsequently included in the esoteric “six-syllables water-facing ritual” *rokuji karinhō* 六字河臨法 (cf. Lomi 2014). This conclusive part of the service became so relevant that the entire leadership of the ritual progressively shifted from the *kami* ritualists of the Jingikan to the *onmyōji* of the Onmyōryō, marking a transformation in the conceptualization of

purity from the ancient to the medieval period. If we take into account the *Nakatomi harae kunge* it is clear that Onmyōdō and esoteric Buddhist deities played a pivotal role also in the associations of names for invoking the “four purification gods” (*haredo shijin* 祓戸四神) of Ise. For instance, according to this text Seoritsu-hime 瀬織律比咩 paired with Enma Hōō 焰魔法王, Hayaakitsu-hime 速開都咩神 was associated with Godōdaijin 五道大神, Ibukidonushi 気吹戸神 matched with Taizan Fukun 大山府君, and Hayasasurahime 速佐須良比咩神 was accompanied by Shimei 司命 and Shiroku 司録. Being associated with five post-mortem deities (*meijin* 冥神), namely one Buddhist deity (Enma) and four Onmyōdō deities (Godōdaijin, Taizan Fukun, Shimei, and Shiroku), the four purification *kami* of Ise developed the capacity of saving the spirits of the dead. In other words, coming into contact with Onmyōdō and Buddhist gods, the medieval *kami* of Ise stopped being simply invoked for guaranteed ritual purity but were also requested to provide benefits for humans after death. This detail underlines a fundamental shift in the notion of *harae* from the ancient to the medieval period when purity did not only mean a stable absence of defilement but also an active soteriological support. Moreover, this transition shows how medieval Onmyōdō should not be narrowed down to mere religious taxonomies to interpret reality but should also be analyzed within the vast panorama of devotional practices concerning a rich pantheon of deities (Itō 2021, p. 352).

As we have seen in the previous sections, mountain ascetics were often ritual companions of *onmyōji* who operated outside the court. For instance, in the *Sangōshiiki* 三教指帰 (797) Kūkai writes that during his ascetic training as a young monk (*shamon* 沙門) on the mountains of Shikoku he performed the elaborate *Kokūzō gumonjihō* 虚空蔵求聞持法 ritual at the end of which Venus (Myōjō 明星) appeared in the sky over the side altar dedicated to Myōjō Tenshi 明星天子. For Kūkai the manifestation of Myōjō marked his perfect achievement of the Dharma. This is an interesting aspect because the canonical *sūtra* concerning the ritual protocol of the *gumonjihō*, i.e., the *Kokūzō Bosatsu nōman shogan saishōshin darani gumonjihō* 虚空蔵菩薩能滿諸願最勝心陀羅尼求聞持法, does not mention this celestial body. It is highly plausible that Kūkai followed a customized local version of the *gumonjihō*, which was influenced by the doctrinal discourses of local *onmyōji* as well as ascetic groups operating in the Shikoku mountains. This version of the *gumonjihō* had to be relatively popular among monastic circles because Myōan Yōsai 明菴栄西 (1141–1215) also mentions the same apparition of Myōjō and underlines the existence of a great number of oral transmissions about the correct procedures for performing this ritual. For instance, the *Genshidan hishō* 玄旨檀秘鈔 (ca. 1604), which also includes some medieval Tendai secret teachings about the *gumonjihō*, specifies that Myōjō represents the amalgamation between Nittenshi 日天子 as Yang element and Gattenshi 月天子 as Yin element. Moreover, Myōjō creates the union between the principle (*ri* 理) and the knowledge (*chi* 智), delusion and enlightenment (*meigo* 迷悟) as well as the supreme enlightenment (*daigo* 大悟), and can ultimately be considered as a celestial transformation of Kokūzō (Ogawa 2021, pp. 301–3).

The first traces of these ascetic traditions began in the Nara (710–794) and Heian (794–1185) periods when some autochthonous practitioners (*gyōja* 行者) embraced new forms of asceticism included in the so-called “Buddhism of mountain forests” (*sanrin bukkyō* 山林仏教) while some others remained focused on non-Buddhist practices. Toward the beginning of the fourteenth century, some of these miscellaneous ascetic groups gathered together within a sectarian movement known as Shugendō, which was integrated within and, at the same time, distinguished from the network of exo-esoteric Buddhist teachings and institutions.

The compound *shugen* does not appear in the Buddhist canon and emerged for the first time during the early tenth century for indicating the achievement of “marks” (*shirushi* 験) through specific “practices” (*osameru* 修). These “marks” referred to the miraculous powers that characterized the ascetic’s body and could be generated by performing austerities principally on mountains but also at riversides and seashores. Fundamental concepts such as the notions of self-discipline (*tsuta* 斗敷), meditation (*zenjō* 禪定), and abstinence (*jōgyō* 淨行), which played a pivotal role in the *sanrin bukkyō* of the Nara period, wielded an

important influence on the conceptualization of *shugen* during the Heian period. In fact, until the fourteenth century, the semantic aspect of the term *shugen* kept constantly swinging between Buddhist theories and non-Buddhist religious discourses as demonstrated, for instance, by the ascetic groups called “those of the hall” (*dōshu* 堂衆). Even if these ascetics actually resided at large temples such as Kōfukuji or Tōdaiji they were considered neither fully ordained monks nor laymen. Moreover, although performing ascetic practices on mountains, *dōshu* never defined themselves as *shugenja*. The major ritual activities of the *dōshu* concerned exorcisms as well as apotropaic rituals, which implied only a partial use of Buddhist ritual technologies mostly limited to the recitation of mantras. In order to accumulate ascetic power for performing these religious services for their patrons *dōshu* had to make two annual self-seclusion rituals on mountains (*sanrō* 山籠), the first of which was called *tōgyō* 当行 and the second “mountain-entry” ritual (*nyūbu* 入峰). It is plausible that the point of contact between Buddhist and non-Buddhist/autochthonous ascetic practices was constituted by the shared goal of achieving an individual process of empowerment (*genriki* 験力) by going through a set of psychophysic exercises, which could have been inspired by Buddhism as well as other religious discourses (cf. Kawasaki 2021; Tokunaga 2021; Kikuchi 2020; Castiglioni et al. 2020).

*Geza* 験者 (literally, “persons with powers”) were among those interstitial religious practitioners who can perhaps be defined as “proto-*shugenja*”. Some *geza* were considered as low-rank esoteric masters (*ajari*) who specialized in reciting mantras and incantatory formulas for subjugating malicious spirits such as the *mono no ke* who possessed humans provoking lethal diseases, or the *gyakuhei* 瘧病 who spread malarial fevers. Until the mid-Heian period, the enraged *kami* who originated epidemic outbursts were not directly treated with Buddhist ritual technology such as the binding power of mantras (*jubaku* 呪縛) but were pacified through Onmyōdō divinatory practices. The rationale behind this ritual differentiation was to avoid irritating an already furious *kami*, limiting its agency through the constrictive power of Buddhist spells. After the Insei period this approach to the *kami* of pandemics changed and *geza* started conjoining their vocal weapons with those of the *onmyōji* to subjugate every type of malevolent spirit or *kami* (Koyama 2021, pp. 399–400).

Tokunaga Seiko argues that, in the Heian period, some *geza* could also have been included in the category of the “Dharma-seal Yin-Yang masters” (*hōshi onmyōji* 法師陰陽師), which brought together mixed religious professionals of Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist incantatory formulas (Tokunaga 2021, pp. 212–13). In other words, *geza* could be low-rank *ajari* or low-rank *onmyōji* and their distinctive mark (*shirushi*) was constituted by the voice, which became the somatic site where all the merit of the ascetic practices converged.<sup>10</sup> *Geza* probably performed non-Buddhist (or non-exclusive Buddhist) forms of asceticism for obtaining extraordinary powers, which were partially channeled into Buddhist or Onmyōdō ritual technologies such as mantras, induced possessions (*hyōi* 憑依), or divinations for healing rituals and exorcisms (*kitō* 祈禱) (cf. Tinsley 2014). For instance, the *Uji shūi monogatari* 宇治拾遺物語 (thirteenth century) reports the story of a *geza* who subjugated the evil spirit (*mono no ke*) of a fox, which penetrated within the body of a person and caused a disease. In this case, the *geza* recited mantras with his empowered ascetic voice, forcing the *mono no ke* to transfer into the vessel-body of his youthful attendant (*dōji* 童子) for being interrogated and providing temporary relief for the exhausted patient.<sup>11</sup> Once the *mono no ke* was inside the *dōji* who acted like a human receptacle for spirits (*mono tsuki* 物つき), the *geza* was able to communicate with it and to apprehend that the curse was provoked by a hungry female fox living in a nearby mound (*tsuka* 塚), which was looking for food to feed her pups. The *geza* ordered the preparation of some rice cakes to be tied up to the waist of the *dōji*. As soon as the spirit of the fox became attracted by these food offerings the *geza* summoned his Dharma-protector spirit (*gohō*) for chasing the *mono no ke* of the fox and making sure that it did not come back to haunt the patient (*Uji shūi monogatari* 1996, pp. 146–47).

It is probable that in the early fourteenth century, under the influence of Buddhist reformation movements (*bukkyō kakushin undō* 仏教革新運動) and precepts restoration move-

ments (*kairitsu fukkō undō* 戒律復興運動), such hybrid ascetics—including the *geza* who were expert in Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist ascetic practices and ritual technologies—were absorbed into more rigid Buddhist institutional and doctrinal frameworks transforming into *shugenja* (cf. Tokunaga 2021, pp. 212–13).

An illustration of the *Tengu zōshi* 天狗草子 (Onjōji 園城寺 version, 1296) provides an excellent visual description of the inclusion of Shugendō within what Kuroda Toshio 黒田俊雄 (1926–1993) defined as the medieval exo-esoteric Buddhist system (*kenmitsu taisai* 顯密体制). This image shows an assembly of ten *tengu* seated on a *tatami* ring, dressed in ritual clothes, all facing the central empty space of the floor enclosed within the green mats' braids. Each *tengu* embodies a sectarian path with its specific set of practices for realizing the buddhahood, which is represented by the empty center in the middle of the room's floor. Although *tengu* usually symbolize arrogance (*kyōman* 橋慢), which constitutes an obstacle toward enlightenment, in this painted scroll their negative valence is humorously turned upside down and the flying creatures are compared to diligent Buddhist practitioners. On the highest *tatami*, there is a *tengu* called “the lamp of the Dharma of all sects and the exo-esoteric pillar” (*shoshū hottō kennmitsu tōryō* 諸宗法燈顯密棟梁) who represents the Shingon school and the fundamental unity of the exoteric as well as esoteric traditions. On his right, another *tengu* is indicated as the head of Tendai school (Tendai *kanju* 天台貫首). Only these two *tengu* share the highest *tatami*. On the middle mat, there is a *tengu* called Atago Tarōbō 愛宕護太郎坊 who is considered the chief of all the *tengu*. On the lowest *tatami*, there are seven more *tengu*: the Kegon-master *tengu* (Kegon *sōshō* 華嚴宗匠), the enlightened Zen-master *tengu* (*tokuhō zenshi* 得法禪師) together with his young acolyte-*tengu*, the Sanron-scholar *tengu* (Sanron *gakutō* 三論学頭), the Hossō-eminent monk *tengu* (Hossō *sekitoku* 法相碩徳), the Shugendō *tengu* who bears the title of “Superintendent of the Three [Kumano] Mountains” (Sanzan *kengyō* 三山檢校), the Ritsu precept-master *tengu* (*jikai risshi* 持戒律師), and the holy man *tengu* of the recitation of the Buddha's name (*nenbutsu shōnin* 念仏上人) (*Tengu zōshi* 1993, p. 140). The fact that the Shugendō *tengu* was explicitly associated with the institutional role of superintendent of the three Kumano Shrines (Hongū 本宮, Shingū 新宮, Nachi 那智) indicates that toward the end of the thirteenth century, some *shugenja* were already operating as proxies of powerful Buddhist temples such as the Onjōji for strengthening the links between religious institutions and renowned cultic sites in the peripheries. It is also interesting to take into account that the Shugendō *tengu* is sitting exactly in front of the “lamp of the Dharma” *tengu*, denoting a fruitful symbiosis between the central authority represented by the exo-esoteric Buddhist system and the marginal authority embodied by Shugendō. A written passage of the *Tengu zōshi* further underlines this intersection between Shugendō and Buddhist institutions, specifying that Onjōji offers to all its practitioners the possibility to follow a triple training in exoteric Buddhism, esoteric Buddhism, and the “single way of *shugen*” (*shugen no ichidō* 修験 一 道). This constant dialogue between *shugenja* and fully ordained Buddhist monks also took place during the mountain-entry rituals, which were performed on sacred mountains such as Mt. Ōmine 大峰山 and Mt. Katsuragi 葛城山 in the Kii peninsula, or Mt. Hikosan 彦山 in northern Kyūshū. For instance, the *Shokoku ikken hijiri monogatari* 諸国一見聖物語 (fourteenth century) reports that on the occasion of the mountain-entry ritual at Katsuragawa 葛川 close to the Enryakuji 延暦寺, i.e., the Tendai headquarters on Mt. Hiei 比叡山, there were always groups of “scholar-monks” (*gakuryō* 学侶) who performed austerities together with the ascetic groups of “practitioners” (*gyōnin* 行人) (Hasegawa 2020, pp. 71–72).

As in the case of the rivalry between *sukuyōshi* and *onmyōji*, there were also numerous episodes in which Buddhist monks tried to limit the penetration of *shugenja* within monastic institutions or to criticize the validity of Shugendō teachings from the doctrinal point of view. This is one of the reasons why those *shugenja* who operated within Buddhist temples were often defined as “low-rank monks” (*gesō* 下僧) who were only partially ordained and could not have access to the highest echelons of the temple. For example, in the *Daigoji sōgō daihōsshira mōshijōan* 醍醐寺僧網大法師等申状案 (1273), it is written that Daigoji clerics

(*shuto* 衆徒) strongly opposed the nomination of a certain Dōchō 道朝 as abbot of the temple because he “has a taste for the ‘single way of *yamabushi*’ (*yamabushi no ichidō* 山伏の一道), but he has not learned the depths of esoteric Buddhism yet”. Even more disdainful was the derogative use of the term *yamabushi* in a passage of the *Shasekishū*. Here Mujū Ichien describes the shabby and sham appearance of an itinerant preacher, defining him as an ambiguous entity, neither a monk nor a layman, and “not even a heap of shit (*kuso* 屎), but simply a little shit (*birikuso* ぶり屎), namely a *yamabushi*” (Hasegawa 2020, p. 70). Despite these almost inevitable frictions, it is crucial to keep in mind that in the medieval period such clashes among different religious professionals, institutions, and doctrinal as well as ritual systems did not simply produce sterile conflicts but often worked as triggers for a creative tension between social actors, which ultimately exalted the hybridity and porosity of all the constitutive niches of the network.

#### 4. Synopsis

Medieval religion, which was conveniently reduced to the confrontation or the binary coexistence of Buddhism and Shintō, or in the best case to a “syncretism”, a fusion of Buddha and *kami*, is in many ways irreducible. In the same way, medieval Buddhism, which was assimilated to the emergence of a few new “reformist” schools (Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren), or even to a few strong personalities such as Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262), or Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282), turns out to be a cross-fertilization of diverse practices, dominated by esoteric interpretations. These are some of the practices that the essays gathered here try to describe.

Certainly, the scholastic exercise that consists in finding a posteriori the logic underlying independently conceived essays that reflect the various temperaments and approaches of their authors is somewhat arbitrary, even if none of them is completely insensitive to the influences and spirit of the times. Thus, consciously or not, every researcher is indebted to the historical works of Kuroda Toshio and Amino Yoshihiko 網野善彦 (1928–2004). In the field of Japanese Buddhism, we should also mention the seminal works of Yamamoto Hiroko and Abe Yasurō. In this regard, we should refer to recent Japanese research on the relationship between Zen and esoteric Buddhism, and in particular the publication of the works of representatives of this trend such as Myōan Yōsai and Enni Ben'en. Numerous excellent studies have analyzed the monastic institutions (the Five Mountains of Zen, the great monasteries of the Pure Land schools), the collective representations of the Pure Land and the Buddhist hells, the beliefs in the buddhas Shakamuni 釈迦牟尼, Yakushi and Amida 阿弥陀 and the great bodhisattvas (Kannon 觀音, Jizō 地藏, Miroku 弥勒, Monju 文殊), the role of meditation and monastic discipline. The articles presented here offer a complementary vision, building on the strengths of their predecessors, while examining new objects and developing new methods.

At the risk of oversimplifying and failing to do justice to the complex array of ideas and realities, one may distinguish several overlapping areas or themes: Cultic sites and the importance of territory, fears of territorial and/or demonic aggressions, possession and exorcism, the resurgence of ancient gods and the emergence of new ones, the role of powerful objects and other forms of material culture (*materia medica*, talismans), the relations between Buddhism and medicine, the ritual role of music and sexuality.

##### 4.1. Cultic Sites and Rituals

One of the major trends in the study of Japanese religion in recent decades has been the recognition of the importance of local cults and sacred sites. This approach has produced monographs on sacred mountains and large temples (Allan Grapard on Kasuga Shrine 春日大社 and Mt. Hiko 英彦山, Heather Blair and Carina Roth on Kinpusen 金峯山, Andrea Castiglioni on Dewa Sanzan 出羽三山, Caleb Carter on Mt. Togakushi 戸隠山, Janine Sawada on Mt. Fuji 富士山, etc.). Several articles in this volume deal—directly or indirectly—with a particular cultic site: Gion 祇園 (Mark Teeuwen), Hieizan 比叡山 (Or



Porath), Kōyasan 高野山 (Elizabeth Tinsley), Ise 伊勢 (Talia Andrei), Tōnomine 多武峰 (Benedetta Lomi).

Mark Teeuwen's article is a continuation of his fruitful work on the evolution over the longue durée of famous cultic sites such as the Ise Shrines or Hie Shrine. In all his work, Teeuwen shows how, behind the apparent unity of the tradition, one can distinguish fault lines, which sometimes widen until they lead to open conflicts. The Gion shrine was for most of its history under Tendai obedience, but strong separating tendencies have always existed there. The cult of its deity, Gozu Tennō, in particular, has been a site of rivalry between Buddhist, Shintō, and Onmyōdō tendencies. However, as Teeuwen shows, the Gion Festival soon acquired its own dynamic, and Gozu Tennō, replaced by Susano, was eventually forgotten. Starting from the current reconstructions of the Gion Festival, Teeuwen shows how it was constituted as a narrative of continuity that erases all the ruptures and the innovations. In doing so, he strives to find the voices of the forgotten actors who, over the centuries, have contributed to making this event a paradigm of Japanese festivals.

#### 4.2. Territorial and Demonic Aggressions

Emily Simpson's article reminds us that Japan is an archipelago, a notion that many scholars have tended to forget in favor of the main island (Honshū) and its dual political center (Kyoto and Kamakura). Simpson shows the crucial role of Kyūshū in the relationship between the archipelago and the mainland, and how this importance is reflected even in the ideological productions of the center (the *Hachiman gudōkun* 八幡愚童訓, produced in circles close to Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine 鶴岡八幡宮 in Kamakura). The foreign threat (especially after the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century) is echoed in collective representations by the imaginary Korean invasions that fed the myth of Jingū Kōgō 神功皇后. Foreign invasion was reinterpreted in terms of epidemic threats. It was already in response to demonic aggression by the foreign pestilence deity Gozu Tennō that Gion Shrine was established at the turn of the ninth century. Japanese xenophobia is only a reflection of a deeper, albeit unlocalized, fear of demonic aggressions. Simpson shows how the Korean aggression was described in one of the versions of the *Hachiman gudōkun* as a demonic attack by a red demon named Jinrin 塵輪 ("Dust Wheel"), and how this led to a positive retelling of Chūai Tennō's 仲哀天皇 role, who had been eclipsed by his consort Jingū in the classical mythology of the *Kojiki* 古事記 (712) and *Nihon shoki*.

Japan is much vaunted as the land of the gods (*shinkoku* 神国), yet it was also a land of demons. Much of Japanese religious discourse belongs to demonology. The constant fear of demonic attacks haunts Japanese religion. This omnipresence of evil is an aspect little studied until now by all those who seek to see in Kamakura Buddhism the emergence of a "pure Zen" and of Amidist devotion. Illness and other inauspicious events were usually explained by demonic possession.

Iyanaga Nobumi shows to what extent the danger of possession was rooted in medieval mentalities, in large part due to the influence of esoteric Buddhism, which also resorted to induced possession (Skt. *aveśa*, "entering"). The term *aveśa* (Jp. *abisha* 阿尾捨) also refers to the identification between the practitioner and the deity, a practice known as "entering oneself and being entered" (*nyūga ganyū* 入我我入). Focusing on a ritual text by the Daigoji monk Seigen 成賢 (1162–1231), Iyanaga examines the role played in Shingon exorcisms by "protectors" (*gohō* 護法) such as the acolytes of the wisdom-king Fudō 不動明王. The invisible world adjoins and overflows the human world on all sides, and its shifting borders must constantly be renegotiated. Communication was achieved through divination and (induced) possession, resulting in oracles. Protection against evil forces was achieved primarily through esoteric rituals and exorcisms, and also through the use of talismans.

#### 4.3. Gods Old and New

The medieval period is marked by the emergence of new deities, or the assumption of deities that had been relatively obscure until then. Gozu Tennō is a good example.

Elizabeth Tinsley discusses the rise to prominence of Niu Myōjin 丹生明神, an ancient goddess, probably of Korean origin, who was linked to the renewal rites associated with cinnabar (an ingredient in the Daoist elixir of immortality). In the Shingon tradition, she is associated with Kariba Myōjin 狩場明神, a hunter deity, as protectors of Kūkai and tutelary deities of Mount Kōya. Tinsley's article describes ritual debates performed by the monks of Kōyasan as offerings to the *kami*—whose taste for such intellectual games had never been suspected before. This example shows, once again, that the split between intellectual elites and popular devotion exists only in the minds of traditional scholars.

There is one particularly important divine category, that of adolescent gods such as Jūzenji 十禪師 and Uhō Dōji 雨宝童子. Jūzenji became the representative of Sannō Shintō, a religious discourse centered on the Hie Shrine at the foot of Mount Hiei. Uhō Dōji, who came to be seen as an avatar of the sun-goddess Amaterasu, represents in fact more of a Buddhist countercurrent to the Ise Shintō, centered on the Shingon (and later Zen) temple Kongōshōji 金剛證寺 on Mount Asama 朝熊ヶ岳 and on the Keikōin nunnery in Ise. Uhō Doji is also an astral deity, an emanation of the planetary deity Venus (Myōjō)—which brought him to play a central role in esoteric Buddhism as a symbol of non-duality and supreme realization (Skt. *susiddhi*). Using a recently discovered image of this deity, Talia Andrei attempts to reconstruct the history and religious practice of the Keikōin nuns, of whom little was known until now. Contrary to the widespread idea of the opposition between Buddhist and Shintō rites in Ise, she shows that the nuns of Keikōin practiced esoteric rites very similar to those of the priestesses (*kora* 子良) of the Ise Shrine. The very name *kora*, according to Yamamoto Hiroko, refers to the cult of the fox and Dakiniten, and we know that in certain medieval texts, the solar goddess Amaterasu was identified with the fox (and Dakiniten). Times have changed, and Amaterasu, having regained a Shintō virginity in the Edo period, could become a symbol of Japanese imperialism.

Tinsley's and Andrei's essays illustrate how the most concrete institutional issues become intertwined with beliefs in local deities—once again negating the long-held motif of a Buddhism without gods, or the tired argument that the worship of the gods was merely a monastic concession to the beliefs of common people. As Tinsley and Andrei show, the gods are here the partners of the monks and nuns, and their interlocutors in highly doctrinal debates. This was undoubtedly also true of "Zen" monks such as Myōan Yōsai, Enni Ben'en, and Keizan Jōkin 瑩山紹瑾 (1268–1325).

Sujung Kim introduces the cult of the god known as Chintaku reifujin 鎮宅靈符神, which was heavily influenced by that of the Daoist god Zhenwu 真武 and its esoteric Buddhist version, the Bodhisattva Myōken 妙見菩薩, the deity of the Pole Star. She argues that this cult was not merely a Japanese version of the Daoist cult of the Northern Dipper, imported from Korea, but was directly imported from Ming China during the Muromachi period. Her article sheds light on a significant aspect of religious material culture, the role of talismans, whose study, initiated by Michel Strickmann (1942–1994), has become the focus of recent scholarship in China, Korea, and Japan.

#### 4.4. Objects of Power

Objects of power (relics, icons) constitute another important element in medieval Japanese religion. Actually, they are no longer merely objects, but rather "subjects" endowed with agency. Adopting a microhistorical approach that focuses on the "crackings" on two wooden statues of Nakatomi Kamatari 中臣鎌足 (614–669), the founder of the Fujiwara lineage, Benedetta Lomi shows how these crackings, seen as ominous "responses" to current events, cast a long shadow as they were still mentioned in the Edo period in Amano Sadakage's 天野信景 (1663–1733) *Shiojiri* 塩尻 (1697–1733). Lomi examines the complex dialectic that braids together the links between sectarian and politicized strategies, the animation of icons and the metaphysics of presence, and the eminent concrete concerns of preservation of material objects. She illustrates the way in which material culture and collective representations are intimately linked. As art historians know well, the metaphysical is always embedded in the physical. The material culture is never purely material, nor

the religious conceptions purely metaphysical: they are always anchored in concrete reality. Sometimes, as in the present case, a perceived danger led monks to forget for a while the ritual logic that led them to animate an icon by inserting into it another one, perceived as a kind of “soul”.

The animation of a statue reminds us in some ways of the above-mentioned phenomenon of *aveśa*. The difference between deities and demons is a question of function, not nature. Depending on the case, the same supernatural power can be invoked as a deity or exorcised as a demon.

#### 4.5. Buddhist Astrology

Scholars have long noted the importance in esoteric Buddhism of astral cults inherited from Indian and Chinese (as well as Western) astrological traditions, especially from the Daoist cult of the Northern Dipper. Yet it is only recently that Buddhist astrology has come to the forefront. Jeffrey Kotyk has already made a significant contribution to this emerging field. Here, he endeavors to show the selectivity with which medieval Japanese adopted and adapted Indian and Chinese systems which, in spite of agreement in principle, contradict each other on many points. In particular, the Daoist cult of the star of fundamental destiny (Honmyōshō), once inserted into the esoteric logic of non-dual bipartition, came to take on new embryological and metaphysical values (as a symbol of ultimate non-duality, as in the case of the planet Venus) that were relatively undeveloped in the Indian and Chinese sources. This evolution is particularly characteristic of the theological speculations of Tendai esotericism (Taimitsu 台密) and in particular, of a trend known as the Genshi kimyōdan 玄旨帰命壇.

#### 4.6. Buddhism and Medicine

Another rapidly emerging field is that of the relations between Buddhism and medicine. Its origins can be traced back to a seminal article by Paul Demiéville (1984–1979)—originally published as an entry in the *Hōbōgirin* 法寶義林 encyclopedic dictionary, and translated into English in monographic form. Andrew Macomber, who co-edited with Pierce Salguero an important book on that theme, has already distinguished himself as one of the leading figures in that field.

The dual aspect of material culture is particularly clear in Macomber’s study of the *Kissa yōjōki* 喫茶養生記, a text by the Shingon priest Yōsai (usually celebrated as the founder of the Rinzai school of Japanese Zen, despite his credentials in esoteric Buddhism). This text is often put forward as the precursor of the tea ceremony, and as such, it has attracted the attention of various scholars interested in the material culture of Buddhism. Macomber shows, however, that it is also interesting for its emphasis on the medicinal value of mulberry, and he reveals the interweaving of the medicinal virtues and symbolic valences of this plant. The mulberry is thus placed at the center of a vast and rich semiotic network. In passing, Macomber corrects the traditional image of Yōsai as a “pure” Zen master. We see that Yōsai’s teaching, like that of Enni Ben’en—a Zen monk credited with the introduction to Japan of noodles (*soba*)—owes to the syncretic tradition of Zen-Mikkyō, which Japanese scholars have just begun to rediscover (better late than never).

By insisting, not only on the material and properly “medical” aspects of the mulberry, but also on its apotropaic, ritual, and symbolic aspects, Macomber also follows in the wake of the research conducted by Strickmann in his groundbreaking work, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Strickmann 2002). His essay also complements Iyanaga’s work on possession and exorcism. Again, by showing the importance of esoteric Buddhism during the Kamakura period, it dovetails with Gaétan Rappo’s description of the expansion of “countryside esotericism” during the Muromachi period.

#### 4.7. Music and Sex

What is bred in the bones... Fabio Rambelli brings to light a usually neglected aspect of Buddhism and contributes to bridge an important gap in Buddhist scholarship, namely,

the role of music. Despite its ubiquity in ritual practice, music is mostly virtually invisible (or inaudible); or, when it does appear, it is promptly condemned. Certainly, on the fringes of monastic Buddhism, we find a Bodhisattva of music and song, and it is known that Benzaiten 弁財天 is a goddess of music. The Noh tradition is said to trace its Buddhist origins to the *sarugaku* 猿樂 rites performed at the *ushirodo* 後戸 (“back door”) of temple halls. But precisely, it is through the “back door” that the “entertainment arts” (*geinō* 芸能) enter the sacred space, perhaps with a thrill of transgression. In contrast, *bugaku* 舞樂 and *gagaku* 雅樂, which Rambelli takes as his main focus, were from the outset recognized as official art forms, at the very center of monastic life and imperial liturgy. Rambelli, himself an accomplished musician, is thus able to provide us with an acoustic (and not merely visual) entry into a medieval ritual.

The repressed in Buddhist discourse also returns in the form of sex, or, more precisely, homosexuality. The figure of Jūzenji studied by Or Porath is a complex one: a youthful deity who possesses young novices, who embodies homosexual desire and at the same time the observance of precepts, he is also a cosmic deity described as the warp and woof of Heaven and Earth, identified with the vital breath and the sixth consciousness of people, as well as with King Yama and the demonic god Kōjin in his form as “god of the placenta” (*ena kōjin* 胞衣荒神). Porath, however, is primarily interested here in showing how, through the cult of Jūzenji, homosexual practice (said to have been introduced in Japan by Kūkai!) moved to the heart of monastic life, before spreading to warrior circles (where it was no doubt not entirely unknown before).

Paradoxically enough, it is another form of sexuality, heterosexuality, which was deemed heterodox, or even branded as a “heresy” (*jakyō* 邪教). Such is the case of marginal sectarian movements such as the Tachikawa-ryū 立川流 in Shingon and the Genshi kimyōdan in Tendai. The heretical nature of the Tachikawa-ryū is said to derive from its syncretism of Shingon with Onmyōdō teachings, a syncretism typical to the adaptation of Shingon to peripheral regions. Yet Gaétan Rappo’s essay, focusing on the life and work of the Shingon priest Shunkai 俊海 (ca. 1389–1454), shows how this adamant critic of the Tachikawa-ryū’s embryological discourse also attempted to adapt Shingon to the local conditions he encountered in Shimotsuke Province, in Northern Japan. Interestingly, Shunkai takes as his target the priest Monkan 文觀 (1278–1357) and his Joint Ritual of the Three Worthies (*sanzon gogyō-hō* 三尊合行法), although the latter was based on perfectly orthodox sources. Scholars including Iyanaga Nobumi, Stephan Köck, and Abe Yasurō, have begun to rehabilitate the Tachikawa-ryū. At any rate, Rappo shows not only the vitality and expansion of esoteric Buddhism over against the “new schools” of Kamakura Buddhism during the Muromachi period, in areas far from the centers of political power.

This shows, once again, that the exclusive concern with sectarian nominations, which has long dominated the study of Japanese religion, is misleading. Alternative approaches of the kind illustrated by the contributions to this issue seem to indicate that this period is over.

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## Abbreviations

- DNBZ *Dai Nihon Bukkyō zensho* 大日本仏教全書. Edited by Bussho kankōkai 仏書刊行会. 161 vols. Tokyo: Bussho kankōkai, 1912–1922.
- SNKKBZ *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* 新編日本古典文学全集. 88 vols. Tokyo: Shōgakusan, 1994–2002.

## Notes

- 1 After the Tengen no ran 天慶の乱 (939–940) the imperial court commissioned the compilation of lists regarding all the major and minor *kami* associated with the territories administered according to the Ritsuryō system. The aim was to enact new pacificatory rituals with special attention to those potentially dangerous *kami* such as Hachiman Daibosatsu 八幡大菩薩, whose oracle had inspired Masakado's coup. Buddhist monks played a pivotal role within the religious facilities, which were directly involved in this reorganization of the *kami* cults (Uejima 2021, p. 577).
- 2 In this introduction the term Shintō is broadly adopted to indicate the polyhedric sphere of practices and logic about *kami*, which developed in symbiosis with Buddhism as well as in reaction to it. The more neutral expression “*kami* worship” better describes the pre-fifteenth century non-standardized forms of the rituals for the local gods (*jingi saishi* 神祇祭祀), which were progressively integrated within the realm of gods (*jindō* 神道) among the six paths of rebirth (*rikudō* 六道) since the second half of the seventh century. It was only in 1419 that in the *Nihon shoki kikigaki* 日本書紀聞書 the Hossō monk Ryōhen 良遍 (d.u.) specified, for the first time, that the compound 神道 should not be read *jindō* (emphasizing the dependency of *kami* on Buddhist deities) but *shintō* (underlining the independent power of *kami* vis-à-vis with buddhas) (Teeuwen 2002, pp. 242–43; Itō 2020, pp. 137–38). A few decades later, Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼俱 (1436–1511) expanded these theories on the primacy of the *kami* over the buddhas within a doctrinal current (*ryūha* 流波) known as Yuiitsu Shintō 唯一神道. It is only from this moment on that it is possible to talk about a non-Buddhist Shintō. It is significant to keep in mind that most of the creators of these new conceptualizations about *kami* were standard Buddhist monks such as Ryōhen or shrine-monks (*shasō* 社僧) in charge of rituals for the *kami*. Even in the case of Yuiitsu Shintō, Kanetomo had never conceived *kami* as antagonists of buddhas but as universal primordial matrixes from which buddhas and bodhisattvas also derived their power (Itō 2021, pp. 645, 655).
- 3 Among the names of the protagonists there is also Christianity, which had a relevant impact on the late medieval religious discourses from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, the present Special Issue is specifically focused on the interactions between Japanese and Central-East Asian religions.
- 4 In Japan between the thirteen and fourteenth centuries coins started to circulate as a medium of exchange but neither the shogunate nor the imperial court had ever taken into account the possibility of fostering an autonomous minting of coins. On the contrary, coins were perceived as an extremely dangerous technology, which could quickly lead to the accumulation of enormous wealth but also abrupt death. In fact, the expression “coins of disease” (*zeni no yamai* 銭の病) came into use to underline the potentially lethal consequences of the contact between the human body and currency. Coins were considered a permanent property of the *kami* who temporarily lent them to humans. This divine poisonous gift had to be immediately returned, for instance, by burying strings of coins under the earth (*mainōsen* 埋納銭) or remelting their metal for coating Buddhist statues in order to extinguish the initial debt with the gods and assuring the production of surplus in future exchanges (Amino 2012, pp. 145–50).
- 5 According to the Mahāyāna teachings, a buddha is said to have three different types of bodies (*sanshin* 三身): a physical samsāric body (*keshin* 化身), an enjoyment body for dealing with bodhisattvas and advanced Buddhist practitioners (*hōjin* 報身), and an absolute body overlapping with the Dharma itself (*hosshin* 法身). Toward the thirteenth century, these three bodies of the buddhas were associated with three categories of *kami*. Namely, the “real gods” (*jitsumeishin* 実迷神) embodied the *keshin*, the “gods of the acquired enlightenment” (*shikaku no kami* 始覚神) represented the *hōjin*, and the “gods of the original enlightenment” (*hongaku no kami* 本覚神) coincided with the *hosshin*.
- 6 Michiie composed the *Sōshobun* until 1250; after this year Enni replaced the regent in recording the events reported in this text.
- 7 Kōkei was the father of the renowned sculptor of Buddhist statues (*bushshi* 仏師) Unkei 運慶 (?–1223).
- 8 The three poisons are desire, anger, and nescience. Itō Satoshi points out that the reptilian body (*jatai* 蛇体) of certain *kami* such as Amaterasu helped associate them with the Buddhist notion of three poisons as reported, for instance, in various passages of the *Keiran shūyōshū* 溪嵐拾葉集 (1318) by Kōshū 光宗 (1276–1350) (Itō 2021, p. 651).
- 9 The five hindrances, which afflict the female rebirth, are the inability to become a god of the Brahma heaven, a god of the Indra heaven, a Mara king, a wheel-turning king, and a buddha.
- 10 It is interesting to note that, in the Buddhist scriptures composed in classical Chinese, ascetics are most often defined as “those of the spells” (*jijusha* 持呪者) or “those of the mantras” (*jimyōsha* 持明者) for underlining how the fruits of ascetic practices concentrated in the numinous powers of the practitioner's voice. Iyanaga Nobumi points out that this synesthetic connection between voice, aural force, and asceticism is also reflected in the Sanskrit term *vidyādhara* (Jp. jimyō 持明), which not only denotes the practitioner, but also the court of the Vidyārājas (Myōō 明王) who are the “masters of the mantras” and, by extension, the archetype of the ascetic (Iyanaga 2021, p. 394).
- 11 In medieval temples lads and young acolytes (*chigo* 稚児) could also play pivotal roles in male-male sexual relationships with senior monks, which also had fundamental ritual implications, see (Porath 2015).

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